



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Research and Information Service Research Paper

---

28 May 2012

**Aine Gallagher**

## Flexible Working

**NIAR 121-12**

This paper provides a range of current case studies on flexible working practices in the private and public sectors, to inform the Committee for Finance and Personnel's Inquiry into Flexible Working.



## Executive Summary

Following the decision of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to undertake an inquiry on flexible working, this briefing paper provides a range of current case studies concerning flexible working practices in the public and private sectors. The purpose is to inform the work of the Committee on this issue. The paper provides some background flexible working and information on current flexible working arrangements in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), though it acknowledges that the NICS does not currently have a formal strategy on flexible working. Finally, the paper considers some potential lessons for Northern Ireland arising from these case studies.

Flexible working is primarily about:

*'...being able to work in different places, at and for different times...and about being able to work in different ways, using technology and the different skills that people have'.<sup>1</sup>*

Legislation in the United Kingdom provides the statutory right to request a flexible working pattern to some employees with parental or caring responsibilities. Employers must seriously consider applications for flexible working and can reject requests only on legitimate business grounds.<sup>2</sup>

Flexible working is used widely in the UK, though the research suggests that it has not been implemented in a systematic way in either the private or public sector. The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) does not have a formal policy on flexible working. However, there are a significant amount of flexible working arrangements available within the NICS, particularly with regard to flexibility of hours and attendance.<sup>3</sup>

The Northern Ireland Executive has not formally considered the recommendations of the Bain Review for implementing flexible working practices in Northern Ireland. However, there have been a number of developments in technology and premises which have facilitated flexible working in the NICS, including IP telephony, telepresence and web conferencing.<sup>4</sup> These technological developments also enable a certain amount of flexibility with regard to location. For example, the introduction of a common secure access service allows staff to gain access to departmental IT services from non-NICS locations.<sup>5</sup>

Flexible working arrangements have been introduced in the Irish Civil Service, including flexible working hours, worksharing and 'e-working'. There are also examples of how flexible working has been used successfully by local councils in the UK, for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jones et al in Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 19.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>2</sup> The Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, Part IXA: Flexible Working.

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2002/2836> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/3.11-hours-and-attendance.pdf> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

<sup>4</sup> Correspondence from Departmental of Finance and Personnel to Committee, 9 March 2012.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

purpose of both efficiency savings and improving the work-life balance of staff. In the private sector, flexible working has been used primarily as a cost-saving mechanism. However, there are also examples of the use of flexible working as a means of attracting to senior positions more qualified women, who are sometimes 'hidden' from the traditional job market.<sup>6</sup>

The case studies presented in this paper highlight potential lessons for Northern Ireland about the benefits and challenges of implementing flexible working practices in the public sector. For example, many case studies demonstrate the importance of senior executives showing willingness to work flexibly and suggest that operational pressures may be the greatest barrier to flexible working. The research also found that a lack of proactivity in the implementation of flexible working practices may prevent organisations from maximising the potential benefits of this form of working.

It has been suggested that this reluctance to promote flexible working practices proactively also has an effect on the ability to use flexible working to address gender inequality in employment. This has both social and economic impacts on the UK where an estimated one in five individuals in the working population works below their potential, at a cost to the economy of up to £23 billion.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 52.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>7</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 20.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary.....                                 | 3  |
| Introduction .....                                     | 7  |
| 1    Definition of Flexible Working .....              | 7  |
| 2    Flexible Working in Northern Ireland.....         | 10 |
| 3    Flexible Working in the Irish Civil Service ..... | 14 |
| 4    Flexible Working in the UK Private Sector .....   | 15 |
| 4.1    KPMG.....                                       | 15 |
| 4.2    BT .....  | 16 |
| 4.3    Women Like Us .....                             | 18 |
| 5    Flexible Working in Local Government .....        | 19 |
| 5.1    Hertfordshire County Council.....               | 19 |
| 5.2    Salford City Council.....                       | 22 |
| 5.3    Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council.....     | 22 |
| 6    Lessons for Northern Ireland .....                | 23 |
| 7    Concluding Remarks .....                          | 25 |



## Introduction

This paper provides a sample of current flexible working practices within the public and private sector in the United Kingdom in order to inform the work of the Committee on this issue.

In an evidence session with the Committee on the issue of flexible working, Professor Sir George Bain was asked to comment on a potential Committee inquiry on flexible working. He remarked that:<sup>8</sup>

*It is hard for me to see the disadvantages of flexible working...flexibility in general is desirable. To some extent...it is more a question of how one should do this rather than whether one should do it.*

*It seems to me that, if the Committee were minded to inquire further, its inquiry...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.*

With this in mind, this paper aims to provide the Committee with a selection of case studies concerning flexible working practices, which demonstrate key challenges and benefits arising from this form of working.

Case studies of flexible working within the private sector include KPMG, BT and recruitment company Women Like Us. Within the public sector, flexible working within a number of local councils is highlighted. The paper also includes information on current flexible working practices within the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

A number of key issues are raised through the examination of these case studies, including the importance of input and involvement at senior levels, possible barriers to the successful implementation of flexible working and the potential for flexible working to address gender equality employment issues.

## 1 Definition of flexible working

This section outlines the context of flexible working, including legislation in the UK and Northern Ireland which requires employers to consider requests for flexible working arrangements. It also sets out a definition of flexible working and highlights different types of flexible working practices.

According to Jones *et al*, flexible working:<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Committee for Finance and Personnel Official Report, Flexible Working, 1 February 2012, p. 5.  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Meetings-of-Assembly-Committees-Minutes-of-Evidence/Flexible-Working/> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

*...is about being able to work in different places, at and for different times (shift systems, longer and shorter hours) and about being able to work in different ways, using technology and the different skills that people have. It is also about moving flexibility away from a singular perspective towards a notion of 'shared' flexibility.*

*Rather than restrict ideas about flexibility to a small number of policies, we argue that flexibility is about being able to achieve desired outcomes in a range of ways, being flexible about how, when and where people work.*

Legislation in the UK provides the statutory right to request a flexible working pattern to some employees with parental or caring responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> There are some restrictions to this right: the employee must have worked for the employer for 26 weeks continuously before applying and they must not have made another application for flexible working during the past 12 months. Employers must seriously consider applications for flexible working and can reject a request only if there is a good business reason for doing so.<sup>11</sup> It is also possible for employees to challenge their employer in court, should the latter refuse such a request.<sup>12</sup> Other European countries, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany France and Finland have introduced statutes that provide the right to request flexible working arrangements to all employees – irrespective of their reasons for seeking a change.

Flexible working is used widely in the UK. Research carried out last year by think-tank Demos<sup>13</sup> found that currently 90% of employers offer at least one form of flexible working arrangement to their employees; almost 60% of employees stated they currently used a form of flexible working and 83% of requests for flexible working are approved.<sup>14</sup> The report claimed that flexible working is:<sup>15</sup>

***'...particularly important in a sluggish economic climate where employment legislation has been cast as a potential barrier to job creation and growth.'***

A report published by the Westminster Sustainable Business Forum<sup>16</sup> has found that 'the public sector could increase the productivity of its workforce by £8bn a year by using its buildings differently.'<sup>17</sup> Collectively improving workplace conditions,

<sup>9</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 19.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>10</sup> The Flexible Working (Procedural Requirements) Regulations 2002.

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2002/3207/contents/made>

<sup>11</sup> NI Direct, 'Flexible working and work-life balance'

<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/employment/employment-terms-and-conditions/flexible-working/flexible-working-and-work-life-balance.htm> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

<sup>12</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 36.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>13</sup> Demos is a UK think-tank 'focused on power and politics'. <http://www.demos.co.uk/> [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Westminster Sustainable Business forum is a 'coalition of leading businesses, parliamentarians and organisations informing better policy making on sustainability issues.'

<http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/wsbf> [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>17</sup> 'Changing building use "could raise productivity by £8bn"', Nick Mann, Public Finance, 7 November 2011.

introducing flexible working and reinvesting money saved by rationalising property portfolios could help to increase productivity by between 5% and 15%; a 5% increase would equate to £8bn worth of staff time. The report makes reference to flexible working, claiming that it could lower space requirements, and thereby reduce property costs and carbon emissions.<sup>18</sup>

## Types of Flexible Working

In practice, flexible working arrangements encompass a range of options, including:<sup>19</sup>

- Part-time working: *frequently defined as working for less than 30 hours a week, or for less than the typical working week of a comparable job.*
- Job-sharing: *part-time working when two or more people share responsibility for a job between them.*
- Flexible hours (or flexitime): *when employees can choose how to allocate their hours of work across a period of time.*
- Compressed hours: *the reallocation of time into fewer and longer blocks during the week or fortnight.*
- Term-time working: *when employees are on a permanent contract, but can take paid or unpaid leave during school holidays.*
- Hot-desking: *when more than one employee can use a single workstation and desk space as required; used to increase flexibility, efficiency and employee mobility.*
- Mobile or teleworking/working from home: *permits employees to work all or part of the working week at a location remote from their employer's official workplace.*

Local software company Consilium's Chief Executive Colin Reid has argued that maximising the benefits of mobile technology can make organisations more productive and help citizens hold government to account. He claims that Northern Ireland can take the lead in developing mobile technologies and generate new jobs for graduates. Consilium's clients typically make 20-40 per cent savings through mobile working.<sup>20</sup>

---

<http://www.publicfinance.co.uk/news/2011/11/changing-working-practices-could-raise-public-sector-productivity-by-8bn/> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

<sup>18</sup> Leaner and Greener II: Putting Buildings to Work, Westminster Sustainable Business Forum, 2011, p. 56.

[http://local-government.interserve.com/media/Microsites/local-Government/PDF/wsbf\\_report\\_2011\\_leaner\\_and\\_greener\\_ii\\_putting\\_buildngs\\_to\\_work.pdf](http://local-government.interserve.com/media/Microsites/local-Government/PDF/wsbf_report_2011_leaner_and_greener_ii_putting_buildngs_to_work.pdf) [Accessed 23 April 2012].

<sup>19</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 20.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>20</sup> 'Consilium Going Mobile', AgendaNI Magazine, 1 March 2012.

<http://www.agendani.com/consiliumgoing-mobile> [Accessed 20 March 2012].

Mobile working has generated efficiency savings for other organisations, such as Aberdeen City Council, which is saving £1.5 million per year through mobile working, and has a mobile workforce of 225 staff.<sup>21</sup>

## 2 Flexible Working in Northern Ireland

This section outlines current flexible working practices available in the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Northern Ireland Assembly. It also outlines recommendations arising from the 2008 Bain Review, an independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs chaired by Professor Sir George Bain.

In 2001 the Central Personnel Group within the Department of Finance and Personnel produced a booklet on 'Work-Life Balance in the Northern Ireland Civil Service', outlining policies and working practices which have the potential to:<sup>22</sup>

*...help to develop a modern and forward thinking civil service where a motivated, confident and flexible workforce provide the high quality service which our community has a right to expect in the provision of its public services.*

This booklet suggested that all jobs within the NICS should be considered for an alternative work pattern.<sup>23</sup>

The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) does not have a formal policy on flexible working. However, the Northern Ireland Civil Service HR Policies include provisions on flexible working under the 'Hours and Attendance' guidelines. The policy states that:<sup>24</sup>

*There is a considerable amount of flexibility in the way Departments may arrange the conditioned hours of the working week. A Department may, with the agreement of their Departmental Trade Union Side, introduce a Flexible Working Time facility (FWT).*

A Flexible Working Time facility offers considerable scope to vary times of arrival and departure from work, to vary the length and timing of lunch breaks and to take time off by working extra hours. A Code of Practice on Flexible Working Time has been agreed between the Management and Trade Union Sides of the Central Whitley Council and forms part of the NICS HR Policy.

The Code of Practice offers guidance on Flexible Working Time (FWT) in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which is now a 'well-established part of many Civil Servants' working lives'. According to the HR Policy:<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Central Personnel Group, Department of Finance and Personnel, 'Work-Life Balance in the Northern Ireland Civil Service', p. 1.  
<http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/worklife.pdf> [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Northern Ireland Civil Service Human Resources Policy (Staff Handbook), Section 3.11: Hours and Attendance, p. 9.  
<http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/3.11-hours-and-attendance.pdf> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

*Both sides of the Central Whitley Council would like FWT Schemes...to be extended to as many Civil Servants and work places as possible.*

The HR Policy also states that:<sup>26</sup>

*Ideally, all staff in one office/location should be covered by the same FWT arrangements.*

Like all employers in Northern Ireland, the NICS is also required to consider requests for flexible working arrangements under *The Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002*.<sup>27</sup>

The Code of Practice on Flexible Working Time also relates to Secretariat staff at the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA). There is a 'considerable amount of flexibility' in the way the NIA may arrange conditioned hours of the working week and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission recognises that:<sup>28</sup>

*'...flexible working arrangements can assist with the retention of skilled staff and reduce costs; to raise staff morale and reduce absenteeism; and to react to changing business needs more effectively. For staff, the opportunity to work flexibly can greatly improve their ability to balance home and work responsibilities.'*

Guidance on flexible working arrangements for employees and employers has been produced by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland<sup>29</sup>, the Department for Employment and Learning<sup>30</sup> and the public service trade union Unison<sup>31</sup>

## Bain Review

In 2007 the Department of Finance and Personnel commissioned an independent review of policy on the location of public sector jobs. The Review was chaired by Professor Sir George Bain and the Report was published in 2008, setting out a number of 'practical recommendations for the longer-term approach to the location of public sector jobs.'<sup>32</sup> The Report contained a section on flexible working, which recommended that:<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> NI Direct, 'Flexible working and work-life balance'.

<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/employment/employment-terms-and-conditions/flexible-working/flexible-working-and-work-life-balance.htm> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

The Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2002/2836/contents> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

<sup>28</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly Staff Handbook, Section 3.10: Hours and Attendance.

[http://assist.assemblyni.gov.uk/services/hr/sep\\_project/assembly\\_handbook/section\\_3/hours\\_attendance.htm#flexible](http://assist.assemblyni.gov.uk/services/hr/sep_project/assembly_handbook/section_3/hours_attendance.htm#flexible)

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/flexible\\_working\\_employer\\_guideF\\_sept10.pdf](http://www.equalityni.org/archive/pdf/flexible_working_employer_guideF_sept10.pdf) [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>30</sup> [http://www.delni.gov.uk/flexible\\_working\\_-\\_a\\_guide\\_for\\_employers\\_and\\_employees\\_er\\_36.pdf](http://www.delni.gov.uk/flexible_working_-_a_guide_for_employers_and_employees_er_36.pdf) [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.unison.org.uk/worklifebalance/thingstoknow.asp#four>

<sup>32</sup> Independent Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs, 2008, p. 3.

[http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/publications-how-we-make-decisions-major\\_policy-proposals-review-of-policy-on-location-of-public-sector-jobs](http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/publications-how-we-make-decisions-major_policy-proposals-review-of-policy-on-location-of-public-sector-jobs) [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>33</sup> Independent Review of Policy on the Location of Public Sector Jobs, 2008, p. 114.

*All public sector bodies should consider implementing flexible working approaches and include these within their business plans.*

Neither the Department of Finance and Personnel nor the Executive have formally considered the recommendations of the Bain Review. However, the Department has noted that.<sup>34</sup>

*There have been a number of developments in the areas of use of technology and premises, and others are planned, which are relevant to the recommendations and which support, either directly or indirectly, flexible working as envisaged by the Bain Review.*

The Department of Finance and Personnel has used the application of new technology as a means of facilitating flexible working. Relevant technology initiatives adopted by the Department include the successful roll out across all NICS sites of Network NI (as anticipated in the Bain Review), and the creation of the IT Assist (the NICS shared service for the provision of IT services). This system, allows staff to connect their laptop to the NICS network, and to work remotely online at virtually any NICS site. The introduction of a common secure access service also allows staff with the right equipment to gain access to departmental IT services from non-NICS locations, such as home.<sup>35</sup>

In correspondence to the Committee, the Department highlighted the NICS Unified Communications Initiative, which is a key enabler for flexible working and includes the use of:

- IP Telephony (IPT)
- Instant Messaging and Presence
- Telepresence
- A Web Conferencing pilot

**Telepresence**, for example, is in effect high quality video conferencing. The NICS has been using video conferencing for many years, though there has not been a cohesive NICS strategy or approach to this issue. As part of the NICS Unified Communications Initiative, there is investment in infrastructure to bring together existing and future video conferencing units into an integrated telepresence network, which also will link to desktop and phone-based video users. This solution is due to be tested in the next few months, and the Department anticipates it will enter full service by Autumn 2012.<sup>36</sup>

---

[http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/publications-how-we-make-decisions-major\\_policy-proposals-review-of-policy-on-location-of-public-sector-jobs](http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/publications-how-we-make-decisions-major_policy-proposals-review-of-policy-on-location-of-public-sector-jobs) [Accessed 1 May 2012].

<sup>34</sup> Correspondence from Departmental of Finance and Personnel to Committee, 9 March 2012.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Correspondence from Departmental of Finance and Personnel to Committee, 9 March 2012.

Video conferencing has the potential to deliver efficiency savings in travel and subsistence costs, and to reduce the environmental impact of travel through reduced emissions. In 2010 a report by the Sustainable Development Commission recommended that the Department for Transport, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport “work together to investigate the potential to reduce the need to travel through the creation of a UK network of high quality video-conferencing facilities.” The report recommended the formation of a cross-departmental team to work with business in developing opportunities for ICT-enabled mobility. It stated that public sector bodies should establish a network of videoconferencing facilities, and organisations should be required to report the videoconferencing utilisation rates.<sup>37</sup>

In evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, technology provider Cisco claimed that:<sup>38</sup>

*Evidence from the private sector suggests travel spend can be reduced by as much as 30% through better use of communications-based alternatives to travel like video conferencing. This means there may be potential for the public sector to save as much as £900 million a year, as well as to significantly reduce carbon emissions.*

The Department also has facilitated mobile working through the creation of satellite offices for ‘touch-down’ working. In May 2011, the Department installed a pilot regional satellite office in Marlborough House in Craigavon, which provides 20 workstations, 6 of which have networked computers attached. The remainder offer network points where staff can connect their laptop to the NICS network.

The business zone scheme also allows those registered to access other flexible working zones in Clare House (Harbour Estate, Belfast), Causeway Exchange (Belfast City Centre) and Castle Buildings (Stormont Estate). Currently around 230 staff are registered in the scheme, with the majority from the Department of Finance and Personnel, the Department of Education, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment and the Department for Employment and Learning. A small zone similar to that in Marlborough House has also been set up in the main reception area of Castle Buildings on the Stormont Estate, to support officials whose headquarters location is outside the estate, but who may have to visit Stormont, for example, to support Ministers or appear at Assembly Committees.<sup>39</sup>

Although this scheme is certainly an example of flexible working in practice, it is currently targeted at workers whose role requires them to be away from their normal

<sup>37</sup> *Smarter Moves: How Information Communications Technology can promote Sustainable Mobility*, Sustainable Development Commission.

<http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications.php?id=1050> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

<sup>38</sup> ‘Government video-conferencing usage revealed in sustainability evidence’, *Public Sector Travel*, 9 November 2010.

<http://www.publicsectortravel.org.uk/2010/11/09/government-video-conferencing-usage-revealed-in-sustainability-evidence/> [Accessed 15 April 2012].

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

place of work on a regular basis, and has not been offered as an option for office-based staff wishing to reduce their commuting time, except in exceptional circumstances. The Department acknowledges that this type of flexible working is 'more opportunistic working than explicit strategy.' According to the Department, it is not anticipated that this policy will change without detailed consideration of the management and business issues that could arise if the concept was broadened.<sup>40</sup>

### 3 Flexible Working in the Irish Civil Service

In April 2009, flexible working arrangements were included in the Irish Supplementary Budget. Policies such as *Special Incentive Career Break Scheme for Civil Servants* and a *Shorter Working Year Scheme for Civil Servants* were introduced.<sup>41</sup>

**Shorter Working Year Scheme for Civil Servants:** This scheme is an extension of the term time scheme, which allows for parents of school-going children up to 18 years of age to take a continuous block of 8, 10 or 13 weeks unpaid leave during the summer holidays. The new scheme allows any civil servant an opportunity to take up to 3 continuous blocks of 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 or 13 weeks (to a maximum of 13 weeks in total) unpaid leave for any reason at any time during the year.

**Career Breaks:** This scheme provides that staff may be granted special leave without pay for a period of not less than six months and not more than five years subject to meeting eligibility criteria.

**Special Incentive Career Break Scheme for Civil Servants:** The Special Civil Service Incentive Career Break Scheme was introduced as a once-off measure that was included in the Supplementary Budget on 7 April 2009. Following implementation on 30 April the measure was extended to staff in the different areas of the public service, including the local government sector.

**Hours of Attendance & Flexible Working Hours (FWH):** Most Government Departments/Offices operate a system of Flexible Working Hours (FWH). Under this system, civil servants must work their full quota of hours, but they are given much more flexibility in doing so. Staff may, within certain limits, vary their arrival times, departure times, and lunch breaks and are allowed to work up additional time which may subsequently be taken as time off (flexi-leave).

**Worksharing:** Worksharing means that staff may choose a daily/weekly work pattern which is different from the standard working day/week. All civil servants may apply to workshare. Staff who opt for worksharing are required to do so for a minimum of

---

<sup>40</sup> Official Report, Flexible Working: Departmental Briefing, 14 March 2012.  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Meetings-of-Assembly-Committees-Minutes-of-Evidence/Flexible-Working--Departmental-Briefing/> [Accessed 28 March 2012].

<sup>41</sup> Circular 412003: Pilot schemes to promote e-working in the Civil Service  
<http://circulans.gov.ie/pdf/circular/finance/2003/04.pdf> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

twelve months. In general, worksharers enjoy pro-rate arrangements with their full-time colleagues in relation to pay and other conditions of employment.

**E – Working:** In April 2000, the Government approved a Code of Practice on teleworking, or e-working. The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) committed the Irish Government to introduce teleworking options into mainstream public service employment by 2002.<sup>42</sup> The PPF committed the Government to develop a teleworking policy for all publicly-funded organisations to be implemented by 2002.<sup>43</sup>

## 4 Flexible Working in the UK Private Sector

This section outlines a number of case studies highlighting the use of flexible working practices in UK private sector organisations. The case studies demonstrate the potential of flexible working to lead to economic efficiencies within organisations, for example through increased staff retention, lower levels of absenteeism and a reduction in accommodation costs. The case studies also highlight key success factors in flexible working practices, such as leadership and cultural change.

### 4.1 KPMG

In January 2009, KPMG announced a ground-breaking programme called “Flexible Futures”, which involved an appeal to all KPMG’s 11,000 partners and staff in the UK, to volunteer to change their terms and conditions of employment for a temporary period of 18 months. During this period, the new terms allowed the firm, as and when it required, to ask volunteers to:

- Reduce their working week by one day, unpaid, or;
- Take between 4 and 12 weeks leave at 30% pay.

Staff could volunteer for either or both of these. The maximum salary loss in any calendar year was capped at 20%, and full benefits would continue to be provided. By the end of the period, 85% of staff had signed up for one or both of the options.<sup>44</sup>

The objective of Flexible Futures was to ‘manage the firm’s people costs in line with fluctuating and unpredictable business demands whilst retaining talent.’<sup>45</sup> The

<sup>42</sup> Circular 412003: Pilot schemes to promote e-working in the Civil Service  
<http://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/finance/2003/04.pdf> [Accessed 20 April 2012].

<sup>43</sup> Programme for Prosperity and Fairness  
[http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached\\_files/Pdf%20files/ProgrammeForProsperityAndFairness.pdf](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/Pdf%20files/ProgrammeForProsperityAndFairness.pdf) [Accessed 15 April 2012].

<sup>44</sup> ‘Flexible Futures – KPMG’s hedging strategy for talent’, Rachel Campbell, Partner - Head of People, KPMG Europe. 10 March 2009.  
<http://www.csr360gpn.org/magazine/feature/flexible-futures-a-hedging-strategy-for-talent/> [Accessed 15 April 2012].

<sup>45</sup> Business in the Community 2010 awards, Opportunity Now 2010 Awards Case Studies: ‘Agile Organisation Award’.  
[http://www.bitcdiversity.org.uk/awards/on\\_awards\\_2010/case\\_studies/agile\\_workplace/kpmg\\_flexible.html](http://www.bitcdiversity.org.uk/awards/on_awards_2010/case_studies/agile_workplace/kpmg_flexible.html) [Accessed 15 April 2012].

programme was designed and delivered quickly, between December 2008 and early January 2009, in response to a rapidly worsening economic climate. The development of the programme was led by a cross-functional central team that came together for a fixed period, with a clear objective of designing and delivering a scheme in a short time scale:<sup>46</sup>

*From the start flexibility and agility were championed from the top of the organisation as crucial to the success of the business at a challenging time.*

The scheme was rolled out in the first instance to its most senior people via a two way conference call hosted by the chief operating officer and the UK head of people. Following the call over 90% of its most senior people volunteered to sign up to the programme, prior to launching to the rest of the firm. Over the subsequent eight months around 500 people across the business were asked to take leave in line with the options for which they volunteered. The scheme saved the organisation over £4 million.<sup>47</sup> This case study highlights the use of flexible working as an economic downturn measure to reduce costs and prevent redundancies in periods of economic difficulty.

## 4.2 BT

According to a report by Demos, BT is:<sup>48</sup>

*...a good example of a large corporation that has successfully embedded aspects of the flexible working agenda in a way that was enabled by technology, but ultimately embedded through leadership and cultural change.*

70,000 BT employees are now involved in the BT Workstyle Project, which is one of the largest flexible working projects in Europe. The company has introduced measures to allow 15,000 employees to work from home and equipping 64,000 to work flexibly. BT found that establishing flexible working practices had a major positive effect on retaining staff and cutting costs. By 2005, BT was saving €725 million-plus per annum through reductions in its office estate, and BT's 11,600 home workers save the company €104 million a year in accommodation costs, and are on average 20 per cent more productive than their office-based colleagues.

According to the organisation:<sup>49</sup>

*Flexible working should be seen as a philosophy of business organisation, rather than a technological issue, comprising every aspect of the company, from its*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Business in the Community 2010 awards..

[http://www.bitcdiversity.org.uk/awards/on\\_awards\\_2010/case\\_studies/agile\\_workplace/kpmg\\_flexible.html](http://www.bitcdiversity.org.uk/awards/on_awards_2010/case_studies/agile_workplace/kpmg_flexible.html) [Accessed 15 April 2012].

<sup>48</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 27.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

*headquarters and international facilities office employees and remote employees, to its physical and intellectual assets, suppliers, partners, and of course, customer.*

The starting point for the BT Workstyle Project was the recognition that 'in a digital, networked economy, competitive advantage relies on the ability to anticipate and react quickly to change.' According to the company, consumer expectations have been one of the key drivers of BT's embrace of flexibility as an organisational principle:<sup>50</sup>

*We have to satisfy demands for our products and services around-the-clock. There is no room for a traditional nine-to-five working day because that just can't meet the demands placed upon us as a business.*

### **Key practices and enablers**

In addition to the use of remote technology platforms, the enabling factors for the BT Workstyle Project included clear policies and careful measurement, leadership from the top, cultural and behavioural change, and development of the right equipment and workspaces for people's jobs. A phased approach was taken, with focused projects followed by a broader roll out.

The Project incorporated the following key elements:<sup>51</sup>

- A robust, scalable and flexible technology platform (BT's Workstyle Technology Architecture)
- Creation of a flexible estate and accommodation rationalisation: the company established a number of carefully designed buildings for BT employees around the world, equipped with hot desks and touchdown areas.
- Leadership and culture change: senior executives were strongly encouraged to be early adopters to demonstrate management commitment. Mechanisms and processes were put in place to ensure that the data necessary to monitor and prove the flexible working business case was collected. The focus shifted from rewarding people's attendance to rewarding their contribution to the business and its customers.
- Policies were established to enable people to work flexibly in a sustainable way, and significant time and resources were allocated to training.

### **Impact of flexible working**

BT's integration of flexibility as an organisational wider practice has produced 'tangible and substantial results in terms of cost savings, productivity, employee retention and carbon reduction.'<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Caroline Waters, BT Group Director of People and Policy.

<sup>51</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, pp. 28-30.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

- The proportion of female BT employees in the UK who return to work after taking maternity leave is around 96–99 per cent more than double the national average. This is estimated to save the company €7.4 million a year in recruitment and induction costs.
- Each home worker is reported to save the company £6,000 a year, a total of around £70 million per year.<sup>53</sup> Home working call centre operators also handle up to 20 per cent more calls than their office-based colleagues.
- The absentee rate among flexible workers is down 63 per cent and is now 20 per cent below the UK average.
- Cost savings of over €725 million a year through reduced office estate and €104 million a year through reduction in accommodation.
- Teleconferencing has eliminated the annual need for over 300,000 face-to-face meetings, leading to savings of over €38.6 million a year.
- Avoiding the purchase of approximately 12 million litres of fuel per year, resulting in 54,000 tonnes less CO2 being generated in the UK.

### 4.3 Women Like Us

Women Like Us is a recruitment consultancy and social enterprise that helps employers match their needs with women who need flexibility. It has a highly flexible workforce: 25 out of its 29 members of staff work part-time and all work flexibly, for example, working from home.<sup>54</sup>

Women Like Us sources talented, experienced candidates and matches them to flexible and part time recruitment opportunities. They helped a number of organisations to introduce flexible working arrangements, including the following companies:

#### **ConnectED**

ConnectED represents, markets and sells a set of products to the education sector. The company was able to access highly experienced candidates for a reduced cost by working with Women Like Us to design roles that were all recruited on a part time and flexible basis.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 30.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>53</sup> Isles N, *The Good Work Guide: How to make organisations fairer and more effective*, London: Earthscan, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 52.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>55</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 29.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

*Like a growing number of small businesses throughout London, ConnectED discovered that by being flexible, they were also able to attract the attention of talented candidates who are 'hidden' from the traditional job market, and gain experience, reliability and commitment in return.*

### **PrimeTimers**

South London based **PrimeTimers** helps charities, voluntary and community groups to grow by handpicking talented and experienced professionals from the private sector to cross over to non-profit organisations. In late 2008, PrimeTimers won a huge contract, which meant that it could double its output. At the time it had three members of staff, which meant it needed to hire new personnel who could take on various aspects of the business, but with very different skills and on differing projects. With the help and support of Women Like Us Prime Timers hired two candidates for 2.5 days a week, with an overlap to occur on one. Brent Thomas, CEO of PrimeTimers, comments:<sup>56</sup>

*We believe you can unlock a tremendous amount of talent – in both the corporate and third sector worlds – by hiring women returners and other staff on a job share basis. Job shares work so well for small organisations.*

## 5 Flexible Working in Local Government

This section outlines the use of flexible working arrangements in a number of local councils. These case studies demonstrate the potential for flexible working practices to be used in local government as a means of reducing accommodation and facilities costs, improving corporate image, and increasing productivity levels.

### 5.1 Hertfordshire County Council

Hertfordshire County Council has been named by campaigning charity Working Families as one of the best family-friendly employers of the past three decades. This is in recognition of the leadership it has shown in its flexible working and family-friendly initiatives.<sup>57</sup>

Hertfordshire County Council offers flexible working to all its employees and the default position is one of acceding to requests wherever possible. Some 82% of the Council's workforce is female, and 31% are carers. The Council recognised that:<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 41.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>57</sup> K. Goodwin, 'Hertfordshire County Council: flexible work – an activity, not a place', Equal Opportunities Review, Issue 193, 01 October 2009.

<http://www.eortrial.co.uk/default.aspx?id=1118422> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>58</sup> K. Goodwin, 'Hertfordshire County Council: flexible work – an activity, not a place', Equal Opportunities Review, Issue 193, 01/10/2009.

<http://www.eortrial.co.uk/default.aspx?id=1118422> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

*...with more carers in its workforce, it needed to support these staff, and offering flexible working was a way of demonstrating the value it placed on them.*

In 2009 Hertfordshire County Council's three year programme, "The Way We Work", was completed. This programme involved reducing office accommodation from 51 offices to three main bases in key towns across the county, directly affecting 4,500 Hertfordshire County Council staff. "The Way We Work" was a self-funded programme, which 'improved motivation and morale, enhanced knowledge and information sharing, increased retention of staff and improved the skills of their staff.'<sup>59</sup> According to the organisation:<sup>60</sup>

*The Way We Work programme means that staff now enjoy a higher standard of accommodation and it allows the organisation to spend more money on front-line services. [It] set out to ensure that the property we currently own best serves the needs of our services, and by extension, the people of Hertfordshire. It is helping us achieve our aim of making Hertfordshire an even better place to live and work.*

The objectives of "The Way We Work" were to maximise space and desk occupancy, improve document management, achieve coherent standards of ICT, solve maintenance back-log on offices, realise capital receipts and reduce revenue cost. These objectives were achieved by:<sup>61</sup>

- Reducing the county council's building portfolio from 51 sites which were old, cramped and expensive to run, down to three main bases which are modern and easily maintained;
- Providing appropriate workspace, facilities and working conditions to enable staff to work more flexibly and provide a more responsive service;
- Providing quality support and training for staff to take full advantage of the new technology and new ways of working; and,
- Reviewing the council's working practices.

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) does not adopt a highly prescriptive centralised process, but instead 'encourages managers and their teams to adopt solutions that work for their part of the business.'<sup>62</sup> The programme is expected to realise significant cost savings of £3.8 million each year by.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> MJ Award Entry 2009 People and Workforce Achievement of the Year. [http://admin.localgov.co.uk/his\\_localgov/view/images/uploaded/Image/peopleHertfordshire.PDF](http://admin.localgov.co.uk/his_localgov/view/images/uploaded/Image/peopleHertfordshire.PDF) [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> K. Goodwin, 'Hertfordshire County Council: flexible work – an activity, not a place', Equal Opportunities Review, Issue 193, 01/10/2009.

<http://www.eortrial.co.uk/default.aspx?id=1118422> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

*...securing efficiency in working practices and services delivery, removing duplication and unnecessary bureaucracy and making effective use of new technology.*

Several results of the changes made in the Council are outlined below.<sup>64</sup>

- In the three new HCC sites, there is an open plan working environment with no individual offices for managers;
- The new sites have longer opening hours, which allow staff to come in earlier or leave later and enables them to adjust their working pattern to fit around their caring responsibilities, lifestyle or simply avoid traffic; and,
- IT has been key in facilitating flexible working at HCC. New technology allows staff to transfer their telephone number to any phone and access emails and documents from any HCC site or from home. Currently, there is an average of 5,000 remote log-ins to the council's IT systems each week and the reduction in paper use since the office rationalisation reportedly equates to 32 Eiffel Towers stacked on top of each other.

### **Impact of flexible working**

Hertfordshire County Council's approach to flexible working has led to:<sup>65</sup>

- Improved retention and reduced recruitment costs - from March 2004 to March 2009 there was a reduction in turnover by just over 3% across all grades;
- Reduction in absenteeism - sickness absence has fallen to 7.1 days per employee annually, which is below the nine-day national average for local government;
- Improved morale - 72% of employees report that their manager is sensitive to work-life balance issues;
- High take-up of flexible working - 94% of flexible working requests are granted compared with a national average of 77%, and the council estimates that around 75% of its workforce is engaged in some form of flexible working pattern, including staff at director level;
- Improved corporate image - the winning of employer awards in competition with the private sector has brought the organisation external recognition and HCC has received many invitations to speak about its flexible working programme. It has also raised its profile as an employer of choice - resulting in an increased level of applications to work at the local authority; and,

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Goodwin, 'Hertfordshire County Council: flexible work – an activity, not a place', Equal Opportunities Review, Issue 193, 01/10/2009.

<http://www.eortrial.co.uk/default.aspx?id=1118422> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

- Estimated cost saving of several million over a six year period, which can be redirected into front line services.<sup>66</sup>

## 5.2 Salford City Council

Salford City Council developed the concept of home working as a way to contribute to its drive to modernise service delivery, explore a range of environmental issues, compete in terms of staff recruitment and retention, support and benefit from the Council's evolving accommodation strategy and further develop its flexible working agenda.<sup>67</sup>

A small pilot scheme for was set up for staff working in the Housing and Council Tax Benefits area of Salford Direct. The pilot home working project was judged a success by staff and managers and was quickly adopted by fifty more staff. It was subsequently decided to extend home working to other service areas across the Council including telephony staff in the Customer Contact Centre. Home working is now one of a number of flexible working options made available to staff, subject to the approval of a business case.

Performance benefits for the Council have included:<sup>68</sup>

- Council Tax and Benefits processing productivity improvements of 15% to 20% with no adverse effects on performance;
- 48% increase in Benefits and Tax Overpayments productivity levels; and,
- After 12 months, among the initial pilot group of home-based staff, sickness absence levels were reduced by 75%.

## 5.3 Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council

Stockport Metropolitan Borough developed a range of flexible working options to deliver four strategic objectives:<sup>69</sup>

- Increasing participation in flexible working to become an employer of choice;
- Reducing 33% of floor space through the use of new ways of working with innovative IT technology and office design;
- Allowing employees to take more control of their work life balance as it has a positive effect on service delivery; and

<sup>66</sup> Project Nomad, Flexible Working: Summary Report for Project Nomad, 2006, p. 4.

<http://www.wisework.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/NomadFlexibleWorkingGuide.pdf> [Accessed 10 March 2012].

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Project Nomad, Flexible Working Summary Report for Project Nomad, 2006, p. 4.

<http://www.wisework.co.uk/sites/default/files/resources/NomadFlexibleWorkingGuide.pdf> [Accessed 10 March 2012].

<sup>69</sup> Leaner and Greener II: Putting Buildings to Work, Westminster Sustainable Business Forum, 2011, p. 59.

[http://local-government.interserve.com/media/Microsites/local-government/PDF/wsbf\\_report\\_2011\\_leaner\\_and\\_greener\\_ii\\_putting\\_buildngs\\_to\\_work.pdf](http://local-government.interserve.com/media/Microsites/local-government/PDF/wsbf_report_2011_leaner_and_greener_ii_putting_buildngs_to_work.pdf) [Accessed 23 April 2012].

- Reducing the environmental footprint in line with the Council's priorities.

From 2005 to 2008 the Council carried out its Work Life Balance Improvement Programme. The uptake of flexible working occurred across all Directorates, in a wide variety of teams 'where the patterns of flexible working demonstrate the theme of "not one size fits all"'. The most common options adopted were working from home one to two days a week; working from home all contracted hours; extended flexi-time scheme (which sees the reduction or removal of core hours) and compressed hours. Other flexible working patterns at a team level also have been adopted.<sup>70</sup>

### Impact of flexible working

The closure of Council buildings and the implementation of flexible working patterns across all five Directorates has led to accommodation reductions of 5,097m<sup>2</sup>. This programme has seen 600 employees working from home either full time or one to two days a week, across a civic employee population of approximately 1,600. In year four (2009), the project provided a net benefit of £744,000 to the organisation.

Two of the biggest benefits have been the reduction in sickness absence (in particular short term), and reduced employee turnover in hard to recruit for posts. Flexible working also has benefited the environmental policies within the organisation, with 37% fewer journeys in peak travel time, reducing congestions, and home workers on average reducing their mileage by approximately 30% a week.<sup>71</sup>

## 6 Lessons for Northern Ireland

There are key features arising from these case studies, which are worth considering in the implementation of flexible working practices in Northern Ireland. This section outlines the importance of senior involvement for successful implementation of flexible working practices, barriers to flexible working and the potential of flexible working to address issues of gender equality within the workplace.

### Importance of senior executives showing willingness to work flexibly

Sir George Bain highlighted the importance of senior leadership in implementing flexible working practices in his evidence session with the Finance Committee:<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Leaner and Greener II: Putting Buildings to Work, Westminster Sustainable Business Forum, 2011, p. 60. [http://local-government.interserve.com/media/Microsites/local-government/PDF/wsf\\_report\\_2011\\_leaner\\_and\\_greener\\_ii\\_putting\\_buildngs\\_to\\_work.pdf](http://local-government.interserve.com/media/Microsites/local-government/PDF/wsf_report_2011_leaner_and_greener_ii_putting_buildngs_to_work.pdf) [Accessed 23 April 2012].

<sup>72</sup> Committee for Finance and Personnel Official Report, Flexible Working, 1 February 2012, p. 4. <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Meetings-of-Assembly-Committees-Minutes-of-Evidence/Flexible-Working/> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

*...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.*

KPGM's flexible working scheme was rolled out to its most senior people first, before launching the scheme to the rest of the firm:<sup>73</sup>

*From the start flexibility and agility were championed from the top of the organisation as crucial to the success of the business at a challenging time.*

BT emphasised the importance of leadership from the top: '*senior executives were strongly encouraged to be early adopters to demonstrate management commitment.*'<sup>74</sup>

### **Barriers to Flexible Working**

According to Demos, despite the widespread use of flexible working and the rewards that have been gained by organisations adopting flexible working arrangements, there remain 'real barriers preventing organisations from successfully implementing such arrangements.'<sup>75</sup>

The CIPD's survey of human resources professionals found that operational pressures were the most commonly reported barriers to flexible working: more than two-thirds of respondents identified this as the most important constraint. A survey of small businesses described by Peacock found that smaller employers find costs to be a significant barrier to adopting flexible and remote working. Of some 5,000 small businesses, 29 per cent felt that the technology required to roll out such programmes effectively was too expensive. Organisational culture can also pose a significant challenge: according to the Demos report there is a tendency to offer flexible working *reactively*, rather than *proactively*, when designing and developing a job.<sup>76</sup>

The case studies in this paper appear to suggest that flexible working is often adopted reactively, for example, as a means of reducing office accommodation, as in the case of Hertfordshire County Council, or as a response to external economic considerations, as in the case of KPGM. The lack of proactivity in the implementation of flexible working practices may prevent organisations from maximising the potential benefits of this form of working and may also have an effect on the ability to use flexible working to address gender inequality in employment, as discussed below.

<sup>73</sup> See page 9.

<sup>74</sup> See page 10.

<sup>75</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 41.  
<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>76</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 42.  
<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

## Gender Equality

In the Committee for Finance and Personnel's evidence session on flexible working, the issue of gender equality and equal opportunity in employment was raised as a possible area on which the Committee could develop its thinking about a potential inquiry into flexible working.<sup>77</sup>

Research from Demos suggests that flexible working has not yet been able to address many gender-based inequalities.<sup>78</sup> Although women are far more likely to request and take up a flexible working arrangement than men, research by the Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce suggests that many women and men who work part time appear to be working below their potential; an estimated one in five of the working population. The impact of people working below their potential has implications for the economy because of lost productivity and is particularly important given the current economic downturn. It is estimated that this waste of talent costs the economy up to £23 billion.<sup>79</sup>

According to the Family Friendly Working Hours, there are fewer part-time jobs available in higher-level occupations, meaning that women wishing to work on a part-time basis are competing for lower-level jobs. Among women who work full time, the proportion employed in high-level occupations has risen threefold over 20 years, while for part time workers the figures have barely changed.<sup>80</sup>

This problem is compounded by the fact that in the UK there appears to be 'a cultural tendency to solely design and advertise jobs on the basis of hours worked', rather than a consideration of whether or how the role could accommodate flexible working arrangements, while still achieving the necessary outcomes or outputs.<sup>81</sup>

Recruitment firm Women Like Us has demonstrated that using flexible working proactively to design and advertise roles can allow talented female candidates to fill high-level roles, which match their potential. These roles can attract those who are 'hidden' from the traditional job market on the basis of flexible working arrangements.<sup>82</sup> In order to do this, the Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce argues, a 'cultural

---

<sup>77</sup> Committee for Finance and Personnel Official Report, Flexible Working, 1 February 2012, p. 8.  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Meetings-of-Assembly-Committees-Minutes-of-Evidence/Flexible-Working/> [Accessed 23 April 2012].

<sup>78</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 76.  
<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>79</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 20.  
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 24.  
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>82</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 29.  
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

shift' is necessary to move employers away from thinking of full-time, fixed hours and location as the norm.'<sup>83</sup>

## 7 Concluding Remarks

This paper has presented a range of case studies highlighting the potential benefits and challenges of adopting and implementing flexible working arrangements. It has covered a range of sectors and job-types to indicate the wide variety of flexible working practices that have been adopted in both the private and public sectors.

The Committee may be particularly interested in the implementation of flexible working in local councils. Flexible working practices have been implemented successfully, and have led to reductions in office accommodation, improved retention and reduced recruitment costs, reduced absenteeism and reduced revenue cost, with savings being redirected into front line services.

Research suggests that the most significant barrier to flexible working is a lack of proactivity in implementation, which may prevent organisations from maximising the potential benefits of this form of working.<sup>84</sup> While flexible working has been adopted by many organisations in both the private and public sectors, this is often a reactive step as a means of reducing costs or in response to external economic considerations. In order to maximise the potential benefits of flexible working practices, it is necessary to look at strategic and widespread implementation.<sup>85</sup>

This lack of proactivity in the implementation of flexible working practices may also have an effect on the ability to use flexible working to address gender inequality in employment. The issue of gender equality was raised in the Committee for Finance and Personnel's evidence session on flexible working. However, research suggests that flexible working has not yet been able to address many gender-based inequalities because of the reluctance to consider flexible working practices in the design and advertisement of jobs.<sup>86</sup> This is a significant issue given that the absence of flexible working arrangements in higher-level occupations can lead to those who work on a part-time basis working below this potential. It is estimated that this waste of talent costs the economy up to £23 billion.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 24.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>84</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 42.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>85</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 42.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>86</sup> Demos, 'Reinventing the Workplace', 2011, p. 76.

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/reinventingtheworkplace> [Accessed 10 April 2012].

<sup>87</sup> Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce, 'Flexible Working: working for families, working for business. Family Friendly Taskforce', 2009, p. 20.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/family-friendly-task-force-report.pdf> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

Flexible working has been defined as working in different places, at and for different times and being able to work in different ways. The NICS has adopted a range of policies in regards to flexible working practices, part-time working, job sharing and flexible working hours, which suggests that the temporal aspect of flexible working is operating effectively within the NICS.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, the Committee may wish to focus its inquiry on the location/technological aspects of flexible working, for example mobile working, homeworking and remote working. The Department has suggested that there have been a number of developments in these areas which have the potential to support flexible working practices.

In its evidence session with the Committee, the Department suggested that ‘an inquiry by the Committee might be very helpful...in crystallising thinking’ on a policy or a formal strategy in flexible working.<sup>89</sup> A Departmental Official stated that:<sup>90</sup>

*...a coherent central policy [on flexible working] 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.*

This may provide a starting point for the Committee’s inquiry into flexible working.

---

<sup>88</sup> See pages 9-10 above.

<sup>89</sup> Committee for Finance and Personnel Official Report, Flexible Working, 14 March 2012, p. 4.  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Meetings-of-Assembly-Committees-Minutes-of-Evidence/Flexible-Working--Departmental-Briefing/> [Accessed 23 March 2012].

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*