



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance and Personnel

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Flexible Working: Departmental Briefing

14 March 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Conor Murphy (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Judith Cochrane
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Ross Hussey
Mr Paul Maskey
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Mr Adrian McQuillan

Witnesses:

Mr Derek Baker	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Robert Fee	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Philip Irwin	Department of Finance and Personnel

The Chairperson: The next session is on flexible working, into which we have agreed to hold an inquiry. The purpose of this session is to receive an initial briefing from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and it is likely that the Committee will want to hear from DFP again as its inquiry progresses. With us today are Derek Baker, director of personnel; Robert Fee, from the information, strategy and innovation division; and Philip Irwin, head of the properties division. Gentlemen, you are very welcome.

We had a previous session on this issue with George Bain, and you will probably have been provided with the Hansard report of that session or at least have seen a copy of it. There is particular focus in this area on flexible working, and we want to explore it further. I invite you to make your opening remarks. We have received a briefing paper from you and a reminder of our session with George Bain.

Mr Derek Baker (Department of Finance and Personnel): Thank you, Chairman, and good morning. I will not say much by way of opening remarks. You have our briefing paper, so I will just make a couple of points.

For the purposes of definition, our understanding of flexible working is that it focuses on the flexible location of work, as opposed to alternative working patterns such as part-time or term-time working. That is why I have brought my colleagues Robert and Philip with me. Philip can deal with premises issues and Robert with the technology issues that would support flexible working on those terms.

Secondly, I know that the Committee's interest in this subject might have taken Sir George Bain's review as its starting point. However, the review's recommendations have never been formally accepted as policy by the Executive; consequently, we do not have a formal relocation strategy for the public sector that would provide a context. That is not to say that flexible working cannot be taken forward in isolation, but we do not have the contextual background for it.

Moreover, at present DFP, whether in the areas of technology, premises or personnel policies, does not have a mandate for reaching into the wider public sector; we have no locus in determining such matters, for example, in the health service, the education sector, the PSNI or local government, and we are not resourced to do so. That is not on our agenda at present. Needless to say, my colleagues and I liaise with the wider public sector, but we do not have a directional influence.

My final opening comment is that the Civil Service does not have a formal policy on flexible working, although some of the building blocks that could inform and facilitate such a policy — we might hear more about those from my colleagues — are there. Specifically and organisationally, the creation of IT Assist as a common IT shared services provider across all Civil Service Departments and the rolling out of Network NI as a single IT infrastructural platform facilitates much of that. Moreover, in the absence of a major funding programme, Philip and his team have done some opportunistic work on premises. We do not have a policy or a formal strategy on the issue, although that is not to say that we should not have. An inquiry by the Committee into that might be very helpful to us in crystallising thinking in that area. That is all I have to say by way of opening remarks.

The Chairperson: Thank you. We have a broadly similar view. The Bain report was about relocation, but there was no Executive agreement on taking that forward. However, with that, other measures were suggested, such as people working from other locations rather than the issue of part-time work or the status of someone's employment; this was about the location from which they could carry out their employment. In that sense, we are probably in broad agreement on the definition.

You said that an inquiry would be useful, which is its intention. From our perspective and from evidence from DFP officials, we can see that some of the building blocks are now in place as regards IT, particularly with IT Assist. From a previous evidence session, we know that office design has allowed people to accommodate others at workstations so that they can carry out work for whatever section of the Department or Departments they work for. I suppose that DFP is taking a laissez-faire approach: allowing it to happen organically in Departments without any cohesive strategy. In the absence of that, it is not hard to see why you do not have directional influence over other public-sector organisations, because if it is not happening in Departments, how would you necessarily influence others to make it happen?

We intend to take evidence to confirm our view, but we see it as an area where there is not really any contention, both as regards office accommodation development and IT development where there are opportunities for that. The Department might not have looked at a formal policy, but it is looking at formal policies in relation to cost savings.

Mr Baker: We are.

The Chairperson: Is that an aspect?

Mr Baker: It could be. You have characterised it absolutely correctly: we do not have a formal policy, so how can we reach out into the wider public sector? The opportunities are there. We are always looking for opportunities for cost savings, and Philip may want to say something about premises. In looking at premises, we are looking at cost savings. The Committee is probably aware of our objectives and our targets to reduce the overall size of the footprint, and that will be achieved not just by reducing overall numbers of Civil Service staff but by changing space standards and allowing for more flexible working. It would be difficult to put a cost on it. However, as regards more efficient working, when new opportunities arise, facilities are put in place in buildings to provide touch-down opportunities for staff. I am located in Belfast city centre, for example, but when I come to the Stormont estate to meet my Minister or to appear before the Committee, I can touch down at various

locations here, I can plug in my laptop and work happily from here, and I can get access to all my records and filing systems. That is part and parcel of what is going on on the premises front. I will defer to Philip, who can tell you what we are doing about space standards and so forth as regards targets and cost savings.

Mr Philip Irwin (Department of Finance and Personnel): That is slightly different from flexible working. On the property side, everything is driven by trying to reduce our costs and trying to consolidate the estate. Where we can, we exit buildings when leases expire or when we have break-clause opportunities to do so, and we move those people elsewhere in our existing estate. When we do a refurbishment or take a new space, we have specific standards of 10 to 12 square metres per workstation when we fit out a space, which would be more densely populated than the existing estate.

We gave information in our briefing paper on the flexible space that we put in in Marlborough House. That was not a project in its own right, in a sense; it was driven by a consolidation project where we were moving people from elsewhere in Portadown into the building. In refurbishing the building, we took a corner in which to put down flexible working stations, and we have operated it as a little pilot study to capture information on how many people would be interested in using such space and trying to assess that over time.

It has been specifically aimed at mobile workers, so there is demand for this from people whose job takes them out and about as part of their normal activities. It has been targeted at agricultural inspectors, education inspectors and so on, who are out and about. When they have done their day's work, they can, rather than head back to base in Belfast, go to a location that is closer to where they are and perhaps get papers for what they need the next day, have access to the computer network and so on. To date, it has not been targeted at people who do a normal office-based role in Belfast and who have a fairly significant commute. That introduces many other policy and personnel issues. If we were to target staff in that way, we would need a formal policy on how and when to operate it. You will see from the briefing paper that there has been demand among the staff that we have targeted — mobile workers. It was introduced in May last year and has increased month on month almost since then.

The Chairperson: In the absence of any policy from you, other Departments are doing that. For instance, DRD officials were using regional Roads Service offices to do Department work two or three days a week instead of travelling to Belfast. You are piloting a specific area around workers who travel, but, over the years, it has been happening in other Departments. Is there any attempt to gather information on that?

Mr Baker: No is the answer. You are absolutely right that it is happening. For example, a major portion of my staff work in Waterside House and in Orchard House in Derry. I have people who normally commute to Belfast from the north-west, but, on occasions, they can touch down in Waterside House and work from there. Their telephone extension is switched to there, and it works very well. However, we are not formally gathering information on the extent to which that is happening across all Departments, and we are not formally evaluating the benefits of it for individual staff.

Mr D Bradley: You said that the Department has no formal strategy, but does it have a view of flexible working? For example, does the Department see advantages in it and does it see where we can go with it?

Mr Baker: Yes, there is no question that the Department sees its potential. For some years, largely led by people who work with Robert in the information services and innovation division, we have been trying to develop a vision for how new technology, coupled with developments in premises, can facilitate new ways of working for the benefit of staff and, more important, for the benefit of our customers. I am sure that some members of the Committee have visited the future@work facility at Clare House to show where this technology might take us. There is a clear view of the benefits that can accrue from the new technology; we have been rolling that out, and strategies are in place for its use. Robert, you might want to talk about some of the things that are in the pipeline to promote that.

Mr Robert Fee (Department of Finance and Personnel): In the absence of an official flexible-working policy, we look at technology from different angles. We have been doing work on unified

communications, including IP telephony, where we can switch people's extensions to wherever they happen to be. There is instant messaging and presence, and the work that we are doing on videoconferencing. That is all tightly integrated.

That opens up the potential for people to work from any place where they can gain access to the network. The building blocks are there, but we cannot make the business change. All we can do, through initiatives such as future@work where we show the technology, is demonstrate the art of the possible to business, because it is business that needs to take up the ball and run with it and change how it operates.

Mr D Bradley: You see the potential in the relocation of public jobs, the redesigning of the estate and so on. If there is that potential, and Departments are already involving their staff in that work, there is a need for an overview to bring all those factors together into a strategy.

Mr Baker: I do not disagree; that is eminently sensible. To pick up on a point that Robert made, there is an important issue here. The Civil Service is not a homogenous business; there are hundreds of types of business, from MOT inspection to meat inspectors to running social security offices. Each business is very different, and each may or may not lend itself to flexible working. Some people have to be in a particular location: you cannot poke around under a car from home; you have to do it at the MOT centre. In many respects, the decision on the feasibility of flexible working must be taken at a business area level.

I agree with you that a coherent central policy would at least provide a framework, an encouragement, and, if you like, an à la carte menu from which business areas could choose to encourage them or at least to provide them with the tool kit to consider it. Decisions will be different in every business area, but it is possible to get more coherence into our approach.

Mr Cree: I am glad that Mr Baker mentioned the customer, as the customer is often left out. Although I appreciate the need to use modern technology and to facilitate staff in the most effective and efficient manner, provided it is monitored, how can I be assured that you are not talking about the technology simply being an answerphone message? I told Professor Bain that it is often the case that there is no one to take your call and you are asked call back later. That is no use at all.

Mr Baker: I agree.

Mr Cree: Does that mean that it will not happen any more?

Mr Baker: It does not just happen in the public sector. I agree entirely that it is attractive to say that we need to use new technology to provide a service to the customer, perhaps online, but we have to acknowledge that many people are not online and would prefer either face-to-face or telephone contact, and research has shown that. That is reflected in some of the new customer channels that we are trying to develop. The Committee has visited NI Direct in the Causeway Exchange and knows how that operates.

I take your point entirely. I cannot give you a universal answer for the whole Civil Service; it comes back to my point that these decisions must be taken business area by business area depending on the nature of the business and its interaction with the customer. It is not, to use the cliché, "one size fits all".

Mr Fee: Some of what we are doing with unified communications attempts to target those issues. If the instant messaging and presence systems, which are integrated with the telephony system, are exposed to the operator, the operator should see that someone is available before transferring the call to them.

Mr Cree: That rarely happens.

Mr Fee: Well, exactly, because we are in the process of rolling this out, but that is where we want to get to with it. We are talking about flexible working. With the technology that we are deploying, we have the theoretical capability to extend the corporate telephone network into someone's home.

Therefore, a case officer who happened to be at home would show as available if they were logged into the system and an operator could transfer the call to that individual. In that respect, we have the potential to build a virtual call centre, not only for people sitting in one physical location but across the network and even into people homes. The building blocks are being put in place for that.

Mr Cree: The primary focus of our attention should be the customer.

Mr Fee: I totally agree.

Mr Baker: I want to make a follow-up point to that. I suppose that it is a bit of an anecdote, but I think that it goes with the flow of your point. Sometimes, we do things with the best intentions that intuitively seem right but which can have unintended adverse consequences. This example is not directly in the area of flexible working, but it is relevant. For good reasons, we have permitted alternative working patterns to develop in certain business offices and have allowed people to undertake part-time or term-time working. Individual managerial decisions have allowed staff to access those alternative working patterns, and, hey presto, we found that staff were not available at the right times to deal face to face with customers in front-service offices such as jobs and benefits offices. We have had examples of where we have gone far too far in allowing alternative working patterns, and that militates against effective business and customer service. We need to be careful.

Mr McLaughlin: I am sorry that I missed the start of your presentation. However, you will be aware from earlier comments that this is meat and drink to me. This is good work, and I was doing a bit of remote desk working myself.

It is not intended that the business zone scheme will be optional for staff. Is there a direction of travel in that regard, or have people considered the matter and decided that staff should not be able to opt into that scheme? You gave us an example of an individual who, if he or she was logged in at home, could be regarded as being available.

Mr Baker: I will ask Philip to comment on that in a moment. I think that that is the general direction of travel. We acknowledged earlier that we do not have a clear policy or strategy direction on flexible working that is articulated and written down; it is more opportunistic and has been developed on an ad-hoc basis. However, it is the direction of travel, and as premises are refurbished or —

Mr McLaughlin: Or not travel.

Mr Baker: Well, yes. As premises are refurbished, the opportunity is taken to put in place the kind of touch-down facilities that are useful for staff. We have those in Causeway Exchange in Belfast city centre, and even the older example of Royston House, where I work, has those. Some Committee members will have visited what I suppose is regarded as our flagship premises in Clare House, and we also have those facilities in Marlborough House in Craigavon and Castle Buildings in the Stormont Estate. We are putting touch-down facilities in place. The technology allows people to log on, and the facilities accommodate those who are perhaps travelling from different parts and need to spend time in a certain location. It is more opportunistic working than explicit strategy. Philip, do you want to add anything to that?

Mr P Irwin: That is absolutely what it is at the moment. Just before you came in, we said that we have targeted Marlborough House, the biggest of the four or five premises, at mobile workers and those who are out and about as part of their daily jobs. We have not introduced that as a NICS-wide policy for those who live in that part of the world to save them a commute to Belfast, and there are probably several reasons for that. For a start, we may not be able to cope with the deluge of applicants, and we also have to be careful that we do not end up adding costs. We have put those facilities into three or four premises on an opportunistic basis. A project was taking place in those locations anyway, and it was relatively cost-effective to use space that was not otherwise being used. If it suddenly went NICS-wide, we would have to be careful to look at the savings that we can accrue, as there is no point in having two desks, with someone going two days a week to one and three days a week to the other. If we have a core of people who base themselves away from their normal base for a time, we would have to introduce some form of desk sharing at their original base; otherwise we would be just adding to the

size of the estate. There has to be a cost focus on this, as well as a focus on benefits from operational and staff points of view.

Before we took this out formally across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, the policy issues would need to be hardened up.

Mr McLaughlin: Fair enough. You have identified an obvious cadre of workers who are out of their offices for a considerable portion of their working time who certainly will benefit. However, it seems to me that the technology would support other areas and opportunities. Even through a pilot scheme, we could test the practicalities and the cost benefits or otherwise. I do not know whether "ad hoc" or "opportunistic" is the best description, but there are other potentials, given the improvements. We have tried and tested hot desking, for example, in this region as well as elsewhere. We should look at all the opportunities, working within, as you say, the prudent management of resources and testing what is practical and beneficial, particularly for citizens interfacing with services. You want people to have contact with government to the widest possible extent. We also want to look after the welfare, rights and entitlements of our staff. I would like to see people examine how we can broaden this out into other areas of exploration, perhaps initially on a pilot project. Let us explore all the potentials while we are at it rather than just some of them.

Mr Baker: I agree. Those are absolutely legitimate objectives that go with the flow of what we are doing.

Mr McLaughlin: I think that they do.

The Chairperson: This part of the costing may not be so easy to calculate, but you have to factor in time spent commuting and time lost through congestion on the roads, particularly in travelling in and out of Belfast, as people have the opportunity to work from more remote locations. Can you be more precise about what you mean by ad hoc and opportunistic? For instance, can planners go into a DFP facility and work there, or does it happen only within Departments? People will tell you about Department of Agriculture or Road Service offices that are only half-filled. Can officials from other Departments use them as hot-desk facilities?

Mr Baker: Generally, yes. With some of the facilities that Philip talked about, any official from any Department can go in and use them. However, we do not — sorry; I do not. I do not know whether Philip does — gather hard information centrally about daily occupancy rates of, for example, a DARD or DRD office and whether it is available for use as a touch-down facility for other staff. However, the facilities that exist can be used by all government officials. People from any Department can come into Royston House, where I work, and work away for a few hours.

Mr P Irwin: Those facilities are actively promoted as being available to everyone, which is fine.

The Chairperson: To travelling workers?

Mr P Irwin: People around Belfast use Clare House, for example, all the time because of its handy location. If you are going in and out of Bangor and you need to get onto the network, it is a good location. There probably are other ad-hoc arrangements between individuals and other Departments that happen all over the place that suit people. However, I suppose that no formal communication of information on all the various offices that Departments control and manage is available to other Departments. As I say, it is probably done on an ad-hoc basis.

The Chairperson: How difficult would it be to collate that information across your three sectors, even in a ballpark way? If the Committee is to conduct an inquiry into the matter, it would be very helpful to have some information to see what is happening across Departments. As I say, it does not have to be detailed with regard to who is working where. Do Departments avail themselves of that? Is it happening? What sort of rates are there? As a starting point, it would be helpful for us to identify what pilot schemes are going on. They are, in effect, pilot schemes even though they have not been designed or put into function as such. They are happening in certain places. Your pilot scheme for people who access Marlborough House is successful because increased numbers are using it. Is there any opportunity to collate that information across Departments?

Mr P Irwin: That specific information is probably not held. That is why, in Marlborough House, we have a scheme for which people have to register, and every time they come in or out we can capture the information. If ad-hoc and one-off arrangements are happening in various Departments, that information is probably not being captured and held. It is probably done very informally.

Mr Baker: If someone from another Department pops into Royston House to camp out for an hour or two, we do not capture that information formally. However, that is not to say that if the Clerk wanted to engage with us to identify the kinds of information or data that might be useful, we could not see whether we could mount a special exercise to do a bit of a round robin and see what we could helpfully collate for the Committee. I am more than happy to work with the Clerk on that issue.

The Chairperson: Fair enough.

Mr Hussey: You say that you cannot record that data. Is there not a system by which people, particularly staff, use a card to get in and out of buildings? If that is the case, can some system be implemented that will record those data?

Mr Baker: Security arrangements differ from building to building. Some of them have swipe cards. Where I work, in Royston House, there is a swipe-card system because of the personnel records and so on that are held there. However, in other buildings, such as Castle Buildings, people use the touch-down facility, which is in reception, so they do not get into the premises.

Mr Hussey: Last week, we were in Bedford Street. The building had a swipe system for entry

Mr Baker: I suppose that the short answer is that not every building has a swipe-card system. There are just different arrangements.

Mr P Irwin: Even in those that have a swipe-card system, people may know that you are in the building, but it will not record information on whether you used the touch-down facility or had a meeting with someone.

Mr McLaughlin: It is not a question that you cannot capture it but that you do not capture it at the minute.

Mr Baker: Yes, absolutely.

Mr McLaughlin: If we decide to capture it, the swipe card is one available technology. Someone gets into the system and he or she is recorded, and that person logs out of the system when he or she is finished. You know exactly when that is. It can be done. However, we are not at the stage of quantifying it. Presumably that will be one of next stages. I am trying to help you with this, you know. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Baker: Perhaps a few pound signs of investment will come along with it.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much. Derek will stay to brief us in the next session. I thank the other two gentlemen for their evidence. The Committee Clerk can liaise with you on other information. We will take the matter further.