



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

## **Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development**

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**From:** Stella McArdle,  
**To:** Shane McAteer, Clerk to the Committee for Finance and Personnel  
**Date:** 12 March 2014  
**Subject:** Inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector in Northern Ireland

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1. At its meeting on 11 March 2014, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development considered correspondence from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to the Committee for Finance and Personnel's Inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector in Northern Ireland.
2. The Committee agreed to forward the following extract to your Committee for information.

**Correspondence from the Committee for Finance and Personnel on its inquiry into Flexible Working in the Public Sector in Northern Ireland.**

DARD is a Department with a high number of office based staff coupled with staff who spend a varying degree of their working week between the office and out in the field on a range of inspection / testing duties. As a Department we currently make use of the existing flexible working arrangements such as part time working, term time etc and, in recognition of the nature of the work and associated business needs, the Department has also introduced flexible working practices through the flexible location of work, making effective use of the DARD estate.

The Department provides touchdown areas in a number of buildings across Northern Ireland for use by staff who have a business need to be in a location other than their permanent workstation. A touchdown area is a space in a building which offers office facilities for short term working.

The availability of these areas allow an officer who is attending a meeting or event in a particular location for part of the working day to complete the remainder of the

day in that location in instances in which it would not be economical or practical to return to the permanent workstation.

The DARD Direct offices have been designed to offer such facilities in Enniskillen, Dungannon, Omagh, Magherafelt, Coleraine, Newtownards, Ballymena, Mallusk, Newry, Armagh and Downpatrick. The offices each have touchdown areas to accommodate 3 staff, with the exception of Dungannon and Downpatrick each of which has facilities for 1 member of staff. In addition, there are facilities available in Orchard House, Londonderry, in the CAFRE campuses and in Dundonald House headquarters.

The use of touchdown areas requires agreement between the member of staff, his/her line management and the Premises Officer responsible for the specific building.

Department of Finance and Personnel future@work drop-in Business Zones are also open to DARD. Three are based in the greater Belfast area with one in Marlborough House, Craigavon. These facilities are for staff who travel as part of their business requirements and similar to the facilities DARD offers, can be used to negate unnecessary travel to a permanent workstation when an officer is in the locality for business reasons.

This pro-active approach in relation to flexible location of work aligns with the Department's Estate Management Framework which seeks to maximise the use of the estate, contribute to a reduction of building and maintenance costs plus consideration of facilitating a flexible working approach.

Looking ahead, successfully implementing flexible working arrangements also dovetails with our response to the PFG target to advance the relocation of DARD HQ to a rural location. As part of our considerations of the relocation, the Department plans to assess the extent to which flexible arrangements including remote working can be introduced to ensure maximum benefit and efficiency of the workforce. This includes giving the workforce the skills and tools to be able to work effectively in different places, at different times.

This approach is aimed not only at providing flexibility for the workforce but also, through the use of modern and emerging information practices supported by technology, providing opportunities to transform the way business is conducted using technology that best suits the job and at a time that best suits our customers and stakeholders.

DARD acknowledges that the key objectives of the proposed research are comprehensive and the department is keen to contribute to the initiative and to

avail of the learning and knowledge gained. We welcome the intention to use these findings and recommendations to inform the development of cross-cutting strategic policies and procedures for maximising flexible working arrangements across the NICS, particularly if it leads to accelerated adoption of the approach.

*Stella McArdle*

**Stella McArdle**  
**Clerk, Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development**