

BRIEFING TO THE COMMITTEE OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL
ON ITS INQUIRY INTO FLEXIBLE WORKING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) represents approximately 45,700 public sector workers in Northern Ireland. This includes approximately 20,500 non industrial staff working in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and its sponsored bodies. NIPSA therefore welcomes the opportunity to present evidence to the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its Inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector in Northern Ireland.

Much of the focus on evidence taken to date has centred on NICS arrangements, policies and procedures in relation to flexible working. This primarily relates to working arrangements and IT capacity. While some of the evidence given to the Committee also considers the possibility of greater joined up Government and how technological advances may facilitate centres covering both central and local government, this short briefing relates to the NICS mainly.

It is fair to say that NIPSA recognises the benefit and value of advancing technologies and how these can both enhance the working lives of its members and the services they provide to the community of Northern Ireland. NIPSA does not believe that such technological advances should be used to diminish the pay, terms and conditions of its members. Technology should therefore be utilised to effect efficiency gains by streamlining processes and providing greater access to government service for the public we serve.

The Committee may wish therefore to note a resolution adopted at the 2013 NIPSA Civil Service Group Annual Delegate Conference which stated:-

“Conference is concerned at the Assembly Committee for Finance and Personnel inquiry into Flexible Working. It is expected that the inquiry will lead to recommendations to inform the development of cross cutting strategic policies and procedures and implementation of new flexible

working arrangements across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Conference is conscious of the fact that a number of options being considered are those which were resisted by Trade Union Side under the failed Workplace 2010 project. These include mobile working, hot-desking and possible system based monitoring and management of performance.

Conference calls on the Executive Committee to ensure that any attempt to introduce new flexible working arrangements do not result in poorer terms and conditions of service or diminished health and safety protections for members. While Conference recognises the benefits of modern technologies for members and the added flexibility this can offer, Executive Committee must ensure flexible working arrangements are only advanced and introduced where equality of opportunity and family friendly arrangements are protected and not based on the diminution of terms and conditions and/or a loss of posts and career advancement.”

There already exists within the NICS a number of policies and procedures that contribute to greater flexibilities such as flexible working hours, term time working, part-time and job sharing arrangements. Many of these are in place with NIPSA having pursued their introduction through negotiation and which are founded on family friendly principles. It is important therefore that any proposed extension to further flexibilities is capable of addressing business needs in the context of the equality agenda pursued by NIPSA and which seeks to address and maintain worklife balance.

One issue that was addressed, which following protracted negotiations resulted in a flexible working arrangement, was a homeworking policy. Despite the time and effort invested in these negotiations by both parties, NICS management failed to make the

policy operative, contrary to the principles of the NICS Whitley Constitution on agreements reached.

NIPSA has never received an explanation as to why the policy did not become operative. However we note that reasons were provided to the Committee in evidence presented by NICS Management on 13 February 2013. In addition we note the claim that homeworking operates on an ad-hoc/informal basis. NIPSA believes that this practice may well result in privilege by rank and that few junior grades have been able to avail of the ad hoc/informal facility. Having read the reasons presented to the Committee NIPSA believe it is not true to suggest a negative impact on business areas of the NICS, as homeworking would only be approved where it was effective and efficient to do so.

Another issue that appears to have been raised is the possibility of “personal for business use”, ie where staff may be expected to use their personal IT facilities. NIPSA would not advocate such an approach for a number of reasons such as data protection, system maintenance, accessibility and system security. These are all the responsibility of the employer ultimately and should not be transferred to individuals (beyond where individuals have statutory responsibilities). It could not be the case that an individual becomes personally responsible for the loss of data and data security etc in a way that increases the potential for disciplinary measures to be initiated.

One facility that has some potential is the use of centres (hubs) that can be utilised by staff while on official business away from their permanent station. Some

arrangements already exist where staff can connect to IT facilities rather than requiring them to return to their permanent work location. This has the benefit of increased time management, potential reduced travel costs and greater flexibility for the individual from a worklife balance perspective.

This is a brief paper in advance of meeting with the Committee on 4 December at which time NIPSA will be pleased to expand during discussion.

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