

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Finance

CONNECT2 REGIONAL HUBS

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Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to update the Members on plans for the establishment of a number of new civil service regional hubs – known as “Connect2 Hubs”.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC BALANCE

Since 2018, the Reform of Property Management Programme has been focused on making more efficient use of the government estate. To date, the programme has realised circa £14 million in revenue savings through targeted interventions including the acquisition of James House and the rationalisation of leased properties in favour of freehold.

Providing staff with the flexibility to work remotely is an important part of this Programme. Historically, places of work within the civil service have been concentrated in Belfast. Where people work influences where they spend their money, so assisting people to work throughout the region will promote regional economic balance. Long commutes to work mean added expense, and more time spent travelling rather than in work or at home. In addition, more travel means more traffic congestion and more carbon emissions.

Enabling people to work closer to home therefore promotes regional economic balance, reduces carbon emissions, and promotes the work-life balance and health and wellbeing of our staff. I am therefore establishing hubs across the region that will allow civil servants to work closer to where they live subject of course to business requirements.

COVID-19

COVID-19 has seen an unprecedented shift to remote working in the civil service, enabling colleagues to work from home with many public services now being delivered remotely, and I want to give my thanks and pay tribute to all those civil servants who have stepped up in the most amazing way to deliver essential public services across a range of Departments in some of the most challenging circumstances. However, the response to Covid has confirmed that remote working is feasible and productive.

We now have an opportunity to build on these new ways of working that have the potential in the longer term to deliver savings and improve productivity, while supporting the realisation of many cross-departmental and Programme for Government outcomes.

While the current level of remote working is not optimum in the long-term, looking to the future it is evident that some business units will have a significant number of staff working outside of the office on a blended model approach. There is an appetite among staff and departments for a blended approach to remote working.

REGIONAL RECOVERY AND REGENERATION

Connect2 hubs will provide strategically located work and collaboration spaces for civil service staff. They will support the new ways of working, allowing staff to work remotely whilst connecting to people, technology and the office.

My Department is working closely with local councils to ensure that the impact of investment best reflects the needs of each region and maximises value to the public purse. Support to date across council Chief Executives has been encouraging.

Staff commuter data was analysed to identify Connect2 locations which would reduce the need for long commutes.

For many if you wanted a job in the Civil Service you had to commute to Belfast. There wasn't the same opportunities in other locations.

An implementation plan is being rolled out. Different locations are at different stages of development.

The first Connect2 Hubs are expected to open in Ballykelly and Downpatrick this year.

Planning has started for facilities in Ballymena, Craigavon, Omagh and the Antrim/Newtownabbey area with their opening planned for 2022.

Locations in Derry, Enniskillen; Newry and the Bangor/Newtownards area are planned for 2023.

Substantial investment is already underway in Derry that will rationalise and modernise our local estate to accommodate the Civil Service within Orchard House. To assist in longer-term regeneration objectives the Programme SRO is in dialogue with the Derry City and Strabane District Council Chief Executive to explore significant plans to include potential facilities to promote local economic recovery and urban regeneration over the next five years.

CONCLUSION

Given the detrimental impact of Covid-19 on local economies it is imperative that the NICS office estate works to reduce revenue pressure within public spending while maximising the local economic and regeneration benefits in the towns and cities across the region.

The establishment of regional hubs is about taking a balanced approach to investment by working with local councils in order to help address regional imbalance, promote economic recovery and reform across departments.

The opening of these new Connect2 Hubs not only promotes exciting new ways of working for the civil service but presents huge opportunities to make a positive impact on the environment and local economies as well as the health and wellbeing of our staff.

I will keep the Assembly updated as plans for Hubs progress.