FLEXIBLE WORKING INQUIRY

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Summary

Business Area :   Enterprise Shared Services.

Issue: This paper provides an update on flexible working in the NICS.

Restrictions: None.

Action Required: To note in advance of the session on 13th February.

BACKGROUND

1. The Committee has requested information and data on flexible working in the NICS, which members could explore further in the course of their deliberations on the Flexible Working Inquiry. This update covers the areas highlighted by the Committee in its letter of 9th January 2013.

KEY ISSUES

Examples of the different types of flexible working in operation across the NICS, including flexible arrangements for how, when, and where public servants undertake their work

2. The Northern Ireland Civil Service regards itself as an employer that recognises the importance of having a wide range of terms and conditions that support staff in all aspects of their working life and specifically allow staff to balance their work commitments with life responsibilities.

3. It is evident from the Research and Information Service Research Paper on Flexible Working, 28th May 2012 that the NICS does have a significant amount of flexible working arrangements. We already have arrangements that allow for a wide variety of working hours, patterns and locations, including teleworking and working from home. While this is to be commended, the NICS recognises that we have done more than most employers and it is acknowledged that too much flexibility can have an adverse impact on business arrangements.

4. The flexible working arrangements available in the NICS are as follows:

    -   Flexible hours or flexitime;

- Compressed hours;
- Part-time working which includes job sharing and term time working options;
- Partial retirement; and
- Personalised hours.

5. **Flexible hours or flexitime** is identified in the Research Paper as a flexible working arrangement. The main purpose of the NICS Flexible Working Time (FWT) is to provide a more flexible system of attendance for staff. Staff are able to vary the times of arrival and departure from work, the length and timing of their lunch break and to take time off if they work extra hours. There is, however, a guiding and over-riding principle that this flexibility should be achieved without adverse effect on the overall efficiency of Departments or on service to the public.

6. While the majority of civil servants work full time and have the facility of FWT, the facility exists for staff to avail of a flexible working arrangement. This type of flexible working can be defined as a pattern of work which differs from the traditional 9 to 5, 5-day week on the employer's premises. For several years, the NICS has offered a number of alternative working patterns, such as part-time working and compressed hours as well as flexible working (flexitime) to its employees and these options have proved quite popular among staff, although more female staff work part time.

7. **Part time working** is a generic term that captures all reduced hour arrangements including term time working, job sharing, compressed hours and personalised hours. Additionally, employees who have caring responsibilities have a legal right to request flexible working and the Department must formally consider these. The Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, which came into effect on 6 April 2003, introduced specific rights to balance family and employment responsibilities. Flexibilities such as term time working promote work-life balance by enabling parents with school aged children to spend more time with their children over the school holidays. All NICS staff, not only parents, may apply for term time working under the policy.

8. **Partial retirement**, which formed part of a wider government-led pension reform initiative, was introduced in the NICS from 1st March 2008, with the general aim of allowing older staff to ease into retirement, where this could be accommodated by management. Partial retirement policy is not yet included in the HR Handbook but has been availed of by NICS staff, male and female equally, since its introduction. Partial retirement allows an individual who reduces their pensionable earnings by at least 20% (by reshaping their job through a reduction in working hours and/or level of responsibility) to take some or all of the pension they have built up, while continuing to work. The job reshaping necessary is at the discretion of management, in line with business need, and is a permanent change, although exceptionally a further reduction in pensionable pay may be accommodated, again if in line with business need. Departments are obliged to consider all applications for job reshaping, but there is no obligation to agree to an employee's request to reshape their job for partial retirement and departmental business needs take precedence.

9. From an IT perspective, no central record is maintained about how flexible working is being implemented, as this is an issue for each government department and each business area within that department. However, we are aware of examples of flexible and agile working in different departments including:

- Schools Inspectors in the Department of Education who are home based;
- Planning staff in the Department of the Environment who use video conferencing to allow staff to work closer to home and to manage teams in remote locations;
- Business Consultancy Staff in the Department of Finance and Personnel, whose work style is a mixture of home, office (hot desking) and on-site, undertaking assignments;
- NIDirect staff hold daily team meetings between Belfast and Derry/Londonderry via video conferencing;
- Department of Finance and Personnel IT staff in IT Assist who have adopted an element of teleworking to allow them to work closer to home; and
- Staff from a range of departments who use the Future@Work Business Zones.

An update on the extent to which flexible working has been implemented across the NICS

10. Of the 25,960 staff currently employed in the NICS (as at 1st April 2012), 6,186 work part-time (4,682 female and 1,504 male). With an aging population and consequently an aging workforce, it is expected that more people will take up flexible working options in the coming years. Partial Retirement is proving equally attractive to male and female employees and there are 302 males and 310 females currently partially retired.

11. From an IT perspective, there is no official record kept of the amount of flexible working which is undertaken by staff. The best indicator is the number of laptops and remote access connections that have been provided. Of the 18,000 NICS staff supported by IT Assist, 3,870 have laptops, of which 500 have ADSL (a dedicated broadband line in a staff home connecting the user directly to the NICS network), 586 have SSL (staff use a cable to connect to their own home broadband router) and 871 have 3G (enables staff to connect to the network while on the move). There are also 2,074 Blackberry users, allowing staff to receive emails while out of the office and a pilot is currently underway with tablet type technologies, using the Blackberry Playbook (58 users). Some staff have a combination of these devices, i.e. some staff have an ADSL connection in their home as well as a 3G card for when they are on the move and may even have the SSL (home broadband connection) as a back up in case of the failure of the ADSL line.

Examples of technology and workplace design being used to facilitate the flexible location of work in the NICS; this should include, for example, an update on "The Future of Work" facility and information on the role and potential of Network NI in facilitating greater use of flexible working practices

12. **NetworkNI** is now fully rolled out across all NICS sites, it provides better service levels, substantially increased bandwidth, and makes it easier for staff to work from different locations.

13. **IT Assist** is the in-house IT provider for the NICS and provides a wide range of services including desktop, helpdesk and datacentre services. From a flexible and agile working perspective, IT Assist has introduced consistency and a common approach across all NICS departments.

14. **Secure Remote Access (SRA)** is a set of technologies which provide a common and consistent approach to allow staff to access the NICS network from remote locations, including home. The methods of access include ADSL, SSL and 3G (see definitions

paragraph 11). All of these services are available via PC/laptop equipment provided by IT Assist at the request of the relevant Department.

15. **Encrypted Laptops** are the main method for mobile staff to gain access to the NICS network, systems and services. Encryption is used in conjunction with a security token to protect access to the device and the data contained thereon.

16. **BlackBerry Service** is used as the main means of providing secure access to NICS services such as email from a smartphone device. Work is underway to investigate alternative devices such as tablets.

17. **Unified Communications** is a key enabler for flexible and agile working. It comprises a range of tools, including email. The main components include telephony, video conferencing and instant messaging and presence, as follows:

- **IP Telephony (IPT):** The NICS embarked on a project to replace its aging telephony environment with technology which would exploit the investment in NetworkNI. The IPT project has been rolled out to over 16,000 users across 105 sites. The project is still ongoing and has another 12 to 18 months to run. From a flexible and agile working perspective, IPT delivers a number of key capabilities including extension mobility which affords the user the ability to log into any phone anywhere on the network. A further capability is called 'single number reach' which allows a call to be automatically transferred to a user's mobile if it is not picked up via the desk phone.

- **Video Conferencing:** The NICS has been using video conferencing for many years. However, with the introduction of NetworkNI and IPT, the NICS has taken the opportunity to integrate video conferencing with the main telephony environment to create a single infrastructure. The new video conferencing infrastructure delivers much better quality, better reliability and ease of use. Multiway video conference session can be established which can include external locations connected via ISDN or the Internet. From a flexible and agile working perspective, the ability to schedule reliable video conferencing sessions using a mix of technology creates the potential for distributed teams. Since the new Video Conferencing infrastructure was installed on 1st June 2012 there have been 753 video sessions lasting an average of 47 minutes[1].

- **Instant Messaging and Presence:** Instant Messaging and Presence is another key enabler for flexible and agile working. It comprises of four key PC based tools namely Instant Messaging; Presence; Voice, and Video. Instant Messaging allows quick messages to be sent between individuals or groups. Presence indicates if a member of staff is available for communication and the Voice and Video capabilities integrate into the main telephony network and the video conference environment to create an integrated Unified Communications solution. The Instant Messaging solution can be used on any PC which is connected to the NICS network, including PC's which connect via Secure Remote Access, for example staff who are working from home.

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[1] As of 15 January 2013

18. **The Future@Work Facility** in Clare House was created to showcase many of the NICS Reform Projects and introduce NICS staff to potential new working environments. The environment has been repurposed to demonstrate Unified Communications technologies to NICS Staff, with over 25 demonstrations delivered in the past three months. This trend is set to continue throughout 2013.

19. **Future@Work Business Zones** are a number of locations allowing workers who travel extensively or work remotely as part of their jobs to access normal office services - computer network, printers, telephone systems etc. Formally, there are four future@work Business Zones; Clare House, Causeway Exchange, Castle Buildings, and Marlborough House (Craigavon). The greater Belfast zones were established as model showcases for the development and creation of similar hubs in strategic sites (where staff could work for part of their time).

20. Interest in the Business Zones, especially Marlborough House, has increased. Official membership is now 320 NICS staff. Time and travel and subsistence costs have been saved and feedback from staff has been extremely positive. Several staff have joined solely for Business Continuity Planning purposes.

21. Business Zone visitor statistics are held for Marlborough House and Causeway Exchange. None are kept for Castle Buildings and Clare House as many staff and visitors using the facilities both formally and informally were already in the building for other reasons. The Causeway Exchange statistics are of those who solely sign in to log on and do not take into account staff and visitors using the area for formal and informal meetings.

Business Zone	Total visits	Dates	Monthly Average	Min Miles Saving	Min Time Saving
Marlborough House	2,528	May11–Dec12	126.4	3,792@ 45p = £1,706.40*	94.80 hours**
Causeway	132	Oct10–Sep12	5.5		

*Monthly Stat- Based on 1 single journey saved to HQ in Belfast - approx 30 miles. A return journey would be a mean 7,584 miles costing £3,412.80.
** Monthly Stat - Based on approx single journey of 45 minutes (a return journey saving of 189.6hours).

22. The Marlborough House regional zone in Craigavon is most used. Over 1,000 staff visits were recorded within the first 9 months of opening and almost 1,500 visits within the first year. Many Business Zone members have a Lisburn or greater Belfast office base, but regularly work remotely as part of their normal daily duties in the Craigavon/Armagh area. The smallest distance staff can save is approximately 30 miles and approximately 40 minutes, however many have had to make their journey to Belfast twice a day hence saving 60 - 120 miles and 1½ hours per each usage visit.

23. **Workplace design - Workplace NI Standards:** In the past, NICS accommodation has traditionally been tailored to the function being undertaken by the division or directorate occupying the space, e.g. individual offices were created depending on the grades of the staff occupying the space. This resulted in inflexible accommodation, with inefficient use of space. As part of the Workplace 2010 procurement process, a standard was adopted for modern, flexible, open-plan office accommodation. The key principles of this standard

are attached at Annex 1. All refurbishment work or fit-out of new space is now undertaken to these standards. The resultant space is highly flexible and allows for the transfer of staff from one building to another without the need for dedicated refurbishment work.

24. **A Business Continuity Planning Guide** has been developed as part of the IS Strategy, setting out the new opportunities presented by the changing IT landscape within the NICS including NetworkNI, IT Assist services; Secure Remote Access; and Unified Communications.

An assessment of how flexible working is benefitting the NICS

25. From an IT perspective, the business case and decision to deploy technology to support a more flexible or agile work style, is a matter for the individual business in departments. There is, therefore, no central register of benefits which are derived from the technology deployed. However, examples of benefits include:

- The video conferencing unit in Rathgael House, commissioned on 12th June 2012, has been used 52 times [2]including 7 calls to Harrogate, 21 calls to Edinburgh and 6 calls to Cardiff resulting in a significant saving in staff time and travel costs;
- The video conferencing units utilised by NIDirect staff for daily team meetings have been used a total of 194 times from 1st June 2012 to 15th January 2013, saving over £12,000 in travel and saving over 500 hours in travel time (based on one person travelling); and
- The average usage of the Marlborough House regional zone (see paragraph 21) indicates a monthly saving of around £3,400 in travel costs and 190 hours in time.

Information on the recent review of Special Leave policy which examined alternative working patterns

26. The **NICS Special Leave Policy** is about approved time away from work that is not covered by annual leave or sickness absence. It can be a concession at the discretion of management or an entitlement if covered by legislation but it is not about alternative working arrangements.

Information on the agreed NICS Home Working Policy and an update on progress in implementing the policy

27. The NICS agreed a '**Working at Home' policy** with the Trade Union late 2009. Although home working is already facilitated within NICS on an informal and occasional basis, following concerns of the potential impacts raised at a senior level in DFP, the NICS has not proceeded to implement the formal policy. The main concern is that the rationale for the policy focuses in the main on the work/life balance issues but ignores the need for home working to deliver the efficiencies that might be generated in the context of more flexible working practices.

28. 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 home working would primarily be realised through the release of

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[2] As of 15 January 2013

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.

29. Whilst home working is currently permissible on an informal and locally agreed basis from time to time, it is considered that the draft 'Working at Home' policy is inappropriate as it pays insufficient attention to the business need.

30. The technology exists to support all types of part time working arrangements and home working but only where there is a clear demonstrable business need and ultimately it is up to Departments to decide.

NEXT STEPS

Information on any consideration being given to future areas for flexible working across the NICS

31. The NICS IS Strategy, which was agreed by all Departments and signed off by the Information Governance Board in 2011, identified the need for a project on flexible working. The scope of the project included consideration of HR policy issues, development of a range of options for Remote Access and implementation of a range of Unified Communication Technologies, including IPT and video conferencing.

32. The projects which make up the IS Strategy have a number of inter-relationships and inter-dependencies. For example, it was recognised that the Flexible Working Project had a considerable inter-relationship with the Unified Communications project which would deliver major IT capabilities which could support flexible working. From the scope outlined above, significant progress has been made on delivering a variety of options for remote access including departmental-provided ADSL services for key workers and the ability to use home broadband services. In addition, significant progress has been made on the delivery of the Unified Communications project.

Key Workplace Northern Ireland Accommodation Principles

- Workspace to be predominantly open-plan in nature with good access to daylight.

- Modular furniture and storage solutions to be used to aid flexibility and optimum use of space. Normal workstations will be sized at 1600mm x 800mm.

- Average space standard in general office environments of 10 to 12m2 per workstation (defined as the area devoted to a desk, chair, personal and team storage, local circulation space and proportional allocation of support spaces). Space standard in processing centre-style environments to be 8 to10m2 per workstation measured in the same way.

- Team file storage to be provided at an average of two linear meters shelf space per person. Additionally one linear metre of personal storage normally provided by means of an under-desk pedestal or nearby drawer. Offsite storage to be utilised for any additional storage requirements.

- Support spaces to be provided including the provision of reception areas, tea points, service areas (printing, copying, vending etc.), touchdown areas and breakout spaces. These may be semi-enclosed to aid functionality.

- Other cellular support spaces, including meeting rooms, conference rooms, store rooms, first aid rooms and IT communications rooms to be provided. The number and size of meeting rooms will be proportionate to the number of staff in a building. The role of smaller rooms will be particularly key in complimenting the open workspace, providing opportunities for drop in privacy.

- Printing and copying to be achieved through centralised, high quality multi-functional devices (printer/copier/scanner) to reduce the inefficiencies and environmental impacts of existing arrangements.

- Provision of connectivity for specialist communications equipment (e.g. tele-conferencing, video-conferencing) within specific meeting rooms.

- Specialist facilities to be provided as necessary outside the average space standard. These include provision of ministerial suites, emergency planning rooms, public offices, necessary specialist on-site storage, showers and catering. The level of catering will be dependent on location and size of building and the level of departmental subsidy provided. Provision will typically be along the following lines:

  - o 'Deli'/coffee bar type facilities where there are 250-699 occupants;
  - o Full restaurant facilities where there are 700+ occupants.

- Accommodation to be configured in a manner which allows Departments to allocate desks to staff on a 1:1 basis or in a desk-sharing arrangement as required by evolving workplace policies.