

Finance & Personnel Committee Meeting 15 May 2013

DFP Evidence Session – Stephen Peover and Colm Doran

The issue of flexible working arose during questions over sick absence rates in the NICS

Chapter 5 20.15 approx of recording

D McKay – (Chair)

The Committee here has obviously has been looking at the issue of flexible working is that something that is uppermost in your mind?

Stephen Peover

Not really Chairman, we have probably, we think we have, around about the best arrangements for flexible working of any organisation, certainly most organisations, the only thing we don't do is homeworking, everything else is possible, flexible working, term time working, reduced hours, all sorts of things are possible, the menu is really very wide. We don't have an official policy of allowing homeworking, though managers do sometimes do it if a piece of work has to be done, people need to get their heads into a quiet space, and just knuckle down and do something. Personally I'm quite nervous about homeworking as a policy. I think the first thing I would expect to see is well, two things, the public, I think, would rightly want to be reassured that civil servants weren't just staying in the bed in the morning, reading the newspaper or watching daytime tv rather than working.

D McKay

But there's technology Stephen that takes care of that

Stephen Peover

Yes well for some people there is, but that technology, but if we were producing a standard (unintelligible) and I could say at the end of the day, you know, Colm had done 10 pieces of work and that was a reasonable expectation or output for that day, that's fine but for most of our staff there isn't that kind of metric available and you know I don't want to find myself on the Nolan show trying to explain why, you know, 5,000 civil servants are not actually coming into work in the morning, they're staying at home

P Weir

Could you not call in sick that day?

Stephen Peover

I'll come back to that point that's a good point actually, trying to answer how I or my colleagues in the system, can be sure we are getting value for money and the public are, the taxpayer's getting value for money out of our staff. At least if people are in the office there is some sense of oversight of it, but the point about...you're right, sometimes sickness absence is an alternative to flexible working, so if people have got a domestic crisis or something is happening you know, their child minder lets them down or whatever, the husbands ill or wife's ill or somebody's ill, the system can accommodate those sorts of things, we can work with people and say yes, I recognise something has happened today, or this week, and we'll find a way round that and sort it out between the line manager and the individual concerned

D McKay

You were saying there's no policy in place

Stephen Peover

There's no policy but people do do it. Let me be 150% frank with you here, my real concern on this Chairman is that as a bureaucratic, organisations like policies and they like quite complicated policies with criteria and sub criteria and all sorts of application systems and so on, when you start to create that sort of arrangement for things like homeworking, unless you're expecting half your staff to work from home, you don't want to have offices you want people to work from home if you're not trying to create that sort of system, but you're trying to create an arrangement under which you can allow homeworking in a structured way then you begin to set down a complicated policy and what you create for the system is a sense of entitlement, a nascent sense of grievance and, you know, Colm's working from home, and I'm not allowed to work from home because the office has to have a certain number of staff in it, or the criteria don't quite fit my situation but they fit his, you need to be very careful. We had a draft policy on homeworking which I think ran to 30 or 35 paragraphs every one of which almost, apart from the introduction and the final paragraph, were probably factories of grievances in our system. I am very nervous of creating systems that are, by the nature of it, are inflexible. Bureaucratic systems have to be inflexible because they have to be criteria based, they have to be entitlement based and you have to be able to say to somebody, yes you satisfy the criteria or no you don't. When a line manager works with an individual who's got a problem today because their child minder has been taken suddenly ill or their child minders husband, or father, or brother, whatever, has been taken seriously ill, then you can say to them ok, look, you know take the day off and we'll sort it out later or you know you can take this work home with you and do it while the children.....

D McKay

But are all line managers going to be like that?

Stephen Peover

Yeah but at least at the moment the system works, we're trying to balance this issue here of ensuring that we recognise everybody faces problems sometimes, on the other hand do you create a big system to cope with those problems or do you let managers exercise some sort of flexibility at a more local level. At a senior level that's what we do you know, if Colm wanted time off or whatever that could be arranged, that attitude needs to be pushed down the system. Our staff from EO2 upwards are all line managers, they should be exercising those levels of discretion with their staff and their line managers with them I would rather have a system that was a bit more flexible than one which said here are the 6 reasons that entitle you to home working and here are the grounds under which we will withdraw it, or restrain it, here's how we will control it, because there are lots of variables. Many of our offices are quite small, many of them face the public, the public don't want to be coming in and saying I'm sorry Joe's working from home today, he won't be in until next Thursday . We need to maintain a presence and we need to maintain a public service. The system is about providing service to the public not about supporting civil servants, that's very much a secondary or tertiary consideration. I'll be interested in seeing the Committee report on this but that's what we've been wrestling with, how do we have what we already have, which is a very flexible arrangement s for staff in a lot of ways, do we go another step or have we gone far enough? I'd be interested to hear your conclusions on that. My personal view is that we have gone far enough, but I'm open to persuasion, but back to the sick absence thing.

D McKay

We might have to put that in the report.