

From: David McCune

Date: 26 March 2014

**To: Shane McAteer
Clerk to the Committee for Finance and Personnel**

Finance & Personnel Committee Inquiry in Flexible Working in the NI Public Sector: Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment

1. Your 31 January 2014 memo to all Clerks refers.
2. The briefing below sets out how flexible working arrangements are used in DETI.
3. The use and scope of flexible working within DETI is similar to that in the NICS as a whole. Flexible working can take many forms but all involve some alteration to the normal full-time working pattern. There are numerous ways in which staff can deviate from the normal working pattern, where this meets business need. The main alternatives are:
 - part-time;
 - job sharing;
 - compressed hours;
 - career break;
 - flexi-time;
 - time off in lieu (TOIL)
 - term-time; and
 - partial retirement

A phased return facility is also regularly used to assist staff returning from sick absence.
4. When compared to the NICS at 1 January 2013, the percentage of part-time workers in DETI at 38.6% was slightly higher than the NICS average of 37.4%. The overall percentage of females in DETI who were on an alternative working pattern was 32.5%, compared to 31.6% in the rest of the NICS. At the same date 6.1% of DETI males had an alternative working pattern, compared with 5.8% in the rest of the NICS.

Home-working and working from remote locations

5. The NICS does not have a Home Working Policy however, in DETI, as in other Departments, on occasion an officer may ask for some flexibility in this regard and it will be for his/her manager to consider whether or not the request can be accommodated, from a business perspective, for a limited period. Any such arrangement would only be considered on an ad-hoc basis and cannot be agreed as a permanent arrangement or formal change to the officer's existing working pattern or contract of employment.
6. Through the use of technology a number of DETI staff do have the capacity to work remotely away from their normal office location, including their home. This is not to accommodate home working as such, but enables the officer to have access to both departmental systems and documentation etc at home. This permits them to do preparatory or follow-up work when they are required to work away from their normal workplace, and also assists them to work outside normal office hours, where this is necessary for business purposes. The ability to work remotely is also a crucial part of the Department's Business Continuity Planning (BCP), should the normal working location be unavailable in an emergency situation.
7. At present some 120 DETI staff have the capability for full remote access allowing them to work from home or in some cases other field locations via a 3G connection. 76 staff DETI staff are Blackberry users which does not enable full remote working but does give the officers access to emails and other Outlook facilities.
8. Technology also enables DETI staff to avail of the facility to work remotely in other NICS buildings by logging on to any available computer.

Advantages of flexible working

9. There are numerous advantages to allowing staff flexible working arrangements, including:
 - Increased employee morale, engagement, and commitment to the organisation
 - Better work-life balance
 - Increased staff retention/reduced turnover of valued staff
 - Reduced absenteeism
 - Less time spent commuting
 - Lower stress levels
 - Increased productivity
 - Develops image as an employer of choice with family-friendly flexible work schedules
 - Extended hours of operation for departments such as customer service.

Disadvantages of flexible working

10. On the face of it, there are many less disadvantages to flexible working, particularly from the individual's perspective, but also from the employer's perspective, provided that, when a flexible working arrangement is being agreed, the needs of the business are fully considered. Any arrangement needs to ensure that business needs and customer service, be that citizen facing or providing services to other civil servants, is maintained, or even enhanced, through flexible working. Challenges can also arise in relation to communication, team working, performance management and potentially social isolation. Managers and staff therefore need to ensure that these issues are identified as a risk and managed appropriately.

Flexible working in the future

11. Flexible working is, clearly, already well established in DETI with almost 40% of the workforce currently benefiting from some form of flexible working arrangement. In DETI, and the NICS as a whole, the demand for flexible working has been led by employees, in particular female staff who derive a real benefit from it in terms of childcare responsibilities, particularly in the early years. Looking forward, however, the development of new technologies is likely to continue to change how we work and allow us more flexibility in deploying resources. The NICS 2013/16 People Strategy recognises this and, in its commitment to innovation and delivery of services, it commits the NICS to exploring the further use of technology to support an agile, flexible and mobile workforce to enhance business delivery and customer service.

DAVID MCCUNE
DETI DALO