Committee for Finance and Personnel

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Flexible Working

1 February 2012

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Finance and Personnel

Flexible Working

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Conor Murphy (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Leslie Cree
Mr Paul Girvan
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Paul Maskey
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Mr Adrian McQuillan

Witnesses:
Professor Sir George Bain   Expert Witness

The Chairperson: You are very welcome. The Committee had expressed an interest in looking at this area of your work. Decentralisation and relocation have been caught up in the economic downturn along with other issues affecting the Executive, including the reduction of the block grant. There was a strong sense from the Committee that flexible working could perhaps continue to be explored in the current financial climate and could lead to better working conditions for civil servants, less travel and more people being deployed in regional centres rather than in the centre in Belfast. The Committee is pleased to hear evidence from you, and we will be considering whether we take it forward in an inquiry. Perhaps you will make some opening remarks, and then I will allow members to explore the matter with you.

Professor Sir George Bain: Thank you very much. I thought that I might speak for 15 minutes and then leave the rest of the time for questions and, hopefully, answers. My first answer is to manage your expectations. I am not an expert on the subject. It was one chapter in a report on relocation, as the Chairman said. I chaired a report for the Westminster Government in 2001, which gave the legislative background to employees having the right to request flexible working; however, that was a long time ago. A great deal has happened since the report in 2008. Moreover, when people look at the disconnect between my work and life they laugh that I am in this area. I imagine that that can probably be said for most Assembly Members as well. I thought that the best thing I could do this morning was try to facilitate a discussion rather than give "Evidence" with a capital E. The first thing in doing that is to provide a short note to structure a discussion.

There are, of course, many definitions. I like the one that states that it is about allowing employees to be flexible about how, when and where they work. That seems to sum it up. Here, we are mainly concerned with when and where; how used to be dealt with in the literature on job enlargement, job enrichment and autonomous work groups, usually in manual working areas. This morning I have a

hunch that we will concentrate mainly on when and where. I have listed the practices in the report, so I will not go through them all. The excerpts from the report show the different practices in paragraph 6.2.2, including mobile remote working, touchdown, satellite offices, home-working, teleworking, and hot-desking. Even people of my generation tend to know what most of those words mean.

It is interesting that you are thinking of an inquiry, because the public sector is already quite well represented, both across the water and in Northern Ireland, with various aspects of flexible working. You are aware of the Northern Ireland Civil Service document dealing with working at home. There are various projects, such as Network Northern Ireland, which is networking virtually all the civil service buildings. I do not know whether that has been completed; it was supposed to have been completed shortly after our report was finished.

I have listed three categories of things that stop flexible working. The first is infrastructure costs. One of the things that comes out of the literature is that it is useful to walk before you run and to have a pilot project rather than a massive initiative. There is often considerable upfront investment: putting in Wi-Fi and networking requires significant investment, which can make the cost benefits problematic. Secondly, some jobs do not lend themselves to flexible working, and I list some of them in the report. Unless you have pretty well-defined objectives and measurable deliverables, if you do not require supervision or interfacing with customers and clients, and all the other things that I list, it will be difficult to have flexibility for such jobs. Similarly, the people who would not thrive on flexibility are those who lack self-discipline and motivation and perhaps good time management. You have to be technologically literate, and although most people under 40 these days are, older people may not be. Many people who work at home find that it is sometimes difficult to cope with the isolation and the lack of social contact. Those are some of the things that stop it.

I have listed several advantages, which I assume are well known to you and which I imagine are driving your interest. It improves work/life balance and facilitates staff recruitment and retention. When we first talked about the legislative right to request flexible working around the turn of the century in 2000 and 2001, it was pushed by unions but not generally enthusiastically welcomed by employers. That quickly changed, however, because they quickly discovered that once you had flexibility, the range of people you could recruit was much wider. Hence it ceased to be a class-war issue and became much more an issue that both sides could see. It improves satisfaction and reduces costly absenteeism, which is an issue of some interest in the public sector. It improves service delivery, and when you want to deliver a service beyond the normal hours of business, that is a plus. Some of the things that drove the relocation report were an improvement in space utilisation and a reduction in accommodation costs. I visited PricewaterhouseCooper's new building behind the Waterfront Hall. The company employs hot-desking in that building. For the sake of argument, it has 500 consultants — do not hold me to that figure — and 300 desks. People come and go, and the space that that company has is much less than would be required to provide everyone with their own office or desk.

Some of the big things that the Chairman mentioned and that drove the report was a reduction in travel time, transport costs and carbon footprints and an improvement in efficiency and productivity. In the literature people give figures such as a 20% improvement in productivity and so on. Most of that is pretty useless; the figures are usually taken from small samples and each case is different.

When we put the report together — the secretary to the inquiry was Olive Maybin, whom some of you will know — we included just case studies. I am sure that there are many more such examples now. Each case was quite specific. Page 106 of the report — I have chosen public-sector examples — shows an example from a UK Department. The big problem in that Department was linking London and Sheffield; putting in video conferencing greatly helped in sorting that out. One does not have to think too hard about the link here between Derry/Londonderry and Belfast and other places. Something similar could be done here.

Page 110 gives an example from Hertfordshire County Council. The last three paragraphs spell out what was achieved including:

"a reduction in office space and workstation...of approximately 16 per cent."

The council also found:

"work travel has seen a reduction of 10 per cent; work miles have reduced by 9,000" .

One of the most interesting examples is on page 113, as it is a Northern Ireland example. It looked at Macmillan nurses, with whom we will all be familiar in one way or another. That case study involved the use of digital pens and digital pads to enable the nurses to file their reports on each of their patients by simply pressing a button and sending them to head office rather than having to come back to base to have the reports typed up.

I think that you have been provided with appendix c to the report, which includes a few more case studies. The one that I would choose is an English example from the East Riding of Yorkshire Council. Page 190 provides a series of bullet points. I will not read those out, but they show the sorts of things that the council found that resulted from the use of flexible working. Those figures are much more interesting and reliable than broad generalisations about 20% being saved here or there. It shows what was done on absenteeism, productivity, the recruitment of staff, rent arrears, etc. It has concrete benefits.

I will leave you to leaf through the case studies. However, I want to touch on one other area before I draw my presentation to a close — the critical success factors. Again, those came out of the case studies. One thing is stakeholder involvement. By stakeholders, one means employees, customers and users. Almost all the literature suggests that you will not get very far with a top-down approach; it has to be done through a collaborative and consultative approach. Secondly, and most importantly, an example must be shown by senior leadership, and unless the very top management levels are prepared to work in that way and set the example, it will not work. It is like open-plan offices. Someone decides that an organisation must have open-plan offices, and everyone occupies those offices except senior management. Such a set-up usually does not work very well. Thirdly, there must also be support for middle managers, because flexible working means managing and supervising outputs and deliverables rather than inputs. To take an example from academic life: as a head of a department, I did not care too much whether staff worked at home, in the library or anywhere else for that matter, as long as the work was done. At the end of the day, the questions that they had to answer were whether they had got their teaching done and whether they had had good ratings from the students. They also had to be able to show their latest book or paper. There was a clear deliverable and, frankly, it is often easier to write papers and books away from interruptions than it is in the office.

That creates a new kind of culture: do not tell me how hard you work or how many hours you put in; just show me what you have done. Of course, it means that you need a job that has such a deliverable, but it is a completely different method for middle managers to supervise. My dad, who was a manual worker on the railway in Canada, had to punch in and punch out. That is how they managed people; if they were late, they were fined and so on. This is completely different.

I have already mentioned my fourth point: pilot schemes preceding large-scale projects is probably a generalisation that applies in many areas. Finally, cultural change. Many of these projects seem to be part of a wider scheme of cultural change in an organisation, a willingness to innovate and accept that work is about what we do and how we do it, not where we do it.

I will conclude by talking about future policy. As the Chairman said at the beginning, and as the secretary informed me, you are considering whether to inquire further into this area. It is not for me to tell you whether you should have an inquiry, but I thought that I might make a couple of reflections. It is hard for me to see the disadvantages of flexible working. It is not quite a motherhood concept, but flexibility in general is desirable and has most of the advantages that I listed earlier.

To some extent, if I am right, it is more a question of how one should do this rather than whether one should do it. Often inquiries, at least many of the inquiries that I have been involved in over the years here in Northern Ireland and across the water, have been more a question of "should"; asking whether we should reallocate jobs from Belfast to other areas and so on. Moreover, there is no shortage of evidence or examples to consider; there is a growing body of literature and there are case studies. I am sure that, since we looked at this four years ago, the number of case studies here in Northern Ireland in the private and public sectors will have increased greatly.

It seems to me that, if the Committee were minded to inquire further, its inquiry would not be of the same nature as those that I chaired. As I told the Committee, in those cases you are chosen because you are ignorant and people are looking for a blank slate on which they can make an impression, somebody who could perhaps mediate between strongly held points of view. The Committee's inquiry would not be of that nature; it would be one where there was probably not a great conflict over the concept of flexible working. You would be trying to draw on the expertise of people who had done it, who knew how to go about it and who knew where the pitfalls were.

My observation is that if you wanted to proceed with this, it would be quite different, for example, from the inquiry from which this chapter is drawn.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much indeed. You mentioned the benefit of improved efficiency and productivity. There is some question about where the previous plans have gone, particularly the home-working policy. There is some suggestion that the unions have been taking that issue up again. If the Department of Finance and Personnel were to drive this out, it would take a very hard-nosed look at efficiency and at cost implications. That seems to dictate its thinking, much more than possible benefits to the individual or other, what it might consider, woollier measurements to improve people's lives. What scale do you think this needs be on across the public sector for it to start to generate measurable efficiencies in a place this size?

Professor Sir George Bain: I am not sure that I can answer that, because, as I said and as you appreciate, it is about costs and benefits. If depends on whether the costs are relatively small. When I came here this morning, for example, I switched on my phone and found that I am on the network, so I know that this place has Wi-Fi etc. Therefore, the cost of doing something in an environment such as this would be relatively small compared with doing it in, for the sake of argument, County Tyrone, where you would have to start introducing Wi-Fi.

Let me stress one point. The Demos report, which I left in my case, is written from a certain social perspective whereby the benefits to employers, it is argued, are greater than those to employees. An employer who gets an employee to work at home does not have to pay for lighting, heating, desk space etc; that is true. On the other hand, an employee who works at home has probably opted to do so because it has considerable advantages for them, particularly if they care for children or aged parents. I thought that the main driver for this would be the Committee, since the Department of Finance and Personnel is the ultimate employer — is that the right phrase? — of civil servants in Northern Ireland. I think that the Department would take a very hard-headed view. Page 190 says:

"productivity of home workers is 20 per cent higher ... 3 per cent reduction in sickness ... 27 per cent reduction in staff turnover".

Those are the things that leap out. As you will appreciate, measuring employee morale and commitment and providing a greater sense of work/life balance are much softer dimensions.

The Chairperson: As you were saying, one of the difficulties is the connection infrastructure, which is OK in Belfast and such places. However, we have a largely rural population, and people have to travel to centres of work. Was there any examination of the idea of localised centres? Rather than travelling to large centres, is there an opportunity, as part of flexible-working arrangements, to use existing government or publicly owned facilities in towns and villages in order to allow people to work in their own area as opposed to their home, where they may not have Wi-Fi or the capability to connect?

Professor Sir George Bain: Very much so. It is easy to think of the concept of satellite offices and touch-down centres germinating. Take an area such as Crumlin, which I do not live far from. Although travelling from Crumlin is not a major thing, I would not have thought that the area has a great deal of infrastructure as such. In fact, I often find it difficult to get a signal on my phone there. You could easily imagine setting up a small satellite office or a touch-down place there to which people could travel from one or two or a few miles away rather than having to come here, which took me an hour this morning, although that was at a bad time of day, of course.

There has been a tendency in Northern Ireland and elsewhere to have one-stop shops for all government services. Part of the idea in the report was to combine those one-stop shops with flexible-

working arrangements. If you have a one-stop shop in an area, you do not have to go to different offices to get benefits or this, that and the other; you go to one place. It is not a major leap to imagine such places also having office space, desk space or hot-desking so that people would not have to travel elsewhere to work. That is why that chapter appeared in the report. It was interesting that it was not fuddy-duddies like me who actually thought of it; one of the younger members of the secretariat said that we should look at it. If we are talking about transferring employment out of Belfast into the periphery to reduce the carbon footprint and travel time, one idea is to shut down a building on the Stormont Estate that is, perhaps, past its sell-by date and build another one somewhere else. In fact, you do not have to build another building. You can shut down the building that is past its sell-by date and, because of flexible working, you can either utilise a small existing operation or, indeed, perhaps, no operation at all. That is why chapter 6 eventually appeared in the report. Initially, some older members of the commission thought that it was outside our terms of reference. It is funny: when I re-read that to prepare to come here today, I was thinking, of course, about just how much it actually was part of our terms of reference four years ago.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning, Professor. Thank you very much for your presentation. In your report on relocation you consider flexible working. What are the main issues in integrating flexible working and relocation? Does one complement the other? Should flexible working be advanced with one eye on relocation or vice versa?

There are implications for the future design of the public-service estate; you touched on that in your previous comment. What do you consider the implications for the future?

Professor Sir George Bain: When I visited Newry, we had a long chat about our work on the report. To answer the first part of your question: yes, relocation and flexible working are completely complementary. In fact, in a certain sense, without nitpicking, I suppose that it is almost a definitional point as to whether it is relocation. If you think about all the people who queue in traffic each morning from Newry to Belfast, and vice versa, and you introduced flexible working for at least some of those people, you would have much less traffic on the motorway, reduced travel time, et cetera. Therefore, I suppose that you are relocating the work, not necessarily the person. However, that is a quibble. The two, I believe, are completely complementary. One would drive the other.

With regard to the estate — again, I am a little rusty on that now — one of the things that drove the report when the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, now First Minister, commissioned it was the nature of the public-sector estate; particularly some of the buildings at Stormont, which, I believe, are well past their useful life. Of course, rebuilding them here or elsewhere would require major capital expenditure; you know that better than I. Relocation was seen as, perhaps, part of the answer.

As I said, when we started, it was seen as more a case of, OK, we can move x number of jobs from Stormont to x, y or z outside the conurbation of Belfast. As we went on, as you can see from the report, we spoke to property developers and specialists in places such as Enniskillen and Omagh to see whether buildings were available there to which people could be transferred. Of course, the situation has moved on dramatically in the past few years. If that were to proceed, the question of talking to property developers and experts in Omagh, Enniskillen, Strabane and such places does not really arise to the same extent unless you consider the Chairman's notion of a small satellite office somewhere. That was one of the big barriers to relocating. With the possible exception of Derry/Londonderry, there were few suitable buildings to which you could transfer people. Therefore this subverts it.

I rang Olive Maybin yesterday to find out about our "office"; Olive and the other members of the secretariat use desks in Clare House in the Harbour estate. It is not quite hot-desking; they have their own workstations. There is a kind of future at work. I downloaded the 'Northern Ireland Civil Service Reform and the future@work'. I will leave a copy with you. A few years ago, it looked like a working environment from science fiction. There was telepresence; you could meet people who were in London or Moscow as if they were in the room with you. There was no need to fly anywhere. A great deal is already being done in that area. As I hinted, the danger for the Committee might be that it is reinventing the wheel when so much is being done — even in this building — and elsewhere that one could draw from.

Mr D Bradley: From what you say, a great deal is being done on flexible working. Would it be appropriate for the Committee to look into the inter-relationship between that relocation and the public-service estate? According to what you say, those three elements are inter-related.

Professor Sir George Bain: What the Committee looks into is its own call. However, I would be surprised if you could look at one without the other. When Shane and his colleagues got in touch with me, their e-mail contained one of the issues that is driving this. The Committee wants to know, first, how it can save on accommodation costs; and, secondly, how it can improve productivity. I assume that in the Committee's initial thinking there was a connection between whether you need all this square footage of accommodation and whether you could accomplish your objectives with a smaller footprint. That is very hard to answer specifically, but, in general, you could almost certainly accomplish your objectives with a smaller footprint. You would have to look at how much smaller, where and how. The two are irrevocably linked.

Mr McLaughlin: Hello again, George. Two issues interest me. I have had a long fascination with emerging technologies and how they would affect the work/life experience. The first issue that I have come across in my role as an MLA is gender equality. Some married women in middle management were recognised as people who should be promoted to the betterment of the civil service and were offered promotion, but that would have required them to travel from Derry to Belfast. Therefore they had to decline the opportunity. That issue could have been addressed by working from home or by satellite office.

In the early days of the Assembly, it was encouraging to see Peter Robinson, as Finance Minister, put an early focus on the issue. However, I am not convinced that we have embraced the concept in a systemic way and that the intervening years have seen all Departments taking it on board. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why we should consider taking a look at this entire experience. In fact, I could easily extend that, perhaps through the RPA, to local councils, where you bring government to the people. That is not a concept about relocating offices, and it is not an argument about the capital cost of building new structures or about taking from one part of the region to give to another. The issue is about accommodating workers to give them much more job satisfaction and a better work/life balance as well as the environmental benefits from reducing the carbon footprint, which has often been cited.

Therefore in addition to those positive arguments, I also add the issue of equal opportunity, which has affected female civil servants for a considerable time and has put them in the unenviable position of having to decline opportunities for promotion because it would mean moving away from their homes to work.

Professor Sir George Bain: That is right. A theme that came through loud and clear during the inquiry from which this chapter is drawn was the difficulty that married women in particular have with accepting promotion beyond a certain level because it would require them to move.

Although that idea has potential, much would depend on the nature of the promotion. If the promotion was to a position that consisted largely of managing people, it would be hard — unless the situation was similar to the Macmillan nurses' and you were managing them virtually through the web rather than the traditional daily interaction with staff — to see how you could do that properly without moving.

That does not detract from your point that there is a large number of jobs, even at a very senior level, that could be done a certain number of days a week without moving being necessary. I have an example of that, although it is hardly definitive proof: when the low pay inquiry was launched in the late 1990s, the then permanent secretary of the Department of Trade and Industry was a woman called Catherine Bell. She was married, had kids and was one of the relatively few female permanent secretaries in the UK Civil Service. Do not hold me to the exact details, but she worked at home two days a week and spent three days in the office so that she could interact with people. Two days of the week she was at home working, where you could easily get her via e-mail or phone. She has since retired, but I imagine that if she was in the position today you would probably get her on a television screen.

It is easy for me to say, as I have just done, that there would be difficulties for certain kinds of jobs. However, it is also interesting how, when you put your mind to it, you can overcome some of those

difficulties, even for a post such as permanent secretary. You might think that a permanent secretary would need their own office and backup, but the arrangement worked very well 12 or 13 years ago. I imagine that the number of "Catherine Bells" in the UK Civil Service has increased dramatically, both in the sense of being women in senior positions and of having some kind of flexible working.

Mr McLaughlin: Yes, and travelling one or two days is still better than travelling five. That is one of the areas in which we can develop our thinking on any possible inquiry.

The second point is that there may be more progress on this than we realise, because none of us has the full picture. The visit to Clare House some years ago was very interesting, because they were actually futuring; it was not so much about day-to-day practice as about realising potentials. They had gathered up much of the technology, such as the digital pens and the teleconferencing tools et cetera. That has continued to develop, as have the cost parameters, although I am not sure whether that is up or down. I assume that as it gets more mainstreamed it gets more cost-effective.

The BT Riverside Tower in the centre of town has a remarkable facility that demonstrates international teleconferencing. It is real-time and realistic.

Professor Sir George Bain: It is one of the case studies.

Mr McLaughlin: They played a little trick with a guy in Dublin where they poured a cup of coffee and offered it to people. It demonstrates what can be done.

However, I do not see a systematic approach; I do not see the pilot schemes leading to a further roll-out of this in different areas. A facility has been developed in Omagh as part of the investment after the bomb where it has the nearest equivalent to a satellite office. People can come in from different departments and levels of local government and plug in, put in their password and use the portal to their home base. They can bring the service to the local population on an appointments basis. I am not sure that that has fully embraced its wider potential. The Committee should look at it to give it a new focus. I suspect that we have all become a bit blasé about developments around us without grabbing the potentials and taking it as a more proactive policy. In your work, have you a view on whether there is a proactive exploration of that potential or is it a slow burner?

Professor Sir George Bain: As a preface to answering your question, I have not looked at this since the report was submitted. Therefore, you have to guard about what I am about to say, which is that my impression would be exactly what your remarks suggest. There are developments here, there and everywhere, but no one has a complete picture. In fact, initially, on the note that I prepared under "Extent", I thought that I could go to something and find it very quickly — X% of people are covered by this scheme or Y% by that scheme, but I could not find it anywhere. That does not mean that it does not exist, but it is not readily available. Therefore, I struck that out very quickly.

I am looking — this is the ultimate act of self-promotion — at pages 114 and 115 of the report. Three or four years ago, we made eight recommendations about what the Northern Ireland Civil Service should do. I will not go through them, but, as I say self-promotingly and pompously, I suggest that a starting point might be to see how many of them have been implemented, assuming that you thought that those suggestions were good in the first place. My hunch is very few. Picking up on what the Chairman said, recommendation 3 suggested that the Civil Service develop a network of regional satellite offices. Has that been done? From what you say, I assume not. We know that recommendation 4 has not happened or I would not be sitting here today talking about it. I guess that recommendation 6 has been implemented in the sense that you have a policy on home-working; but there were several suggestions.

Mitchel, your point has been taken. I said at the beginning that I am not an expert and I do not pretend for a moment to have much more than a layperson's view of this; there might be someone in Belfast or somewhere else who does. My hunch is that it is very itsy-bitsy. There are developments here and there; some of them are extremely interesting, such as the BT one, but no one has an overall view. An inquiry might focus on that. You are all much better informed about how to drive government than I am; however, my hunch is that, unless there is a central driver at Stormont at the political and Executive

level and a supremo to drive it as part of a policy that the Committee or the Assembly devises, it will probably remain itsy-bitsy and not develop coherently.

Mr Cree: Being just over 40, I, too, tend to be a bit sceptical now. There have been many flavours of the month over the years. We work to make them exact sciences and then move on to something else. The most recent business one that I was involved in was total quality management (TQM), which was going to revolutionise the world. I do not think that it has.

Professor Sir George Bain: It enriched quite a few consultants. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Cree: It certainly did.

Mr McLaughlin: There is no such thing as a total negative.

Mr Cree: The latest version of the answering machine has options to press 1 for this, 2 for that, 3 for the other and 99 if you want to end a call. That seems to be the solution. In fact, having had the misfortune to try to contact a Department recently, I was intrigued by the answer machine saying: "I am sorry. No one is available to take your call now. Please call back later". The message was as simple as that. How on earth do you measure productivity in that scenario? The issue hinges on contracted hours versus productivity or outputs. I am not sure that we can measure that for a great many jobs, even when supervised. Take away the supervision role and what replaces it? Given that it has been some time since your report, might this be a flavour of the month that is disappearing over the horizon?

Professor Sir George Bain: I do not think so, although I accept your point. I used to be principal of a business school in London. Management fads are quite interesting. Somebody once wrote an article describing such fads as being a bit like fashions: they never really go permanently out of style. Things that were around in the 1930s bloom, everybody rushes in, and then they disappear only to reappear in the 1950s, albeit relabelled. TQM is a good example of that, as is job enrichment.

This is a much more fundamental concept. I went to the London Business School in 1989 and was there for eight years. The finance professors — you know, the people who recently ruined the world — were at the cutting edge of technology; they had huge mathematical models and suchlike. There was no e-mail; that did not start until 1993 or 1994. However, it was not a fad; it has revolutionised how we do business.

Take the paper that I presented to the Committee as an example. I said that I would set Tuesday aside, collect my thoughts and if I can I will get together a couple of pages to give to the Committee before I appear. At 4.45 pm yesterday, I e-mailed this, and — boom — you got it. Just 10 years ago, I would probably have had to hire a taxi. I guess we would have had the fax machine, but it would not have been the same.

This is fundamentally different; it is a complete underpinning. One does not quite know where it will end, but I do not think that it is a fad, although there are fads in it, such as some of the apps and so. I am not sure that I am retired, but I have been away from Queen's for eight years now. A year before I left, I could type very well because my mother had insisted that I learn how to type and have shorthand, but I was computer-illiterate. A year before I retired, I started getting myself geared up knowing that I would lose all my support systems. My major qualification today is not my PhD from Oxford; it is my typing qualification from Success Commercial College in Winnipeg, which makes everything else possible. I could not live without it. I have an iPad, an iPhone and a desk computer, without which I could not operate. I will be 73 this month, and if you were to speak to someone much younger than I am, they would echo that much more loudly. As politicians, it must have revolutionised how you interact with constituents, permanent secretaries, civil servants and so on.

I do not think that it is a fad like total quality management; it has actively changed how we do business. I am very interested in history and like to look back on the great defining moments such as the industrial revolution. I will probably not live to see it, but it is not an exaggeration to say that, 100 years from now, people will be calling this the information technology revolution. It will have completely changed how the world operates in the same way that Isaac Watt Boulton and similar people changed

how the world operated in 1776. It is here to stay, which is not to say that we, and the Committee in particular, should not be very sceptical of little flavours of the month. I look at the huge information technology projects that have been put into the health service and so on, about which I know very little except what I read in the papers. Most of them over-run time, budget and everything else and often end in disaster. This, however, has fantastic potential.

Mr Cree: Thank you. We all struggle with technology. I regret not doing the stenographer's course; in my time that was someone else's job. You have the makings of a good politician because although you answered the first part, you have not dealt with the second part. Do you think that it is possible to measure productivity in output, bearing in mind that even a supervised state does not do that?

Professor Sir George Bain: No, I do not. In my briefing notes, the second bullet point in 3(c) refers to the following as barriers:

"jobs that (i) lack clearly defined objectives, measurable outputs, milestones or timescales; (ii) require close supervision; (iii) require frequent face-to-face contact with customers or colleagues".

If you are selling in a shop, you will not be a remote worker, although many people are remote in the sense that we now buy
online. I would never dream of buying a suit online, although that may just be my generation; I want to go into a shop to feel it, look at it and so on.   Your shot across my bows is a good one because although I stick by what I just said, it does not mean that, in 2050 or 2090, 95% of people will not be flexible in the sense of being remote. Flexible means more than that; their working hours, among other things, may be flexible. It is not that they will be remote; they will still be required to interact.

I do not know what the limit is, but, as I said, some people would not react well to it, and some jobs employ people in all sorts of work patterns. Supermarkets are an example. They use annualised hours and term working for mums and dads who have kids at school. It is hard to see how if you are working in Tesco by the airport you will not be employed in the shop; you will not be employed at home. However, if you were invoicing or doing back-office stuff, there is probably no reason why you could not be employed at home as long as you had access to the systems.

The Chairperson: OK. Paul's question will be the last; we are slightly behind time. Interesting though this is, we have other witnesses waiting.

Mr Girvan: Thank you, professor, for your presentation this morning. Flexible working is a culture that has long existed in the civil service. I know one civil servant who has about seven coats that he leaves over the back of chairs so that folk know that he is still there and that he will be back, but whether he picks something up today, tomorrow or next week is another thing. I see areas of difficulty: one is legislation that prohibits working at home; another is rating. If you use your home as an office, should that area be designated as commercial space? Certain considerations need to be given to allow us to expand this. I am a great believer in using technology. It was not available to us even five years ago because broadband had not been rolled out in Northern Ireland to the extent that it is now.

There are also planning restrictions and difficulties with whether the office is seen to be ancillary to the use of the home as a home. To go back to a point that the Chairman made, instead of Departments having their own office space, there could be a space for all Departments to use. A working space could be as flexible as the people who use it. That concept has not been adopted by officials who wish to have an element of protectionism for their Departments. We have to overcome that.

The private sector has probably gone furthest with that approach. It knows that if somebody is not working they are not being paid. It has tended to give that out to people who work on commission, for example, so that it can demonstrate that those people are paid for the work that they do. From a civil service point of view — this brings me back to Leslie's point — it might cost more to monitor what home-working staff are supposedly doing than what you save in the outworkings. I am a great believer in the concept, although we need to do much more work on it. We are further on than we were a few years ago, but much more could be done and a great deal more savings could be achieved. People will have greater job satisfaction. It comes back to the point that Mitchel raised about people being able to

take promotion without having to worry about travel and other factors that preclude them from advancing their career.

Professor Sir George Bain: Since time is pressing, I will make two very quick points. I take the point about civil servants. I remember, while doing this report and others over the past few years, when Bruce Robinson was head of the civil service, you could meet him in three or four different places. He just had a desk, and he would plonk himself down in DFP or across the road or wherever. The difficulties that you raise relate to the previous question. There is health and safety, and rating and security, which is particularly important for government. They all present problems. I was completely unaware of the home-working document. Even from glancing through it, it is obvious that the civil service has thought through most of the issues. There are sections on the difficulties that you might run into with changing the rateable value of your home. On the other hand, as every academic knows, you could write off some of it for tax. There are health and safety aspects. Then, of course, if you are working in a sensitive area, because you are handling personal data or it is a matter of state security, there are huge questions. We have seen how easy it is to lose data and how it can end up on a rubbish tip.

Mr Girvan: Or left behind.

Professor Sir George Bain: You can leave it behind in a taxi. All those questions have to be looked at very carefully. This may be a sensitive example, but if we were thinking of someone working in London for MI5, I doubt that he or she would be working at home but rather in a controlled and secure environment.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much, Professor Bain. That was very interesting.

Professor Sir George Bain: I look forward with interest to see where you end up.

Mr McLaughlin: We will be working from home. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Probably because of the decision of the electorate.

Professor Sir George Bain: Perhaps you could close down the Assembly and just appear on screen. That would be much more efficient.