Committee for Finance and Personnel

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Inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector in Northern Ireland: DFP Briefing

13 February 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Daithí McKay (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr John McCallister
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:
Mr Mark Bailey	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Robert Fee	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Barry Lowry	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Paul Wickens	Department of Finance and Personnel

The Chairperson: I welcome to the meeting Paul Wickens, who is the chief executive of Enterprise Shared Services; Robert Fee, who is from the Enterprise Design Authority; Barry Lowry, who is the director of IT services at Enterprise Shared Services; and Mark Bailey, who is head of pay and policy for central human resources in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). One of you should kick off and make an opening statement.

Mr Paul Wickens (Department of Finance and Personnel): Good morning, and thanks for taking the time out to visit the building. You have the briefing paper, so I will not say much by way of opening remarks, but, as the Assembly's research paper recognises, flexible working arrangements include a range of options in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). As well as variations in working patterns, flexible working is about being able to work in different places and in different ways.

In our paper, we provided information on the various flexible working arrangements that are available in the NICS. We also provided examples of how technology and workplace design are being used to facilitate flexible working or, as you heard, what we call "agile working". Robert will take you through some of the technology that supports flexible working, while Barry is on the IT side of things and Mark is on the HR side. We are happy to take any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson: Paul, I found the paper that we got on 1 February particularly useful. Thank you very much for the tour and for everything today. In my line of work, I use an iPad and try to keep up with technology. The efficiency that that introduces to your day-to-day life is fantastic.

Earlier, we talked about providing members of staff with iPads, and so on. People already have laptops, the majority of people have computers and a broadband connection, and a lot of people are now buying tablets. Rather than having another cost for the taxpayer, what savings can be made by ensuring that staff use their personal resources for business use?

Mr Wickens: You are right. Until now, we have provided the technology and the infrastructure to all who require it. There are reasons for that, not least of which is information assurance and security. You may remember the incident that happened way back, when we lost some laptops. One of the implications of that was the provision of encrypted laptops and devices to ensure that if anything like that happened again, we would not be left potentially exposed.

You are right, and the trend now is towards asking that kind of question. The jargon for it is BYOD — bring your own device. We are actively contemplating a pilot to look at the implications of that. Barry, do you want to say a little bit about that?

Mr Barry Lowry (Department of Finance and Personnel): Yes. The private sector used the concept of bring your own device very successfully. However, I have to say that the private sector has a slightly different set of issues from those of the public sector. In the public sector, our equal obligations to the public are, first, to provide them with the best possible service where we do transactions with them, and, secondly, to look after their data carefully.

We spend an awful lot of money in the NICS making sure that the data that we hold are not leaked and do not escape from the system. One of the reasons why everybody who has some degree of mobility in their work gets an encrypted laptop is that if that laptop were lost, it would be very difficult for someone to read the data that are on it.

The Chairperson: Can you explain the point about encrypted laptops? What is the cost of doing that? Can you get your personal laptop upgraded to be encrypted for a relatively low price?

Mr Lowry: Yes, you can. The difficulty, though, is that if someone lost their personal laptop or iPad, we would be obliged to effectively disable it. We have the technology to do that remotely. If, for example, an official were to lose their BlackBerry, we could remotely disable and kill it, as we call it. If that is someone's personal device, you obviously get into difficulties, because that personal device might have the only copy of their child's graduation photographs, their favourite music or something like that. You then run into difficulties, where you may have to ask yourself, "If I were to completely wipe your device, what would actually happen? What are my legal responsibilities, or even my good employer responsibilities, for the things on your device that belong to you?"

There are also issues when a device becomes faulty. If the device is the only means by which you can work and it becomes faulty, how will we ensure that, very quickly, you can continue to work? In IT Assist, we obviously have all sorts of contingencies for that. If you lose your government device, we can get you a new one within hours. However, if it is your own device and it is configured in a certain way, we obviously cannot promise to do that. There are also issues with insurance, and so forth, if the device is stolen in the line of business.

So, it becomes a very complicated issue for a public sector authority to address. The private sector is slightly different. In the private sector, the information assurance issues are not so vast, because it is very rare for a salesman, for example, to hold sensitive public data on his device; it is usually just company information. They will sign a contract up front to say, "I will use my device, and my employer will give me some sort of recompense for doing so. If I lose the device, I understand that my employer will wipe it." So, they are actually very good at coming up with rules for bring your own device. However, it is very complicated for us to address at the moment.

The Chairperson: Do you have to have the device encrypted? Is there any way that a device can operate off the cloud, so to speak?

Mr Lowry: Yes, there is. There is a facility that the industry calls "sandbox". That means that part of your device is encrypted and can be used for doing business. As Paul described, that is the sort of thing that we want to look at in the pilot. Is there a way in which we can be more relaxed about someone using their own device, without causing any risks to or concerns about information assurance?

The Chairperson: As Leslie said in the previous session, the technology has been there for years. I think that the risk has been holding it back. We heard the high-profile cases of somebody leaving their suitcase on a train, etc, and the fear of that has been crippling for five or six years.

Mr Lowry: Yes, and it is right that we take that risk very seriously.

The Chairperson: Absolutely.

Mr Lowry: I am sure that you are aware that there are lots of best practice guidelines, but they say that you can accept a degree of risk in certain ways of working if you have done other things to mitigate such risk. We are really trying to do that. We are trying to develop technologies to mitigate the risk in a different way. So, instead of saying that it is absolutely not permitted to use a personal device or iPad for your public sector business, we want to say that we will permit you to do so, provided that you fulfil this criteria or that we can mitigate the risk in a different way.

The Chairperson: I think that it is fair to say that the Civil Service has the infrastructure in place for flexible working, but would it be fair to say that there is no overarching strategy in place?

Mr Wickens: We have a number of policies — Mark can jump in on this — that cover all the different aspects of flexible working that we think we need at this point. You are right that there is no one overarching policy called "a flexible working policy". There are separate policies that cover all the different aspects of this, which we think are more than adequate at this point. Do you want to add to that, Mark?

Mr Mark Bailey (Department of Finance and Personnel): Yes. Some of these are covered in the paper to the Committee. I will not go through them all, but there is a wide variety of flexible hours of work arrangements for part-time, partial retirement and term-time for those who want to spend more time with their children in the summer. There is even just flexitime for hours worked during the day. So, we believe that there is a lot there. Paul is absolutely right to say that they are not all pulled into one policy. I think that we are wrestling a bit with not being sure how much value doing that would add, because, subject to business needs, people are still able to work different hours.

We in corporate HR are tasked with implementing policy on behalf of all the NICS Departments. They come to us with their needs and requests. However, we are not getting Departments saying that they need a lot more flexible working policies. They are asking us for that only in some customer-facing areas, where some Departments provide services to the public outside the nine-to-five day; for example, at evenings, weekends and on public holidays. Our policies can deal with that at the minute, but it can be quite inefficient and expensive because it typically involves overtime, which is more difficult to get staff to cover. So, we have Departments suggesting that we look more at flexible working that has staff available more cost-effectively outside nine-to-five hours and at weekends, and so on.

Mr Weir: Are you getting any resistance from the unions on that? Union officials can be quite protective about when overtime applies and its payment rates, such as time and a half. I can see the potential for them to get a bit nervous because anything that is "cost-effective" for the public purse could be read as reduced money for their members.

Mr Bailey: Absolutely, and it is early days. We have not had substantive engagement. I am just saying that Departments have raised the issue, literally within the past few months. In particular, with universal credit on its way and with its potential to massively reform an area, there is an interest about this more flexible working. We are only starting discussions with trade unions, but you are absolutely right to point out that that will be a difficult discussion.

Mr Wickens: I have been engaged with trade unions recently about needing to effectively remove flexible working hours in one very small business area so that we can build and fulfil a public-facing need more effectively, which is the very point that you raised. That is where we engage and consult with the unions about what is needed and about how we can get to an answer that suits us all.

Mr Cree: Following on from that, it is important that staffing levels are adequate outside what are regarded as normal working hours. You have a balancing act to perform between achieving that and extending the number of hours.

Mr Wickens: The other side of that is not having people sitting unproductively at times when, effectively, there is no outward facing or internal work to do. So, the issue is trying to balance both those things.

Mr Cree: Sorry, Chair — your question.

The Chairperson: Going back to the issue of the overarching strategy, as I look at this, I think that there are opportunities for value for money, efficiency and savings deliveries. Given that IT and technology are ever progressing, surely it makes sense to have such an overarching strategy. Is it in the pipeline?

Mr Wickens: I can give you an example of where we are actively doing something. As we were walking around this building, one or two of you commented that it did not seem that busy. If they were all here, we would have about 380 people in the building. Obviously, a lot of them are out and about at various times. I am going to move some groups out of this building and move others in from other buildings to increase the density here to about 460 people. That is part of our normal policy of increasing the density of the workplace, and it is part of the flexible approach that we have. I think that space will increase from 10 square metres to 12 square metres a person. So, by moving different groups about, I will increase the density here.

Alongside that, I will be able to shut down two leases on two other buildings. That will save us £1·4 million a year. The reason why we can do that is because we have all these flexible approaches, which are supported by the architecture and infrastructure that we have. We call it the "Martini approach", because any time, any place and anywhere people can come and connect in any building. So, moving a group from one building to another is less onerous now than it might have been in the past. That is part of our active, ongoing implementation of current policy, which generates massive efficiencies for us as a public sector body.

The Chairperson: So, are there no plans for an overarching strategy?

Mr Wickens: There are no plans for one.

Mr D Bradley: Obviously, there are benefits to flexible working. For example, staff benefit from reduced travel time. Quite often, that time is used as productive working time, which also benefits the Civil Service. As you said, there are benefits from the point of view of property, in that you should need less office space. However, there is a limit to the travel time that can be saved, the extra productive time that you can get and the amount of space that you can save. So, it is a matter of our reaching those limits. Where are we on the journey to reaching them?

Mr Wickens: I cannot remember the actual detail, but I think that the Programme for Government has a specific target for reducing the amount of office space by a certain number of square metres. If I say the number, I will get it wrong, but we can come back to you on that. From tracking it in the Department's balanced scorecard, I know that we are well on track to meet that objective. So, we have set ourselves targets, which have been agreed in the Programme for Government, and we are tracking them and continue to make good progress against them. To answer your question, we have not hit any of the potential hard limits, and we are not close to hitting any of them.

Mr D Bradley: As the Chair said, if you do not have an overarching strategy, is it not that much more difficult to track, monitor and measure the distance that you have travelled or the progress that you have made?

Mr Wickens: All the different constituent parts of the policy, such as the strategy and the implementation, reside in DFP, and a large part of it resides in Enterprise Shared Services. We recently moved the properties division into Enterprise Shared Services so that we are closely aligning; for example, Barry's IT shared services, the HR Connect side of things, Account NI, properties division and NI Direct, which is our citizen-facing website. So, by merging those into one organisation, we are managing the situation very tightly. That is then reported up the line as key metrics to the DFP board. So, again, as Mark said, I do not see any additional value in having, or even in people demanding, an overarching strategy. You will have your own view on that, and you may make recommendations that we will have to consider, but that is the current position.

Mr D Bradley: Do you agree that there is an optimum level of benefit that can be achieved from all this? Beyond that, it is a matter of add-ons as technology develops.

Mr Wickens: There is always the law of diminishing returns to consider. Is it really worth going for that last 20% when you already have 80% of the value? I do not think that we are close to getting to the 80% mark yet. So, if we are thinking about reducing the size of the office estate, looking at the style of working in offices to try to get it more like what you have seen in this building, where people use collaborative work spaces and there is lower density — although the density may be higher in the number of square metres a person — the answer is, yes, we still have a lot of work and things to do before we get anywhere close to that.

Mr D Bradley: OK. Thank you.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Obviously, we talk about the cultural lag, and I understand perfectly the issues that are at the core of that. However, I have some frustration, in a sense. Leslie made the point elegantly enough that technology is advancing, but this technology has been around for a long time, albeit that it is advancing and becoming ever-more accessible. However, for a relatively small region, I wonder at times whether there have been missed opportunities. I recognise that there are very difficult negotiations and discussions with the unions. Certain practices have survived the digital age that should not have, such as handwritten entries, double entries and, as is sometimes the case with digital records, treble records.

In bringing government to the people, including having civic centres where people can access any Department, are we actually moving in a contrary direction? NI Direct, for example, means that you have a centralised web-based process. We discussed the absence of or reduction in the amount of face time that people get with officials or the people who are dealing with their cases. We could have joined-up government in local government, as well as in the Assembly, by having, for example, local civic centres where people come in, log in and meet clients, perhaps having made arrangements over the various telephony processes that we have. They could then have good, productive face time that would be the appropriate and proper response. For me, that also speaks to the need to have an overarching strategy and to move in that direction and to maybe developing a counterculture, if you like, to the one that exists at present. Let us start to challenge people to do things differently and to do them in a way that actually brings government down to the level where people can walk in off the street and say, "I want to talk to so and so", or, "I want to deal with such and such an issue. Who do I speak to?" In many circumstances, that might be local government, but it could also be some of the Executive agencies or Departments.

Mr Wickens: Absolutely. Moving NI Direct into the Enterprise Shared Services family and organisation again backs up a Programme for Government commitment to increase access to online services. I am now the senior responsible owner for that. The very point that you are making is about the counterculture of developing online services and trying to shift people from the face-to-face channel towards using online services. That will take time. We know that. We talked earlier about young people being very comfortable with the devices that are at the end of their fingertips, but what about other sectors of the population? We have a strategy called Digital First that is very much about recognising that we want to move towards the digital channel and digital transformation. It is looking right across the public sector in some instances. So, you are right on that one.

However, we also have what we call assisted digital, which recognises that there are people who are not yet ready or able to use the digital channels. So, we have to continue to provide contact centre support. That could be face-to-face chat, web chat on the computer or going into your library and having somebody do it on your behalf. We are doing all those things. We have a digital inclusion team looking at all those different possibilities to support over a period of time the migration from the way that we are used to doing business to the way that we think we need to do it more efficiently and the way that a lot of people are demanding that we do it.

I think that you can get into some interesting challenges. You may recall that pre-NI Direct, the Consumer Council surveyed the local population. It found that, when they are dealing with government, consumers do not know or care whether they are involved with a central Department, agency or the local council. They do not understand it; it is a technical thing in the background. They just want something fixed. Going towards a single approach such as NI Direct, where approaches, processes and services are accessible through the website, means that you are hiding those physical structures. So, it actually moves much more towards what you are suggesting.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I have seen, in what I have to admit is a very limited number of circumstances, on the continent that local government takes the lead, and I see that they are experimenting with that in the South. Usually, it involves someone who is recognisable as a council official but who is familiar with all the networks and agencies. They provide the gateway or handshaking process that allows people to step off the street and deal with their problem with the appropriate agency. They do not have to pick their way through button 4 or button 5. There is a real person there, who, in the Twenty-six Counties, is usually a council official. In fact, that is their function. They are not an expert in anything other than advising people who they should talk to and who should deal with their problem and, hopefully, ensure that they come out the door with it solved.

Mr Weir: To follow up on Mitchel's point, I know that that approach is being used in the Republic. Similarly, I know of a Member being on a trip maybe six or seven years ago in Scotland who saw a similar system there. The Republic and Scotland, and, I suspect, parts of England, had at that stage moved towards public service centres where there was an integration of central and local government services in a one-stop shop.

Has there been any movement away from that concept since then? I appreciate what you said about moving from the technology, but we seem to have been slow to embrace that face-to-face interaction in Northern Ireland and take it as a concept. I suppose that one of the aims of Northern Ireland Direct in that more remote connection is, as you said, that people do not particularly differentiate between or care about different government agencies and offices or the level of government.

However, there does not appear to be any degree of embracing or even piloting a system such as those that operate elsewhere in which there can be much more direct face-to-face contact and some level of office function shared across Departments. Leaving aside the interaction between local government, central government and various agencies, a constant complaint about administration in Northern Ireland is that Departments often operate with silo mentalities. If you go down certain main streets, particularly in Belfast, you will see one government building of one Department, and perhaps the next building is from another Department and then maybe two down is another government building. That is all very well for supplying employment for areas, but it is perhaps not the most efficient use of resources.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: It does not sound like joined-up government, for a start.

Mr Weir: I think that that is true. We have heard for the past decade or more the accusation that there is an insufficiently joined-up government approach to administration. Has the review of public administration meant that any thought has been given to interacting? Economies of scale may make that easier, but there is also a service disconnect between local and central government.

I appreciate what you say about the online side of things, which is clearly a movement in the right direction to join that up. I appreciate that all this may be moving slightly outside the issue of flexible working hours, but it is linked to providing an efficient service to the public of greater usage of, or movement towards, a public service centre.

Mr Wickens: You mentioned Scotland, where they seem to have been very successful in certain instances with the concept of the one-stop shop. Our locus and remit as a central government Department is to try to get joined-up government across the 12 Departments. I think that we have made vast strides in that, and you saw some of the capabilities that we demonstrated today.

The sort of infrastructure that we have here has also allowed us to have conversations outside the core NICS family with agencies and other parts of the public sector. I have met members of local councils and members of various health structures and organisations, and we have shown them the capabilities that we have. NI Direct is saying — I suppose with its tentacles reaching outwards — that if you are doing that and we are doing that, should we not be talking to each other? We have started talking to each other. The concept of the one-stop shop requires a different approach. Perhaps that is for you to consider.

Mr Weir: All those things are good with regard to the direction of travel. However, I think that there is a bit of frustration about the speed of travel. The things that I mentioned and that Mitchel mentioned have been in place in other jurisdictions for at least seven, eight or 10 years. At that stage, there was talk of having more joined-up government in getting those things together, but progress seems to be a lot slower than it ought to be. As you said, various discussions are taking place, but there does not appear to be a great deal of concrete being put in place.

Mr Wickens: The remit of Enterprise Shared Services focuses more on the back-office capability than on front office. NI Direct is, I suppose, the citizen-facing element.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that, and it may be an unfair question because it might be directed at an area that is outside your remit. However, I think that DFP needs to look at that and try to take that on board in the wider sense, even if it is not necessarily your team.

The Chairperson: Four future@work business zones are listed: three in Belfast and one in Craigavon. The Craigavon centre has seen a lot of use. Why is that the case? I would have thought that one further west would have made more sense for those who live further from Belfast.

Mr Wickens: You are probably right in the sense that there is more opportunity for us to roll out that type of facility to more buildings, and I do not have a problem with that. It is a matter of where we are today, and where we want to get to. We have people based in Orchard House in Derry, and they are using a pseudo touchdown zone; I am not sure whether it is a formal one. Robert, do you want to add anything to that?

Mr Robert Fee (Department of Finance and Personnel): It is certainly not a formal one. Part of the issue is simply finding the right time to do it and the right building to do it in. Properties division would be best placed to know when it is time to have that type of intervention.

The Chairperson: What type of resource are we talking about for these zones? How many units or stations?

Mr Fee: It depends. Some of them are quite small and some of them may have a dozen workstations or more. A number of things need to come together for them to work. Somebody on site has to be willing to look after it, manage the people in and out and make sure that the security and integrity of the building, and so forth, is sound. A number of local arrangements need to be sorted out. There is no reason why further business zones could not be established.

The Chairperson: With regard to advertising new posts in Departments, are we at a stage yet where you have advertised a post and said that it is envisaged that it will mainly be a post where members of staff can work from home, or is it still the case that they will be appointed and later consulted about flexibility?

Mr Bailey: It depends very much on business needs, because it does happen at the minute in certain pockets. As part of the recruitment process, there are different terms and conditions. Someone mentioned the schools inspectors — it might have been Paul, when we were talking downstairs. The schools inspectors in the Department of Education are recruited on a home-based contract. They are based at home and that is where they operate from, because it does not make sense to drag them all to Bangor each morning before they go out to the schools. They would be in the Department of Education's offices only very occasionally, and they would not have a dedicated desk there. So there are some of those arrangements, but it would very much be driven by the business need. There are not many posts in the Civil Service that are like that. It is only where there is a specific requirement. However, it can and has been done.

Mr Cree: That poses more questions than it answers. Looking at the broad-brush approach, there are always two aspects in this: one is internal and the other is external. From what I have learned this morning, you are dealing more with the internal workings of the Civil Service. That is of interest to me, and I want to see that becoming more logical and efficient. If you do not mind me saying so, the external aspect is the one that really matters overall. It seems to me that there is a fiefdom in the Departments; somebody mentioned silos. They do their own thing. That is an impediment to progress. If you want to bring in a system that is of benefit, you have to sell that to all the Departments. First, is there some sort of forum whereby all the permanent secretaries get together, voice their opinions and come up with a consensus on the way forward? Secondly, a very interesting line in the briefing paper flags up:

"too much flexibility can have an adverse impact on business arrangements."

That is quite profound, but it is true. How do you know when you reach that point, or, hopefully, before you reach it?

Thirdly, with regard to the actual hardware that Barry was talking about, we had an example recently when we were looking at laptops to try to reduce Committee packs and the sheer volume of paper. The papers in front of me today are not at all representative — usually, it is quite a job to carry them about. We had, more or less, decided on going for the iPad because it met most of the criteria, but then the new Microsoft Windows device came out, and that will save us a considerable sum of money compared with changing systems, so we are going for that now. That is an example of how technology just appeared. We made the decision and, suddenly, the technology changed. It will continue to change.

I like the idea of bring your own device. With the changing technology and the wide variety of devices — I do not know how many there are now, but there is quite a variety of choices — how can you possibly address that? Fourthly, Paul mentioned going from 380 to 460 members of staff. That is an increase of about one third. You already have a problem with car parking. How will you cope with that?

Mr Wickens: I will take each of those elements in turn. In respect of the permanent secretaries, you are probably aware that they meet together formally every Friday morning. It is known as the permanent secretaries group, and it has a number of subgroups. For example, there is one on online services, which I report to for NI Direct. So, permanent secretaries discuss wide-reaching issues that span the Departments. I can give you an example of where they are starting to drive change across the piece. The head of the Civil Service recently issued a mandate for NI Direct that basically said that Digital First is the way in which we will do things. I spoke about that earlier. If there are any services in your Department that you are looking it, it should be Digital First through this channel, and we are doing it on a joined-up basis. So a mandate was issued by the head of the Civil Service with the full agreement of the permanent secretaries group. That is being delivered through one of the groups that I chair. It is happening.

On the second question on flexible working versus business need, I will touch on the example that I mentioned earlier. We have one particular area where we have just let a contract. As part of NI Direct, we are bringing some private sector staff in, and they are delivering part of the contract for us. If I look at the contact service representatives that they have and the level of productivity — I use that phrase in its widest sense — and compare that with the level of productivity that we would traditionally have enjoyed, you start to look at the effects that something like flexitime has. Flexitime in that specific instance works against productivity. It runs counter to the culture of trying to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. We are taking that head on, and we are having the discussion with the unions about what we can do. We recognise that, where business need dictates something, we will have the hard conversations on that.

With regard to the laptops, who supports what, and bring your own device, who knows what new device will come out tonight? Barry might pick up on that in a moment.

On the last point about increasing the number of people in this building, I was joking earlier. We put cones against five spaces earlier, and it caused all sorts of ructions with the staff because car parking here is available on a first-come, first-served basis, regardless of grade. That is a deliberate ploy, so directors do not have a reserved car parking space. The fact that you got special privilege today caused a few chuckles. It is a real issue for us. We will have to get additional car parking space. We do not have any room to expand around the premises. We have talked to the company next door, but that is not suitable. We are now looking at other possibilities. We had one part of the B&Q car park available to us in the past. We will look at other options, but we need additional car parking space. Barry, do you want to respond to the question on the devices?

Mr Lowry: It is a good question. We tend to track what is happening in the market. The Microsoft Windows 8 device that you talked about is known to us, but they have not developed the business version of that yet. However, as you pointed out earlier, other companies such as Hewlett-Packard have. We are looking at those, and we are seeing whether that would fulfil the need of the tablet and the laptop, which would save money to the public purse. In the past, where we have standardised, we have been able to save money. We have built an elaborate and secure BlackBerry infrastructure because, at that time, BlackBerry was the only safe device that you could use on a restricted network.

Mr Cree: It is not now.

Mr Lowry: Absolutely.

Mr Cree: It has gone the other way.

Mr Lowry: Funnily enough, the industry would say that BlackBerry is about to push on again with some of the new technologies.

Mr Cree: It is going to have to, because it is at the bottom.

Mr Lowry: We will track that as well. We have to manage the tension in respect of how our own staff are productive. Not only do we have to try to use technology to make our staff as productive and effective as possible, but we have to defend how much we spend on that. We will regularly be asked questions by the likes of the 'Belfast Telegraph' about how many officials in the NICS have iPads, for example. They do not ask that question so that they can write a story to say that the NICS is being very innovative in how it does public business. We always have to make sure that we have very strong business justification. Leslie, you gave a very good example about how we can use iPads to reduce the mountain of wasted paper and have a positive effect on the environment. That is one of the things that we have incorporated into the concept that Paul talked about earlier.

I would like to pick up on a point that was made earlier about bringing together central government and local government. It is a fair criticism that Departments have tended to work in silos, but Northern Ireland is possibly the most advanced country in Europe in so far as all staff in its 11 Departments use the same network not only for data, but for voice. We have been the subject of various articles because we are so far ahead.

One of the opportunities that is available to us now — the Department of the Environment has been very innovative in picking up on this — is that we can attach the councils to the same network. We can create a possibility where someone can do business with government without knowing whether it is local government or central government. I described earlier the pilot with Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon where we will do that. In order to roll that out wider, we will need councils to agree that it is a good thing to do. That will require political leadership as well as government leadership, but the point that I am making is that we have used the technology to at least create those choices and introduce those debates. At that point, it is not really our issue; it becomes a wider issue.

Mr Cree: Mac and Microsoft do not get on together. Microsoft is the predominant system in use in government and local government. How are you going to resolve that dichotomy? You will have to choose one, obviously.

Mr Fee: There are incompatibilities between Microsoft and Apple Mac, but there are incompatibilities with lots of IT systems. The way forward for IT is around open standards. If we can push our suppliers towards those open standards, things should start to interoperate. One of the keys to all that is the web browser, and using browser-based technology and applications that will work across different platforms. Those are the sorts of areas that we are starting to home in on and look at.

To date, our infrastructure has been very much based around Windows. We view that as not acceptable, going forward. We are going to have to introduce some level of choice, but it cannot be a totally free and open choice that allows anybody to turn up with any device that they happen to like and think that they can plug in. We have got to be able to manage and control that, and kill it whenever we need to. There are hard choices that need to be made, but we are actively looking at all of that.

The Chairperson: There is reference to the 'Working at Home' policy paper on page 6 of the briefing paper. It states that the Civil Service agreed the policy in 2009 but is not implementing it, for a number of reasons. Why did it agree the policy in the first place?

Mr Bailey: That is a fair question. A lot of discussions went on in developing the policy. I was not directly involved at the time, but it appears that, as the policy developed, it grew and grew and mushroomed, and became more and more complicated. Ultimately, when the policy was finally agreed and we stepped back and looked at it, DFP, certainly, was very concerned that the things we have talked about — inefficiencies, complexities, layers of bureaucracy and other problems — would take away from business flexibility rather than add to it. There was great concern that the policy, if implemented, could cause not only more difficulty with regard to business problems, but add cost.

There was a lot of focus on the work/life balance aspect and being able to work from home rather than the office, but not enough focus on the efficiencies that could be delivered. There are a couple of practical examples in the paper about having two desks, which we have talked about before. As it is written at the minute, anybody who would go through the process and make use of that policy would have a desk or workstation at home, and a workstation in the office. That is a doubled cost. Furthermore, the approval processes are clearly not right. We were talking about a line manager, potentially, approving it, and not taking account of a strategic business need. Home working might be OK for me, or for someone who works for me, for the next year, but we have to have control on that, as it carries on. That person might feel that they have an inherent right to home working, but business needs could change, or they could move to another job. We need to be able to manage that properly.

Your question is very valid. I think it was one of those things that evolved over time. It developed and took on a life of its own. When we stepped back from it, we realised that it was not the right thing for the Civil Service, and, as a result, it has not been implemented.

The Chairperson: Have you tried to put in place a new policy?

Mr Bailey: For the reasons that we described earlier, there has not been an intention to do that. When we stepped back and looked at the broad range of existing policies, we felt from a business point of view that they worked, because home working does happen on an informal, ad hoc basis. I mentioned the example of schools inspectors, but it happens beyond that. There are other individuals and groups of staff for whom businesses and Departments have agreed that it makes sense, but there is no formal, overarching policy covering all Departments.

The Chairperson: Has no consideration been given to putting in place a policy for working at home?

Mr Bailey: Not at this stage. If businesses —

The Chairperson: Surely if there was a need to do it in 2009, that need remains.

Mr Bailey: Earlier in the discussion, I mentioned that corporate HR responds to policies that businesses ask us to develop. We are responsible for taking Departments' views on board, prioritising their policies and rolling those out. I, genuinely, am not getting feedback from businesses and Departments that this is something that they particularly want at this stage. If they did, and they felt that there was a business benefit, we would look at it again.

The Chairperson: Surely it should be led from the top down, not the other way around.

Mr Bailey: Well, corporate HR is not the top; we do not control Departments. We are there to service Departments. We help to develop policy on behalf of all Departments. Every year, the HR directors' group — there is an HR director in each Department — feeds into us and identifies the areas that it would like us to consider from a policy point of view. We take feedback from Departments on their needs. Clearly, there are other factors, such as legislative changes, on which we have to take leadership, and we need to implement those. There could be political views that we need to implement as well. It is a gathering of all of those. At this point, we do not have a sense of the need for a home-working policy. However, if that changes, it is clearly something that we would look at.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Mark gave us an indication, almost from a management perspective, about emerging problems and the numbers that indicated that the rationale for ceasing to implement the policy came from the top. We then discussed the fact that you are not getting any lobbying or advice from any of the divisions of the Departments. Is that a consensus position, or are there individual cases that, although they might be minority applications, are not being responded to because there is not a uniform corporate demand?

Mr Bailey: At the minute, in Departments and certain branches, there are individuals who, on occasions, work from home. However, it is being managed locally; it is not pulled into some corporate overarching policy. When we developed that policy, our concern was that it was so complicated and detailed that it would militate against what it was aiming to do. We should have been trying to improve flexibilities but the policy, as drafted, went the other way and made it more complicated for people. If there is a sense that we need to look at it again, we will. However, as we stated at the start of this discussion, when we look across all the flexible working arrangements that we have, I do not get a strong sense from any Department that something is missing.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am trying to establish whether there is an ongoing monitoring and gathering of data. Any Department or business manager could apply the principles to more localised circumstances. Is anyone gathering up whether every Department is doing that? Is 20% or 10% of the business conducted in that way? What is the evidence? Is it a growing trend? Is it a reducing trend? Is it completely laissez-faire because the central drive has been removed?

Mr Bailey: I am not aware of the gathering of such data. I do not believe that is happening is at the minute. I could not tell you how many people are home working. I would have to ask Departments for their individual information. Other pieces of data are much easier to monitor. We can tell you how many people work part time and term time. That is recorded on the system, and you can run a report. However, home working is much more arm's length. I would not be able to do that without an active enquiry to Departments.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Could we, on the basis of experience, say that particular types of work are more applicable and suitable?

Mr Bailey: Absolutely. We can certainly do that.

Mr Lowry: I will give you an example, because I actually run one of the areas where it works. IT Assist, as you probably know, is an in-house shared service centre. Most of our staff are made up of IT professionals. I am not representative of them; a lot of them are much younger than me, and we engage with them through a staff forum. One of the things that they were keen to do, and which we were keen to explore with them, was to reduce their travel into work. Obviously, I want my staff to be healthy and fit and not to be burdened by too much travel. We explored regional offices around the Province, and we talked to business areas. Some of the offices belonged to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and some of them belonged to the Social Security Agency. They gave us space in those offices. We were able to facilitate staff who were working in the likes of Castlederg, Fermanagh, and so on, to work a couple of days a week from satellite locations, and then come into work for team meetings and that type of thing. We took that through a proof of concept and then conducted a review of it. It demonstrated that the staff were much happier. Sickness absence dropped. Productivity improved as well.

Obviously, IT is an area of work where you can design outcome-based jobs and, therefore, as a manager, I do not need to see someone in a location, or at their desk, to feel confident that my organisation is performing well, because we can design key performance indicators around a service-level agreement with the Departments. We can actually see that our performance has gone up since we introduced that. We are also doing well against other indicators.

However, not every job in the Northern Ireland Civil Service can be designed in that particular way. I think that the trick is to demonstrate those exemplars to the rest of the business, and let it seize on opportunities to use that type of system in their areas of business and gain benefits as well. We talked about future@work. For example, at Marlborough House, I know that a lot of agriculture inspectors now use that facility rather than go back to Dundonald House, and that means they can spend more time out at farms and less time running to and fro between farms and headquarters. They are being very innovative in how they adapt to the technology that we make available.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: That is very informative, and positive as well. It is what I was hoping to hear. Could I go back and ask what I originally intended to ask? *[Laughter.]* I am very interested in this. What about workplace standards, new fit-outs and refurbishments? How is that project going and what are the positives and negatives of that experience?

Mr Wickens: Any new building that we take over, or any refurbishment that we do, is always carried out to what are now called Workplace NI standards. That is the kind of facility that you see here: higher density desks, open plan layout, and things like that. That has become business as usual. Earlier, we talked in the corridor about how people are naturally resistant to change. They will get used to something today but, tomorrow, when they are doing something else, they will not want to be taken away from it. However, generally, it is going very well and we are reducing the size of the office footprint and saving money for the public sector, which frees up money for the front line. The staff, for the most part, are coming along with us on that.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: What you might have regarded as resistance to change has not impeded the roll-out of the Workplace NI standards?

Mr Wickens: There will always be individuals who are inconvenienced, and you have to deal with that. You are obliged to deal with some of them in a formal way. If someone has a genuine disability and cannot travel from one place to another, they will obviously be considered on that basis. However, for the most part, it is working well. I am moving people out of Causeway Exchange, down here, up to Rosepark House on the Stormont estate. So we have a shuffle going on. The net result of that, as I said earlier, is saving £1·4 million a year. We saved two leases. Is everyone genuinely happy about that? No, they are not, but it is a business decision and we are doing our best to work with staff as we take it forward.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. We may forward some written correspondence on certain issues. Thank you again for your hospitality.