



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Finance and Personnel

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Committee Report on the Inquiry into Flexible  
Working in the Public Sector in Northern  
Ireland: Department of Finance and  
Personnel

25 March 2015



Committee before, the message that we tried to put across quite strongly was that we believe that we have a number of policies that support and enable flexible working and that different parts of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and the wider public sector have different needs for and approaches to flexible working, so we are glad that you agree that such a policy approach is not appropriate.

One report that you refer to, and to which I have made some strong references, is the Cabinet Office report 'The Way We Work: A Guide to Smart Working in Government'. That is an excellent overview of the overall capability of what flexible working has achieved and can achieve, certainly in Whitehall Departments. Looking at that report in conjunction with your statement that one size does not fit all, we support that. Quite a strong assertion is made in that document that it is up to individual Departments to have their own policies in place on what their needs are regarding flexible working. Therefore, we are still strongly of the view that we have to get the necessary policies backed up by the technology and the plans that we are going to continue to roll out for property management.

**Mr Mark Bailey (Department of Finance and Personnel):** There are effectively two menus. There are a number of HR policies, and I can go into those in detail, depending on what members' questions are. However, as Paul rightly said, those are backed up very importantly by the technology and the ability to deliver things practically, and that helps to make remote working much more of a realistic prospect now than it ever was before, and increasingly so. Technology is the key enabler to help that to happen, but the two work together. The two menus of policies and options fulfil the notion that no one size fits all, so business areas choose from those depending on their need.

**Mr Wickens:** I will pause after each recommendation to hear whether you have any questions.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Recommendation 1 is pretty straightforward, and I think that there is consensus on it. The later recommendations may be different.

**Mr Wickens:** I very much concur with recommendation 2, which is your view that the:

*"focus should not be on homeworking in particular but rather on selecting the appropriate remote working options and technologies".*

That is the approach that we have adopted and continue to follow. I will come back to the issue of homeworking. However, regarding remote working options and technologies, we continue to try out different things. Some of you met the Enterprise Design Authority (EDA) team when you went to Clare House, which was about 18 months ago — it was certainly some time ago. You saw some of the technology options that we had there, as well as future@work.

Opportunities include unified communications, where we are able to roll out video, voice, screen-sharing and audio conferencing — all of those things. We are providing that capability. We also provide WebEx, both internally and externally, for web conferencing and videoconferencing, and we continue to see an increased uptake. We continue to provide and test technologies as they come along, and, as they prove themselves, we make them more widely available. For example, you may remember the Jabber product, which is the one that we have chosen. It is an interesting name. I have instructed that Jabber be rolled out across Enterprise Shared Services (ESS) so that we can be an exemplar. We know that other parts of the service have adopted it anyway. We continue to push the boundaries of the technological capabilities, and that provides the facility for remote working.

I know that MLAs have different technology platforms supported from a different place. You have board-minute capability, and it is good to see many of you using such technologies around the table this morning. You can have your papers put into appropriate folders, you can see what you need, you can drill down into them and you can work your way from there. Again, we are testing that kind of technology at the moment. With Wi-Fi, we have enabled Clarence Court to be, if you like, a big pathfinder building to see what is possible there. Having come from a fairly restrictive secure environment, our approach was quite conservative and risk-averse, but the world is moving on and the review of classified markings has moved on, so we are looking at what Wi-Fi capability we need to provide. We are testing a number of things in that area. Therefore, we continue to provide and test the technologies.

Daithí, you have communicated with us on hubs and satellite offices. We have had quite a bit of correspondence on that. It is an area that we are continuing to focus on. We are providing touchdown facilities and business zones in a number of hubs and areas. The plan is to make more of those

available, although not in every town or village in Northern Ireland. The plan is to move towards having them in places where people would have to travel less far to get to. It is about trying to provide the capabilities that Departments and organisations will need to serve their business needs.

**Mr Bailey:** I want to comment particularly on homeworking. The technology that Paul described enables all civil servants, with the appropriate approvals from their line manager, to work from home. You can be working from home on your laptop. Your phone number will follow you, because of the technology, and there is the ability to plug in through broadband and log in securely to your own network, or, if that is not available, there is 3G capability. Therefore, people can be working from home, from Marlborough House, from Castle Buildings, or from wherever it may be, and the person who is in contact with them has no idea where they are. It is all about getting the job done rather than about where people sit.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** In your view, how much potential have we still to realise for increasing homeworking in the public sector?

**Mr Bailey:** It is very much driven by the various Departments' business needs. I think that you are right: I have no doubt that there is potential. However, we believe that our role is very much to provide the technology and ability to do it. We promote and encourage that as well. It is not a matter of being static. Paul described developing and growing the technology. He has a small team at work within his group that is encouraging and helping Departments to deploy that technology. Likewise, from a policy point of view, we will be promoting that. Therefore, we are encouraging staff and letting them know what is available. We have 'Xpress HR', which is a quarterly Civil Service HR publication. It lets people know what the available policies are. We occasionally promote various flexible working arrangements. Term-time working, for example, was a recent addition. There is the scope there, and we are encouraging and promoting that, but, ultimately, it is for each individual business area to determine what it needs, how it can best leverage it and how it can make best use of that ability to deliver its business needs.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** How much cultural resistance is there to homeworking?

**Mr Bailey:** It varies, depending on where you are, but I think that attitudes are changing. I am relatively new to the NICS. I have been in it for about seven or eight years, and I have seen a change in that short time. A lot of it has to do with the environment of the office, the Workplace NI standard, the open-plan environment and much more accessibility. I think that the culture is changing, as is the willingness to adopt technology. Sometimes we are driven by our children. It is the children who are picking up the technology and doing everything with it, and we sometimes lag behind. Change just takes time. Human nature is such that we are not keen to change. However, I have seen a lot of changes in the short time that I have been in the Civil Service.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** I have one other question before I bring in Adrian. Are individuals in senior management positions more likely to avail themselves of homeworking, and to have the flexibility to do so, than those further down the food chain, for want of a better term?

**Mr Bailey:** I do not have the data either to support or deny that, but I know of individuals at all grades who work from home on occasions. I believe that homeworking is more driven by the job. Certain jobs clearly lend themselves to homeworking, regardless of the grade. School inspectors are an obvious example that I know that we have used before. They are almost never in the office; they are always out. Even in DFP, the nature of the work of the Business Consultancy Service (BCS) means that its staff are primarily out with clients. That is dependent not on grade but on the job role. There is probably some truth in what you ask, in so far as the more senior that you become, the more control that you end up having over your work. There is probably an element of that, but the most important point is that homeworking is available to all, depending on business need, regardless of grade.

**Mr McQuillan:** You have covered the question I was going to ask on resistance. I thought that there might be some line manager resistance to allowing staff to work from home or to do flexible working.

You also mentioned promoting what is going on. How often do you do that? You mentioned term-time working, but that has been on the go for a fair wee while. Is that the most recent time that you did so?

**Mr Bailey:** No. There are a number of things. 'Xpress HR' is a quarterly publication, so it goes out once a quarter from corporate HR to the entire Civil Service. It summarises policy changes and anything that has changed from a legislative point of view, but it also occasionally picks up on other things. For example, the cycle-to-work scheme is one that we pick up on every so often. We promote the scheme, let people know that it is available and encourage them to use it. That focuses on the individual employee or staff member, but, separate to that, from a business point of view, we have a HR directors' forum that meets regularly. There are discussions from a business point of view about what is available, and how Departments can make best use of what is available, but that is not done in a prescriptive manner. The report has already drawn attention to the fact that we do not have an overarching strategy that attempts to force that on to Departments, but it is done that way deliberately. What we do is try to offer up what is available and make it visible and transparent, but, ultimately, the Department that needs it and could make best use of it has to draw it down.

**Mr McQuillan:** If a Department were resisting something, and you thought that it could work better with it, would you not try to enforce it? If you were to see a Department that thought it could work well using something, but the senior manager was not interested in it or was old-fashioned and was not allowing uptake, would you not try to make a stand in some way?

**Mr Bailey:** Our role is to provide the facilities and to encourage and explain the benefits, but, ultimately, a Department is its own employer and, as such, makes its own business decisions. We cannot overrule those decisions. We do, however, try to encourage or cajole, but we cannot decide on its behalf.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** There is a table in the report that contains feedback from all the Departments and some arm's-length bodies. Under "Flexible Location Working", the table states: "No figures available", "No figures available", "No figures available", "Ad hoc arrangements", "Ad hoc arrangements" and "Ad hoc arrangements". As you say, the Department has taken an almost hands-off approach, but is there really any incentive for Departments to push flexible working? How do we ensure that they make it a priority? I know that some on the Committee feel that this needs to be better monitored to ensure that pressure is put on Departments to put arrangements in place. Adrian is right: there will be people in management positions who are not going to push flexible working and there will be employees who would like to avail themselves of it — those who have to travel long distances and are less productive because of all that travel time, which is unnecessary. Is that something that you will consider?

**Mr Wickens:** I will pick up the first bit of that and perhaps come back to the monitoring element. There is a very strong link to the reform of property management project, which many of you will be well aware of. From looking at the benchmarked office estate as it was in 2012, we can see that we had six desks for every five people, which is an average of about 17 square metres to 18 square metres. As we continue to roll out what we are calling the Workplace NI standard, we are moving towards four desks for five people, with an average of about 9 square metres to 11 square metres. Therefore, if five people come into work in the morning, there are going to be only four desks. That is the ultimate position to be in. Providing that capability will incentivise the behaviour of Departments to consider how they can exploit that. That is there to improve the service for the employee and the Department itself but also to reduce costs and increase the efficiency of the way in which we use the estate. A very big part of what we are doing is — I keep using the term — to create the capability. That will then incentivise Departments and employers to avail themselves of those things and take them forward.

DFP monitors many things, as you well know, and can often be accused of perhaps being slightly bureaucratic on some of those things. We are always looking at ways of trying to reduce that. It is a point worth debating. The danger of putting a monitoring procedure in is that we would then commission each Department to tell us exactly what it is doing. That would be rolled out through the Department, rolled up and brought back. We would look at it, examine it, collate it and centralise it, so a lot more resource would be required. In a climate in which we are looking to reduce the resource, there is perhaps a tension on that one, but I think that we understand where the Committee is coming from.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** It would not require that big a resource, given the benefits of the flexible working proposals. It would be worth it.

**Mr Wickens:** It is perhaps a moot point. If we had more evidence, would it change behaviour and what we are doing? I do not think that it would. It might assist Departments in their behavioural

changes. It might help them understand where they have pockets of cultural resistance, to come back to that phrase. We believe very strongly that we are following best practice in the capability that we are providing and switching on that capability for Departments to take up monitoring —

**Mr Bailey:** In that monitoring —

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Sorry for interrupting, Mark. If you are coming back year after year saying, "It is out there. We do not have the figures, but everything is hunky-dory", the Committee cannot do its job to hold you to account. Every civil servant could come before us and say, "We do not have the figures, but things are moving in the right direction". That is not how this works. We need figures, targets and positive outcomes.

**Mr Bailey:** The only comment that I was going to add was that, if there were to be any form of monitoring, it would need to distinguish between cultural change and business need. Raw data will not give you that. Department a having 5% doing flexible working and Department b having 20% doing flexible working does not tell you anything, because the nature of all of Department a's work might be customer-facing, and, as such staff cannot avail themselves of the facilities. Therefore, data would need to be more sophisticated than that. I think that it would become quite complex. As I said, it is not just about raw data but about somehow convincing the hearts and minds of Departments of the need to make the maximum possible use of it and about how we can best achieve that and encourage them to use it. The raw data might be helpful to some extent, but I think that it would be very limited, because it does not identify the business need.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** If there were even a minimum standard for what Departments should bring back to you, that might help. You have given us figures for laptop users, BlackBerry users, and so on, in DFP. Information on that kind of thing should be easy enough to bring together in the various Departments, so I think that DFP should consider minimum standards for Departments giving you an update on flexible working, and especially on homeworking.

**Mr Wickens:** We have information on BlackBerry and laptops users, which are the specific ones that you mentioned. In fact, I thought that we had provided it to the Committee.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** What I am saying is that there should be a minimum standard for those kinds of things so that Departments are in some way being held to account for the flexible working proposals.

**Mr Wickens:** There is a reform of property management programme. I am the senior responsible owner (SRO) for that, so we can perhaps consider how we can look at the benefits and outcomes. At the moment, the key focus is to drive down cost and increase the efficiency of the estate by providing the kinds of flexible working capabilities that we have talked about. Perhaps we can consider whether there is anything else that we need to monitor or measure as part of that. We are almost one year into a three-year programme. Year 1 has been very much about getting the plan set up and resourced and about getting all the different line items agreed in the wider government office estate, but if there is additional information that we think that we would need to help us measure the benefit and the success of that, which would align with the Committee's expectations, that may be worth considering.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** On the plus side, there is going to be a roll-out of flexible location facilities in Omagh, Coleraine, Cookstown, Ballykelly, Newry and Derry. That is a step in the right direction, and I presume that it is a direct response to the Committee's report. How will those facilities work in practice? How many staff will they accommodate? I am trying to get a sense of what impact that will have on the public sector.

**Mr Wickens:** We do not have a detailed answer for you. I think that they are going to be greatly impacted on by departmental restructuring in a year's time, based on what the new Departments will require. It is the old 'Field of Dreams' scenario, if you remember the movie. If we build it, will they come? We are trying to build a facility on the basis that Departments will avail themselves of it. We monitor the use of the touchdown zones and the business zones. We are able to provide statistics on those, but, for anything beyond that, it will be a case of what will Departments need over the next 12 months and beyond.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** How many of those are existing facilities? Obviously, Ballykelly will be a new build, but is the office space at Coleraine existing office space at County Hall?

**Mr Wickens:** Coleraine and Omagh are planned for later this year; Cookstown is planned for 2016, with a new DARD office; and Ballykelly is planned for 2017 as part of the new DARD headquarters. We have Academy House, which was available from July 2014. We have a small part of Lanyon Plaza, where the Land and Property Services (LPS) building has a bit of a touchdown facility. Castle Buildings and Marlborough House have been available for some time, and Clare House is back online again. You may recall that we went through some quite major changes in increasing the density of population in Clare House. We have managed to free up some of the originally planned workspace, so we can use that for touchdown as well.

The work is ongoing. That is the current plan. IT Assist also uses various satellite zones for pockets of one or two people so that it has engineers close to where they are going to be required, but those are all the main ones.

The facilities for Londonderry and Newry are planned for during 2015-16, subject to available budget. Unfortunately, the budget for property management and maintenance is one of those budgets that we are looking at quite severely at the moment.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Will those be open to staff in different Departments? I am just trying to get a sense of how —

**Mr Wickens:** That is the idea. I would not even call it a smart card, but we made available a little laminated card as a sort of future@work card and identifier. You apply for it and you get it. The idea is to make it available to anybody who wants or needs to use it. All that we will use the card for is to monitor access to the various buildings.

**Mr Bailey:** It is all about trying to make it available, open and transparent to people. Likewise with policies. I do not know whether any of you have had the joy of looking at the NICS HR handbook. Sometimes it is hard to navigate your way around it. We are trying to pull things together over time. We are pulling together all the flexible working and alternative working policies. At the minute, they are all over the place. They are in various different places, because they have evolved over time. We are pulling all those into a single alternative working handbook chapter so that it is at least much more transparent and available to people. We are trying to encourage knowledge of it, among Departments as employers and staff as individuals.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** There is another point that strikes me. The facilities will be for use by a large number of public servants. Are there any barriers to doing it on a smaller scale? The old councils are all closing down this month, and I presume that there may be opportunities to use office space in places such as Ballycastle, Ballymoney or Bangor. Would it be worthwhile looking at that?

**Mr Wickens:** We have had a great degree of communication with the councils about their requirements, especially in areas such as planning. Planning is being devolved to the new councils, and they are looking at what their premises requirements are going to be. There will certainly be a high degree of interaction on that to understand what is going to be required. Again, it comes back to what they will need. Planners in one council area might be able to do their job just as effectively from their headquarters function as they could from somewhere 5 or 10 miles down the road.

We have not been approached about flexible working. It goes back to the NICS making up 12% of the public sector. We are very much focused on the NICS and its capabilities. If there is the potential to share that space, we will. You may recall that "one-stop shop" was very much the term that was in vogue a number of years ago. That is still something that we would like to try, especially in places such as Omagh. Omagh has 16 public-sector office buildings. There must be an opportunity to provide a better, a more consolidated facility. Those are the things that we could look at further.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** We will move on to recommendation 3.

**Mr Wickens:** We agree that the potential benefits are well documented and well evidenced. We believe that we are seeing the benefits of that in the Northern Ireland Civil Service as well.

You talked about looking at an invest-to-save measure. I do not know whether that will be specifically required. We will come on to the ESS business plan later. However, take it as an example of a more holistic approach, where we are using all the polices that are available to us, such as flexible practice

and flexible location. Take a sickness absence measure, for example. We have seen sickness absence in ESS come down quite significantly. That is linked to performance management, which we will talk about later, and that becomes the other side of how you manage that side of the equation. However, I am not sure that we need a specific invest-to-save measure.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We move on to the next point.

**Mr Wickens:** On point 4, we are glad that you see the NICS as an exemplar organisation; we think so as well. When compared with the Cabinet Office report 'The Way We Work', the smart working guide, I do not think that there is anything that we do not do or do not have available as a facility.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK.

**Mr Wickens:** Point 5 is on flexible location. This goes back to moving away from managing by presence and towards managing by results. Performance management is an area that we still need to do some work on. Management has almost come full circle since we introduced HR Connect, which we will touch on later in the session, when we provided a facility for the monitoring and, if you like, form-filling aspects of performance management. I suspect that, in some areas, the focus was taken off the true aspect of performance management, which is looking at a person's needs and objectives, aligned with the departmental business plan's needs and objectives, and was slightly sidetracked towards how you fill in the form.

We have done a lot of work, as has corporate HR — Mark will talk about this — on changing the focus back so that the form is only the thing at the very end of the exercise; it is not the be-all and end-all. Performance management is about managing by results and making sure that objectives are being clearly articulated and understood. We have moved away from a five-box marking system towards a two-box marking system, so you are either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Does that mean that we are doing performance management in the way that we need to do it right across the service? That is open to debate, perhaps.

**Mr Bailey:** Last year, we took the first step in changing or simplifying the rating. As of next week, 1 April, we are launching a simplified online system. As Paul pointed out, there used to be quite a complex form to fill in. We are stripping all that out and boiling it down to take away people's hurdles, or excuses, if that is the right word. That will be launched next week and will make it much simpler. However, to Paul's point, the key thing is the conversation. The key thing in all of this is the discussion between the line manager and the individual. There has been a lot of advice and guidance and a real pushing of the whole performance management culture to try to increase compliance and ensure that people follow the process properly.

We have introduced a number of compliance measures that Departments have been ensuring that they follow. There has been a lot of emphasis, right up to permanent secretary level, on pushing and encouraging performance management and specifically on individuals having objectives that align with their departmental objectives and their own business area. However, they also have personal objectives on which they are held accountable. The system has been there for a long time and has just become a little bit too convoluted and complicated. We have stripped a lot of that back. We have kept the core of it but tried to simplify it. It is now about compliance and the culture of people making proper use of the system.

**Mr Wickens:** Yes, and providing the training and support that they require. In the HR business partner model, which we have adopted very strongly and led with in ESS, the onus and responsibility is very much on the line manager to do performance management on a regular basis. It is not a once or twice a year thing. Some people perhaps still feel that is. Take my direct reports as a specific example. We have tried to roll this out right through the organisation. There are 900 people in ESS. I meet with my senior people one-on-one once every month. Formally, we do a performance management review every six months and then at the end of the year. However, that is purely compliance because performance management is an ongoing thing; it is part of the embedded culture that we have now. Roll that back to sickness absence. We have been very clear about directing and supporting all our managers across ESS and the wider DFP as to how they should be taking up their responsibilities in those things. That is being seen in the results that we are getting in reduced sickness absence in DFP. I think that there is a very clear correlation, although I would not want to rest on my laurels on that.

**Mr Bailey:** To reiterate Paul's point on training, we have done a lot of work with the Centre for Applied Learning (CAL). It completely revised the performance management training last year. That was introduced to reflect the new approach. They have developed and are about to launch an e-learning package on performance management. That will come out within the next few months. It will roll out to all NICS staff to remind them of their responsibilities and obligations and to coach them to develop and ensure that they are following the process appropriately and having those helpful and constructive conversations with their line managers. Quite a lot of work has gone on in that area.

**Mr Wickens:** Point 6 is the recommendation on perhaps considering a Programme for Government (PFG) commitment. The new Programme for Government has not been commissioned yet, and there has been a one-year extension to the current programme, so there will not be a PFG commitment into 2015-16. I do not think that we are a big fan, and I do not think that the Minister particularly wants to consider a strong PFG commitment. I think that the idea is to try to encourage the Programme for Government to look more at external services as opposed to internal enabling and capabilities. That will come out in the wash as we move into the next term of commissioning the Programme for Government.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** So are you ruling that out altogether at this stage?

**Mr Wickens:** We are not ruling anything out; I am just giving you an idea of where we are coming from on it.

**Mr Bailey:** I think that "It needs careful consideration" was the phrase used in the response to the Committee.

**Mr Wickens:** Number 7 relates to an onus on all Departments to ensure that work styles and tasks associated with each job are assessed at business area or team level to determine the applicable flexible working practices. Again, that is reinforcing the fact that one size does not fit all and that directing something from DFP is perhaps not the most appropriate way of doing things, but, yes, we agree that each individual job and role needs to be assessed in the context of a Department's business needs. That is an area that we agree with.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** How many jobs would be assessed? What proportion of the jobs that should be assessed within Departments are being assessed?

**Mr Wickens:** There are two processes for assessing jobs. Mark, you can keep me right. There is the job evaluation for senior posts (JESP) process, and there is the job evaluation and grading support (JEGS) process.

**Mr Bailey:** Yes. JESP is for Senior Civil Service posts, and JEGS is for grades below the Senior Civil Service.

**Mr Wickens:** That is the formal way of assessing and putting points against what level a job should be at. That is very much based on specific objectives and business needs. They tend to be looked at as and when things change, as opposed to being a regular review of jobs and roles. I think that departmental restructuring will probably mean a significant spike in what we will need to look at. There is not a plan to go around the whole system and review all jobs and roles. It is simply reflecting and recognising that, yes, it is a good thing to do, as and when required, but it is —

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Is getting something like that an opportunity, in view of the significant changes in the public sector that are fast coming at us? Is there an opportunity to have jobs assessed for flexible working if posts are to be changed and staff will be moving in more significant numbers than before?

**Mr Wickens:** It is inevitable that that will be required, yes.

**Mr Bailey:** There should be more opportunities. There is a business need there, but where there is a rationalisation or a reduction in the number of staff doing work, which will be inevitable in the coming year, particularly in the Civil Service, we will need to think about how to do things differently. If there is a way of rejigging teams to different locations, the opportunities should absolutely be there. I would like to think that the tools we are providing will be used to support any outworking of the voluntary exit scheme.

I know that David Sterling was here a couple of weeks ago and covered some of the areas of the voluntary exit scheme. There are likely to be a lot of outworkings in redeployment, moving and changing how we do things. These tools will come into their own at that stage, and Departments should be seriously considering how they can make the maximum use of them.

**Mr Wickens:** I can only talk about ESS, but it is a big organisation. It is an opportunity for us to look at areas where perhaps there has been a perceived grade drift. We will look at the organisation in the knowledge that we are going to have fewer resources and that we will lose resource through the voluntary exit scheme. We will consider whether there is a more appropriate way of considering how jobs are graded and loaded on that basis. Obviously, that will be done in consultation with the trade union side (TUS).

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We move to point 8.

**Mr Wickens:** Point 8 refers to the strategic implementation of flexible working, facilitated by a corresponding roll-out of appropriately designed workplaces. That is part of the day job; it has become embedded as part of what we deliver. Earlier, I referred to the Workplace NI standard. We have much less choice about the type or size of desk that will be available; the choice is from a standard framework and catalogue. We have talked about the issues of nine to 11 square metres and technology enabling. All our buildings are connected via Network NI, and our shared services capability supports the working practices that are going to be required. As we review, refurbish and acquire buildings, we have a very clear standard that meets exactly what the Committee is outlining.

**Mr Bailey:** Sometimes, I think we forget how far we have come. You go from day to day almost, but, if I look back, having been in the Civil Service for seven or eight years, I have seen a big change in that time and a cultural shift towards being more open. When we moved to more open-plan workplaces, it was a fundamental change that really got people thinking, and it got a reaction, to be fair. A lot of people reacted negatively because they had been used to always having their own office. However, over time, generally, the mood has changed, and I get a much greater sense of support for the approach for open-plan offices and for the whole Workplace NI standards. It takes time, but we have come a long way.

Anybody who knew the Civil Service of 20 or 30 years ago would recognise that it is radically different, not just in technology but in how we do business, how we address each other and how we manage the day-to-day work in a much more progressive and effective manner.

**Mr Wickens:** Clare House is a really good example of that. Our Minister, the permanent secretary and his senior staff in Clare House have all gone open plan. There are no separate offices, other than those that are used for meetings.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** I was going to ask whether there had been any changes since the Committee went to Clare House.

**Mr Wickens:** That is probably the biggest change you would see.

**Mr Cree:** Is there anybody in it now?

**Mr Wickens:** It is full to capacity.

**Mr Cree:** There were very few in it when we visited. "Open plan" took on a new meaning if I remember correctly. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Wickens:** We have exploited the opportunity and crammed it to capacity.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We will move on to point 9.

**Mr Wickens:** I think that we covered point 9 earlier when we talked about satellite and hub working. Those are part of the plan, unless there is anything else you want specifically to cover.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We will move on.

**Mr Wickens:** There are two aspects to point 10. The first is that the public sector in Northern Ireland appears to lag behind other jurisdictions. I will refer to the NICS, which is the only part that I have responsibility for. We are at the same level as other jurisdictions and in some areas we are well ahead of them. I think that is supported by evidence. I cannot comment on other parts of the public sector because they are not my responsibility. There is a danger of that being seen as a sweeping statement. How can that influence be taken out to the other parts of the public sector? I can understand the Committee's concerns on that, but the NICS is well ahead in certain areas.

We have hosted many organisations from across these islands, from GB and the Republic of Ireland, who have come to see what we are doing and the capabilities that we provide. We have had international organisations from the private and public sectors coming to see us, and they have all commented on how far ahead we are. Gartner, which is the world's largest IT analyst community, is about to publish a case study on what we have done with multifunctional shared services. A big part of that has been looking at the property, the technology, the capability and the flexible working that that underpins. So we disagree slightly with number 10, certainly speaking on the part of NICS.

**Mr Bailey:** I understand the principle of what the Committee is recommending and the efficiencies that might be afforded from it. There is an issue of authority and mandate from our point of view. I am responsible for HR policy in Departments for the NICS. If I started to talk to a local council about its HR policy, it would not thank me for it because I have no mandate or role in how it handles HR or flexible working. There is an issue about authority and mandate. I understand the principle of what you are suggesting in maximising efficiencies across the public sector. There just needs to be a bit of thinking about how that could work and who has the responsibility and authority to take it forward.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Some of the concerns that the Committee heard were from the private sector as well. Companies based here are going to England and other countries across the world to roll out some of their technologies and proposals, which seem to be a solution to problems in areas like health and home care. They were coming up against barriers in the public sector here. I think that the view from many in the private sector was that it takes a long time to get through the system here. There must be some way to cut through that red tape or the process to ensure that decisions are made quickly on new technology, rather than them being out of date by the time the Department of Health or whatever Department gets round to making a decision. I think that there is something there. I do not know what the Department of Finance and Personnel could do, but, if we are talking about guidance and the Department putting down specific recommendations for technology in regard to flexible working, maybe there is something that the Department could put forward. I understand what you say about not being able to babysit them on the issue, but perhaps there is room for some guidance to try to minimise the red tape and introduce new technologies.

**Mr Wickens:** I will give you a couple of, hopefully, positive contributions on that. The word "governance" is often seen as an overhead; I see it very much as a good thing, especially with regard to shared services. There are two specific examples. One is that we have something called the Information Governance and Innovation Board, which is chaired by David Sterling. It looks at the information assessment and information opportunities that exist, along with the compliance side of things. So, on one side, it is making sure that we comply with all the good practice, security, making sure that people cannot attack our networks and all the rest of it, and, on the other side, it is looking at how we adopt some of the technology. There is an appropriate forum for bringing it through. That is why it is called the Information Governance and Innovation Board. It has representation from all Departments at a senior level, usually at grade 5, or up to grade 3 level in some instances.

The other example is our IT services management board, which is chaired by a grade 3 from the Department of Agriculture. It comprises senior people from IT in Departments, looking at opportunities. I have seen some things coming through where a piece of technology was required, or suggested in some instances, by the private sector. It was considered and brought through, and we have tested it and piloted it through our enterprise design authority team, and we have found a way of rolling that out. So, we have very clear mechanisms and governance structures in NICS that also provide a strong message to Departments. Once you get into the Departments' arm's-length bodies, in health as an example, that is where we lose the locus and remit, but there should be a strong link from a Department through to its arm's-length bodies in the government structures that we have set up and enabled on that basis.

Another point is that Barry Lowry, who is my director of IT shared services, sits on the board of Momentum, which is the IT industry federation here in Northern Ireland. He is the only public sector

representative on the board; the rest is comprised of private sector organisations. When any opportunities are out there, we get our ears bent fairly strongly and we listen to them.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We will move on to point 11.

**Mr Wickens:** There is a long way to go on Internet-based conferencing. Internet-based conferencing should be the preferred method for people travelling. I do not think that we are close to mandating that that should be the case but, again, we have provided and switched on the capabilities for Internet-based conferencing. I will give you another example close to home. Within our digital transformation service, we have a digital advisory board, and one of the people on that board is from the digital side of the Estonian Government. Participation in meetings is via Skype. We are using that to save them travelling to us. They are getting the benefit rather than us in that instance. Being able to enable and allow Skype on our government network provided a very significant technical challenge to us. It sounds like an easy thing to do, but there are security restrictions and complications. WebEx and Jabber provide the facilities to do video conferencing, so it is there and it is available. Should we be driving people towards it in their droves? That goes back to our earlier conversation.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** We have tried video conferencing on a number of occasions, and there have been times when it has not been successful. What has your experience of that been? How do we iron out those problems? Is that one of the negatives that still needs to be addressed?

**Mr Wickens:** For simpler meetings, where the nuances of body language are not particularly important, video conferences can be very appropriate. I have certainly taken part in good ones, as well as ones that were a waste of time, as you have just said. Again, one size does not fit all. I think the Committee has seen some of the more advanced technology. There is a room like this, on one side of which there is a wall of monitors and on the other side there are people sitting, as though everyone were located in the same room. That is a very expensive way of doing video conferencing, but it is probably the most effective when it comes to the feeling part of the meeting, if I can use that word. It is horses for courses.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** What are the potential savings in travel costs?

**Mr Wickens:** We have not measured them. In DFP, we measure our travel costs annually and have targeted to reduce them. The DFP board looks at them on a regular basis, I think, but we do not have a specific target for savings from using more video conferencing.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We will go on to point 12.

**Mr Wickens:** Point 12 is about DFP developing corporate guidance for successful implementation to cover cultural changes. Mark has talked about that and the policy support and training, and I think that all those three things go hand in hand. The Centre for Applied Learning, an organisation that I have responsibility for, is there to provide the training and support capability. The HR business partner model, which we have adopted strongly, helps to effect the necessary culture changes and to manage resistance to change.

We have touched on a number of the practical aspects. We have mitigated risks by securing management buy-in and top-level engagement in most instances. We said that strong business cases should be driven by business need. We involve our employees and unions by consulting with TUS and with our employees. Mark, you have given examples of effective communications. Data security comes with the job. The ultimate focus is on business needs, results and outcomes, so I do not think that there is anything that we would disagree with there.

**Mr Bailey:** To some extent, in my view, the building blocks were already there; we have talked about that. I think that the Committee report has helped by shining a spotlight on those. There is work to do on the communications end. I will not repeat what I said before, but we can do more to promote what we have, encourage Departments to take it up and adopt a more strategic approach. My question is about the idea of developing specific formal documented guidance to Departments. I am not quite sure what that would look like. I think that we would do better to focus on promoting what we have, maximising it, explaining the benefits to Departments and encouraging them on every level to take up those opportunities. Redeployment and the voluntary exit scheme, as you said yourself, is likely to be a very good opportunity to do that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** OK. We will go on to points 13 and 14.

**Mr Wickens:** Point 13 backs up what Mark has just said. This is where we strongly welcome the Committee's report. It has provided a very good body of evidence by collating a number of sources. Rather than us going out and regurgitating something, it would be better to provide the document that the Committee has produced. There is more in this than in the guidance from the Cabinet Office, because you have taken in more sources. That has provided the evidence and guidance for strategic implementation on that basis.

We talked earlier about point 14, which deals with taking lead responsibility for monitoring and reporting at a cross-departmental level. Point 15 is about the implementation of the inquiry recommendations. Again, I do not think that I have anything to add, unless there is anything that you want to probe.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Are there any other questions, members?

**Mr Cree:** The only issue I want to raise is monitoring. We do not want 99-9% of our time to be taken up by process. We really have to be objective, stand back and ask whether we are achieving what we decided and whether we have reached those milestones. What we really need to know about monitoring is whether we are getting the right results; otherwise, we could still be talking about this in the same manner in 20 years.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Picking up on Leslie's point and in light of the apparent lack of data on flexible location working, would it be a good idea for the Department to provide the Committee with the key statistics on that, perhaps every six months, so that the Committee can keep abreast of how that area is developing? We could develop a template for that and send it to the Department.

**Mr Wickens:** We are content to consider what else we could do. I am not sure about the six-monthly frequency, but we could consider that offline, whether every six months or once a year. There are certain things that we can provide easily from statistics that are available today, and then there is the question of what else we might need to provide. I will have to look at that again.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** We will draft something up and send it to you.

**Mr Wickens:** Yes, we can talk about that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McKay):** Thank you both very much.