Department of Finance | An Roinn Airgeadais

NICS Hybrid Working Policy: Implementation Survey Results

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A staff survey to gather feedback on the implementation of the NICS Hybrid Working Policy was carried out across all government departments and the Public Prosecution Service for NI (PPSNI) between 10/10/2022 and 13/01/2023. There were 5685 responses to the survey. This represents approximately a quarter of the total NICS staff and is therefore statistically significant.

2. Encouragingly, responses were received from all the NICS Departments and the PPSNI showing a good level of interest in the survey. The largest number of responses were received from DfC staff and accounted for almost 41% of the total. The number of DOF (20%) and DfI (13%) responses was also significant. The responses from the remaining NICS departments were relatively low, ranging from DfE at only 0.2% of the total to DOJ at 6% (Table 1 refers).

3. Responses were received from all levels across the NICS and PPSNI. Approximately one third of the total responses were received from SO/DP levels, with another third from EOII/EOI levels. AA/AO levels accounted for 21% of responses with the remaining 13% from G7, G6 and the Senior Civil Service (Figure 2 and Table 2 refers).

Line Management Support

4. Most staff (91.5%) felt supported by line management and gave positive feedback. The remaining 8.5% who said that they did not feel supported cited two main reasons:
    - Staff stated that a working pattern with a fixed number of days in the office was implemented with little or no discussion and that there was a lack of clarity regarding the business requirements. Respondents' comments referred to 'a one size fits all' approach being adopted without due regard for the nature and remit of individual roles.
    - Some staff stated that they were required to sign a generic workstyle agreement that they had not contributed to and that generic workstyle agreements were being used for whole groups of staff.

Staff Toolkit & Guidance Resources

5. Almost 92% of respondents indicated that they found the staff toolkit and guidance resources available useful and easy to follow. There were however multiple comments relating to a lack of consultation/communication on approaches adopted by higher levels of management. The comments of the 8% of respondents who said that they did not find the resources useful related to three main areas:

- **Lack of awareness** – a significant number of staff responded that they either did not know what resources were available and where to find them or simply did not choose to use them.
- **Local arrangements negated the use of policy and guidance** – several staff responded that they did not find resources useful as management had already decided the approach for their area of work (i.e. management had stipulated the working pattern and ratio of workplace attendance across a department, directorate or business area.
- **Lack of clarity** – a significant number of staff responded that they thought the policy should be simplified and/or clarified in particular instances. Areas mentioned for clarification and/or additional information included:
    i. Workstyle agreement forms – confusion about which form to use was mentioned.
    ii. Appeals process – some staff relayed a requirement for more information on the appeals process and how to navigate it via the Employee Services Portal and HR Connect.
    iii. Management roles – clarification around the role of the line manager and the countersigning, monitoring manager.
    iv. More clarification on the operation of core hours and flexi-time when hybrid working.

Workstyle Agreement Process

6. Over 91% of respondents stated that they found the workstyle agreement process straightforward and added positive comments. In relation to the 8.8% who did not find it straightforward, the comments generally referred to a lack of consultation and communication and non-negotiable approaches adopted by higher levels of management. Some managers also expressed difficulties in agreeing workstyles that suited all their members of staff, whilst still ensuring the level of business cover required. The responses also included comments on the challenges of effectively communicating business requirements and reassuring staff that the reasons were legitimate. Some of the comments made also related to staff wanting a permanent homeworking arrangement as opposed to a hybrid one. In summary, many of the negative responses related to three main areas:

    - **Management commitment to the process** - lack of consultation regarding the workstyle agreements and being required to attend the office a set number of days per week. This included comments relating to the use of generic workstyle agreements, that were developed without any consultation with individuals.
    - **Process complexity and clarity** - there were a number of comments expressing the view that the process was overly bureaucratic and that the forms contained too much information. There was evidently some

confusion over which version of the workstyle agreement to use and where departments generated forms with departmental logos, whether to use these or the ones on the ESP.

- **What happens when resolution cannot be reached** – these comments referred mainly to expressing a need for additional information on the appeals process and additional guidance on what should happen pending the appeal being heard.

Health & Safety Checklists

7. Over 96% of respondents stated that they found the Health & Safety General Checklist process straightforward with only 3.7% expressing they had difficulties. The main issues highlighted in the comments were:
    - Not being able to find the checklist on the Intranet.
    - Requests for all the forms relating to hybrid working to be combined into one and collated together on ESP.
    - Not fully understanding the difference between the H&S General Checklist and DSE Checklist
    - Clarity around the remit of the line manager and when to involve H&S representatives.

8. The majority (96%) found the DSE Checklist process straightforward with only 3.6% expressing difficulties. The main issues referred to in the comments were:
    - Not being able to find the checklist on the Intranet.
    - Requests for all the forms relating to hybrid working to be combined into one and collated together on ESP.
    - Confusion around the DSE checklists for the workplace and home.
    - Not understanding the difference between the H&S General Checklist and DSE Checklist,
    - Technical difficulties in submitting the form (where Departments are using the automated H&S system).
    - Clarity around the remit of the line manager and when to involve H&S representatives.

Benefits of Hybrid Working

9. Results overall for this question were very positive (Figure 3 refers). The four main benefits that over 80% of respondents selected were; better work-life balance, less time spent commuting, fewer interruptions/better productivity and more time for quiet/concentrated work. Positive environmental impact also featured as a benefit with 63%. Almost half the respondents felt that they made better use of face-to-face time with colleagues now. It is also notable that almost

28% of respondents felt that their work aims, and objectives were clearer and over one third felt that their teams now make more effort to communicate with each other. Other key benefits cited were:

- Better focus resulting in improved productivity and efficiency.
- Commuting cost savings.
- More choice around where and when work is done.
- Health benefits e.g. positive lifestyle changes, improved mental health, better sleep, less tiredness.

Disadvantages of Hybrid Working

10. Just over three quarters (76%) of respondents said that they had not experienced any disadvantages of hybrid working. 23% of respondents said they had experienced some disadvantages and 1% of respondents chose not to answer the question. The main disadvantages that respondents said they had experienced were:
    - Lack of contact with colleagues both within and outside the direct work team
    - Having to come into the office for set days when the business purpose is unclear, or it seems unnecessary.
    - Staff preferences for homeworking and lack of flexibility around workstyle arrangements,
    - Commuting and energy expenses at a time when the cost of living is rising.
    - Induction and embedding new members of staff into the team and building up job knowledge.
    - Blurring of boundaries between work and home and the need to be able to switch off outside working hours.

In addition, a number of respondents commented on different approaches across the NICS in relation to communicating an average percentage attendance for the department/business and this being interpreted by business areas as a set number of days per week. Several expressed dissatisfaction with being asked to attend a fixed number of days per week stating that they could not identify any business reason for doing so. Some respondents also highlighted frustration at being in front-line jobs that are not suited to hybrid working and there being no incentives or formal recognition processes in place for them.

Line Management Responses

11. Almost 45% (2541) of respondents indicated that they were line managers and questions 10-12 of the survey were posed to line managers specifically. It should be noted that whilst 2541 respondents indicated that they were line managers, the number that responded to questions 10-12 varied to a minor extent.

12. Around 88% of line managers felt that they were provided with sufficient training and guidance. Several staff however, indicated that they had not received guidance or training and were not aware what was available. The main suggestions that line managers made on what additional training and guidance would be useful were:
    - Improved communication around departmental and business area expectations for workplace attendance and the business reasons for these approaches.
    - More support in relation to what happens when line managers and staff cannot reach agreement.
    - More information and advice on what other HR policies should be used when considering an individual's circumstances e.g. reasonable adjustment, disability and health related issues.
    - Specific training for new and existing Line Managers.

13. The majority of line managers (81%+) stated that they had not encountered any difficulties with workstyle agreements with 18.4% indicating they had encountered some issues. The most common difficulty encountered by line managers related to agreeing the workplace/remote working split (9.25%) Table 13 refers. The second and third most common difficulties encountered are arguably also linked to agreeing the workplace/remote split – these were; getting clarity on the approach for the business area (7.26%) and spreading flexibility across the team (4.7%). Other difficulties encountered by management largely reflected those relayed by all staff in Question 4 and can be summarised as:
    - Lack of consultation with management on approaches adopted for minimum levels of workplace attendance left some line managers feeling they had little input or control over the workstyle agreement process.
    - Differences of opinion between line managers and their management on the requirements for workplace attendance.
    - Staff reluctance to return to the workplace following the Covid period of homeworking and their preference for either lower levels of workplace attendance or for permanent homeworking.
    - Staff being given pre-determined workstyle agreements by management with little or no scope for amendment.
    - More guidance and support required when line managers cannot reach agreement with their staff and clarity on whether the more senior levels of management are able to overrule a line management decision.
    - Some line managers felt that for consistency a minimum level of workplace attendance is required while other expressed the view that 'one size does not fit all' and that there should be more discretion for line managers to implement what they feel is required to meet the business needs of their area.
    - Current workplace environment is not conducive to supporting hybrid working – references were made to layout, furnishings and IT equipment.

Conclusion & Recommendations

14. Overall, the survey has indicated a promising start to hybrid working across the NICS and PPSNI with the vast majority of responses being positive. This is encouraging particularly given the timing of the implementation of the policy. Roll out coincided with the cessation of the prolonged period of homeworking for many NICS staff due to the Covid pandemic. Understandably, many staff were reluctant to return to the workplace and adopt a hybrid working pattern. They were perceiving the policy implementation as a move from the exceptional homeworking arrangements adopted during Covid rather than a change from their workplace attendance arrangements in normal (i.e. pre-Covid) times.

15. Despite the majority of the survey results being favourable, circa 8% of respondents overall expressed dissatisfaction. Their feedback was wide-ranging; from relatively minor aspects such as how the forms and guidance materials are presented to more concerning issues relating to some business areas or spans of control where the spirit and the collaborative, collegiate aspects of the policy do not appear to have been followed in all cases. A number of recommendations have been compiled by the author of this report to address the main issues that have emerged from the survey results and are included at Table 14. The recommendations are made in the spirit of ensuring that the Hybrid Working Policy and its operation continues to be successful and that the benefits of hybrid working positively impacts our customers, staff, operations and processes in our departments, business areas, and our environment.

1. BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

A staff survey to gather feedback on the implementation of the NICS Hybrid Working Policy was carried out across all government departments and the Public Prosecution Service for NI between 10/10/2022 and 13/01/2023.

The survey was coordinated and analysed by Mags Millar, previously Project Manager for New Ways of Working on behalf of NICSHR, Department of Finance. The survey was conducted electronically using the following link on Citizen Space:

https://consultations2.nidirect.gov.uk/dof/9449e4f8

All departments circulated the link to the survey to all staff and allowed a minimum of two weeks for completion during the period 10/10/2022-13/01/2023.

The results contained in this report were generated from Citizen Space on Monday 16 January 2023 at 13:54. There were 5685 responses to the survey. This represents approximately a quarter of the total NICS staff and is therefore statistically significant. The summary results outlined in this report reflect the range of responses and comments received for all NICS departments and the Public Prosecution Service NI (PPSNI). It should be noted that similar themes and issues were raised across all of the organisations.

Departmental New Ways of Working representatives have also been provided with the result data pertaining directly to their department. This is for information and to enable them should they wish to focus on issues of particular significance within their department.

The results are presented in this report in the order that the questions were posed in the survey. It should be noted that questions 10-12 were posed to Line Managers.

2. RESULTS

Question 1: What is your department?

There were 5685 responses to this question. The number of responses received by department are shown in Table 1 below.

DEPARTMENT	Total	Percentage
Department for Communities	2323	40.86%
Department for the Economy	11	0.19%
Department for Infrastructure	759	13.35%
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	303	5.33%
Department of Education	163	2.87%
Department of Finance	1162	20.44%
Department of Health	262	4.61%
Department of Justice	340	5.98%
Public Prosecution Service	106	1.86%
The Executive Office	256	4.50%

Table 1: Total Respondents by Department

It is positive that there were responses received from all the NICS Departments and the PPSNI. The largest number of responses were received from DfC staff and accounted for almost 41% of the total. The number of DOF (20%) and DfI (13%) responses was also significant. The responses from the remaining NICS departments were relatively low, ranging from DfE at only 0.2% of the total to DOJ at 6%. A factor that may have affected the numbers was that departments all rolled out the hybrid working policy at slightly different times, with some choosing to issue the survey well in advance to Christmas 2022 and others choosing to wait until closer to the holiday period.

What is your directorate/branch/business area?

There were 5685 responses to this part of the question – this information was included for departmental reference only.

Question 2: Please indicate which level you are within NICS

There were 5685 responses to this question. Responses were received from all levels across the NICS and PPSNI. Approximately one third of the total responses were received from SO/DP and equivalent levels, with another third from EOII/EOI and equivalent levels. AA/AO and equivalent levels accounted for 21% of responses with the remaining 13% from G7, G6 and the Senior Civil Service.

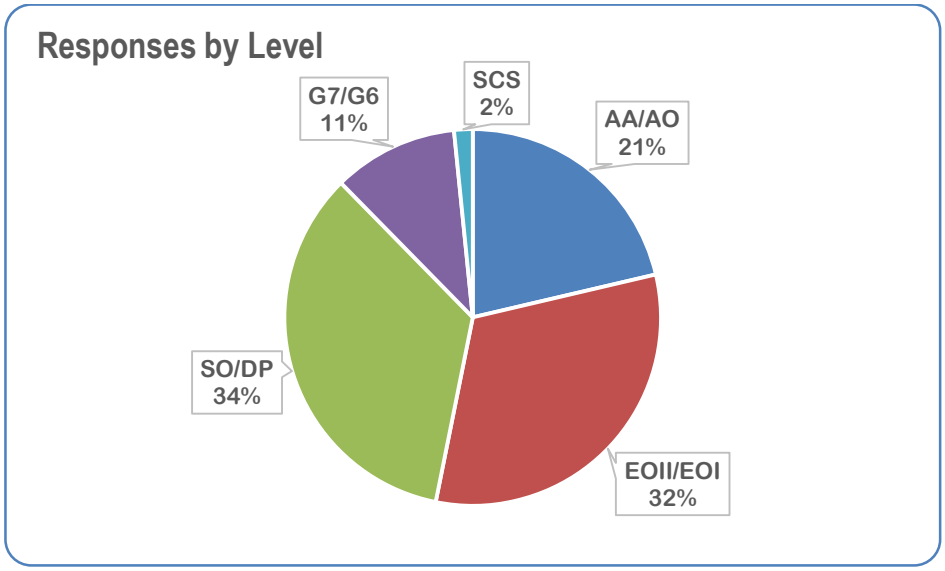


Figure 1: Total Respondents by Level

Grade	Total	Percent
AA or equivalent	43	0.76%
AO or equivalent	1169	20.56%
EOII or equivalent	1178	20.72%
EOI or equivalent	632	11.12%
SO or equivalent	1009	17.75%
DP or equivalent	953	16.76%
Grade 7 or equivalent	528	9.29%
Grade 6 or equivalent	83	1.46%
Senior Civil Service or equivalent	90	1.58%

Table 2: Total Respondents by Department

Question 3: Did you feel supported by Line Management?

(Please note in Q3-9 please think about your experience in agreeing your own Workstyle Agreement with your Line Manager).

Answers

There were 5685 responses to this part of the question. The vast majority of staff (91.5%) felt supported by line management while 8.5% said they did not.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	5200	91.47%
No - please indicate why	485	8.53%

Table 3: Number of Respondents who did/did not feel supported by line management

Additional Comments

There were 825 freetext responses to this part of the question despite only 485 stating they felt unsupported by line management. It should therefore be noted that a significant number of these comments (41%) related to positive feedback about the support they received from their line management.

Overwhelmingly, two main reasons were cited for lack of management support:

- Staff stated that a working pattern with a fixed number of days in the office was implemented with little or no discussion and that there was a lack of clarity regarding the business requirements. Respondents' comments referred to 'a one size fits all' approach being adopted without due regard for the nature and remit of individual roles.
- Some staff stated that they were required to sign a generic workstyle agreement that they had not contributed to and that generic workstyle agreements were being used for whole groups of staff.

Other reasons stated included:

i. Managers were not familiar/knowledgeable about the process.
ii. There appeared to be a disconnect between higher levels (e.g. departmental/directorate level) and local messaging regarding business requirements.
iii. Some Managers reportedly conveyed to their staff that they disagreed with the concept of hybrid working and were therefore unsupportive.

Question 4: In relation to the new Hybrid Working Policy, did you find the Staff Toolkit and the guidance provided on the New Ways of Working intranet site useful and easy to follow?

Answers

There were 5685 responses to this question with almost 92% of respondents stating that they found the staff toolkit and guidance resources available useful and easy to follow.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	5218	91.79%
No - what aspects were difficult to follow?	467	8.21%

Table 4: Number of Respondents who found toolkit and guidance easy/not easy to follow

Additional Comments

There were 537 additional freetext responses to this part of the question. A number of staff added positive commentary. There were however multiple comments relating to a lack of consultation and communication on workstyle approaches determined by higher levels of management.

8% of respondents said that they did not find the resources useful or easy to follow. The vast majority of these responses related to three main areas:

- **Lack of awareness** – a significant number of staff responded that they did not know what resources were available and where to find them, or simply did not choose to use them.
- **Local arrangements negated the use of policy and guidance** – a significant number of staff responded that they did not find resources useful as management had already decided the workstyle approach for their business area (i.e. (i.e. management had stipulated the working pattern and ratio of workplace attendance across a department, directorate or business area.
- **Lack of clarity** – a significant number of staff responded that they thought the policy should be simplified and/or clarified. Areas mentioned for clarification and/or additional information included:
    I. Workstyle agreement forms – confusion about which form to use was mentioned.
    II. Appeals process – some staff relayed that more information on the appeals process and how to navigate it via the Employee Services Portal and HR Connect is required.
    III. Management roles – clarification around the role of the line manager and the countersigning, monitoring manager.

IV. More clarification on management discretion relating to the operation of core hours and flexi-time when hybrid working.

Sample Comments:

"Had I not read the new policy I would not have been able to make a successful case for working at home more often. I am not customer facing and having read the policy I had the means to get a fair home to office workstyle agreement applied."

"I found both the policy and toolkit well thought out and easy to follow. However, both the policy and toolkit were ignored by my line manager on direction from senior management who themselves decided their own policy for certain staff and business areas, without any consultation."

"Staff Toolkit and NWoW intranet helped me to propose a balanced and realistic Hybrid Workstyle Agreement."

"Easy to follow however it was pointless when my WSA was decided before I even completed the form."

Question 5: Did you find the Workstyle Agreement process straightforward?

Answers

There were 5685 responses to this question. Similar to the previous question, 91%+ of respondents stated that they found the workstyle agreement process straightforward. 8.8% stated that they did not find the process straightforward.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	5186	91.22%
No - what were the nature of any difficulties you encountered and how did you resolve these?	499	8.78%

Table 5: Number of Respondents who found Workstyle Agreement process straightforward.

Additional Comments

There were 608 additional freetext responses to this question including a significant number where staff had supported their 'YES' response by adding positive commentary.

In relation to the 'NO' responses the comments generally referred to a lack of consultation and communication and non-negotiable approaches adopted by higher levels of management. Some managers also expressed difficulties in agreeing workstyles that suited all their members of staff, whilst still ensuring that business requirements were met. The responses also included comments on the challenges of effectively communicating business requirements and assuring staff that the reasons cited were legitimate. Some of the comments made also related to staff wanting a permanent homeworking arrangement as opposed to a hybrid working one. The majority of responses related to three main areas:

- **Management commitment to the process** - lack of consultation regarding the workstyle agreement process and being required to attend the office a set number of days per week. This included comments relating to the use of generic workstyle agreements, that were not tailored or discussed with individuals.

- **Process complexity and clarity** - there were a number of comments expressing the view that the process was overly bureaucratic and that the forms contained too much information. There was evidently some confusion over which version of the workstyle agreement to use and where departments generated forms with departmental logos, whether to use these or the ones on the ESP.

- **What happens when resolution cannot be reached** – these comments referred mainly to expressing a need for additional information on the appeals process and additional guidance on what should happen pending the appeal being heard.

Sample Comments:

"New working pattern was dictated without flexibility on what could work best for both parties. Would have preferred at least some discussion before the new working pattern was implemented."

"There was some confusion around which form to fill out, when in reality there was very little difference between forms, so one version for all would probably suffice."

"Once completed and approved, there were no clear instructions as to what to do with the forms, some sent to HRC, others filed them into CM."

"There was no process outlined for when an agreement could not be reached between staff and management other than an appeals process was available. No direction was given on what should happen until an appeal was heard."

"Getting staff to agree these Workstyle Agreements was quite difficult at times as staff you are dealing with all have unique scenarios which mostly led staff to favour working from home more often than being in the office. However, their job roles as a frontline facing officer required them to be in the office to be able to complete all their duties. The difficulty lay in justifying how many days a week they should attend the office that would allow the business to continue with any decrease in efficiency."

"Many staff started the process with the mindset that working at home was the default setting and the business should prove why they would need to come in. Some staff wanting to work at home permanently and not come to the office at any point."

Question 6: Did you find the Health & Safety General Risk Checklist process straightforward?

Answers

There were 5685 responses to this question. Over 96% of respondents stated that they found the Health & Safety General Checklist process straightforward with only 3.7% expressing they had difficulties.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	5475	96.31%
No - what was the nature of any difficulties you encountered and how did you resolve these? Was your resolution successful?	210	3.69%

Table 6: Number of Respondents who found the H&S General Checklist straightforward.

Additional Comments

There were 261 freetext responses to this part of the question. The main issues highlighted in the comments were:

- Not being able to find the checklist on the Intranet.
- Requests for all the forms relating to hybrid working to be combined into one and collated together on ESP.
- Not understanding the difference between the H&S General Checklist and DSE Checklist
- Clarity around the remit of the line manager and when to involve H&S representatives.

Sample Comments:

"As a line manager, it was difficult to know what aspects I could resolves and those that needed to be referred to the H&S rep,"

"It was difficult to understand the differences in documentation as too much information at the one time and then tight timescales to complete and implement."

"I do not know how to access the Health and Safety General Risk Checklist and was not signposted to it when I queried it with my manager."

Question 7: Did you find the DSE Checklist process straightforward?

Answers

There were 5685 responses to this part of the question. The overwhelming majority (96%) found the DSE Checklist process straightforward with only 3.6% expressing difficulties.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	5480	96.39%
No - what additional information would you have liked to receive on the process?	205	3.61%

Table 7: Number of Respondents who found the DSE Checklist straightforward.

Additional Comments

There were an additional 229 freetext responses to this question. The main issues referred to in in the comments were:

- Not being able to find the checklist on the Intranet.
- Requests for all the forms relating to hybrid working to be combined into one and collated together on ESP.
- Confusion around the DSE checklists for the workplace and home
- Not understanding the difference between the H&S General Checklist and DSE Checklist.
- Technical difficulties in submitting the form (where Departments are using the automated H&S system).
- Clarity around the remit of the line manager and when to involve H&S representatives.

Sample Comments:

"There was a fear that if you answered no to any question that you would not be allowed to work from home."

"Clearer guidelines and details of who the approvers are, what is acceptable and what not".

"It was confusing about completing the DSE for home working and for office working and or hybrid."

Question 8: What do you feel are the benefits of Hybrid Working for you? Tick all that apply.

Answers

There were 5685 responses to this question. Results overall for this question were very positive. The four main benefits that over 80% of respondents selected were better work-life balance, less time spent commuting, fewer interruptions/more work done and more time for quiet/concentrated work. Positive environmental impact also featured as a benefit with 63%. Almost half of respondents felt that they made better use of face-to-face time with colleagues now. It is also notable that almost 28% of respondents felt that their work aims and objectives were clearer and over one third felt that their teams now make more effort to communicate with each- other.

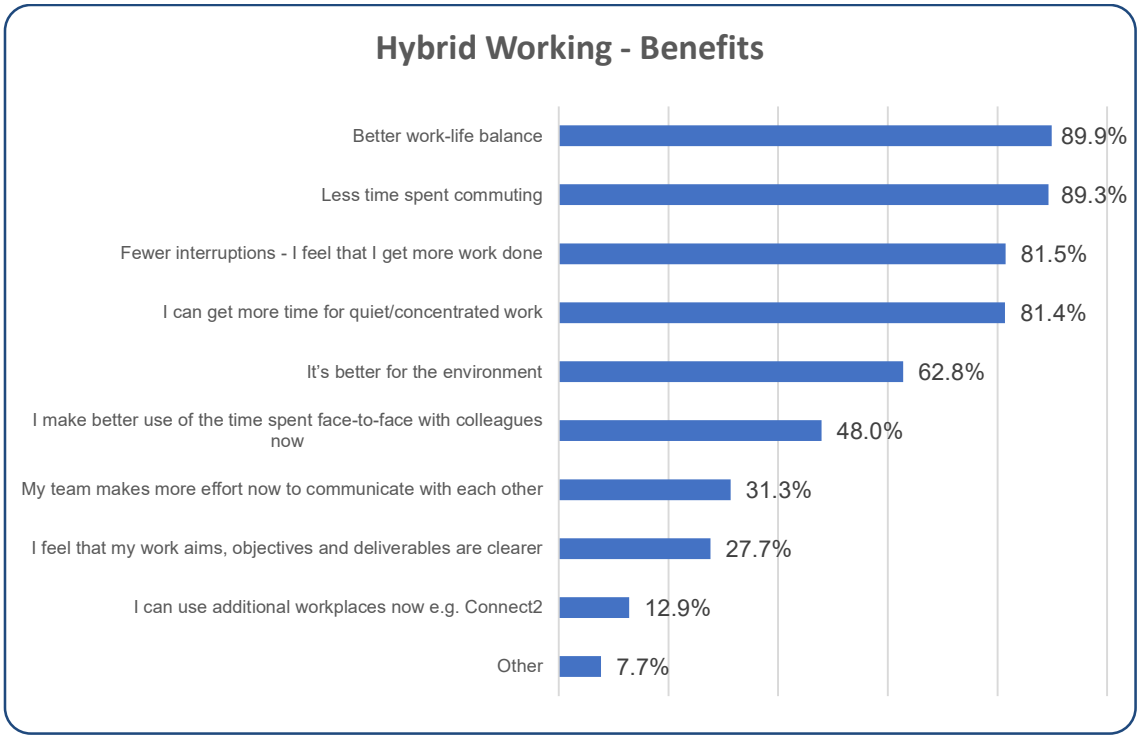


Figure 3: Hybrid Working Benefits by % Respondents selected.

Response	Total	Percentage
Better work-life balance	5112	89.92%
Less time spent commuting	5078	89.32%
I can get more time for quiet/concentrated work	4627	81.39%
Fewer interruptions - I feel that I get more work done	4634	81.51%
It's better for the environment	3572	62.83%
I feel that my work aims, objectives and deliverables are clearer	1574	27.69%
I make better use of the time spent face-to-face with colleagues now	2726	47.95%
I can use additional workplaces now e.g. Connect2	732	12.88%
My team makes more effort now to communicate with each other	1780	31.31%
Other	439	7.72%

Table 8: Hybrid Working Benefits by number Respondents selected.

Additional Comments

There were 793 additional freetext responses to this question, however many staff who selected 'Other' did not state another reason. Many of the comments related to perceived disadvantages and have been included in the summary for Question 9. The other main benefits cited were:

- Improved productivity, efficiency and more focused
- Commuting costs
- More choice around where and when work is done.
- Health benefits e.g. lifestyle changes, mental health, better sleep, less tiredness

Sample Comments

"More efficient & productive. Better sleep, better mental health…"

"Greater flexibility has been accommodated, in terms of when work is done."

"Expense of travelling is saved. This is currently extortionate given fuel prices / cost of living."

"I like having the choice or whether to work at home or go into the office."

"As I am relatively new to NICS I have not once felt like I am by myself working from home, my managers have always been available and colleagues."

"It has really been life changing in that the time I spend at home is far more focused."

Question 9: Have you experienced any disadvantages of Hybrid Working?

Answers

There were 5628 responses to this question with almost 76% saying that they had not experienced any disadvantages of hybrid working. 23% of respondents said they had experienced disadvantages and 1% of respondents chose not to answer the question.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	1313	23.10%
No	4315	75.90%
Not Answered	57	1.00%

Table 9: Number of Respondents who experienced disadvantages of hybrid working.

Additional Comments

There were 1412 additional freetext responses to this part of the question. The main disadvantages that respondents said they had experienced were:

- Lack of contact with colleagues both within and outside the direct work team
- Having to come into the workplace for set days when the business purpose is unclear or it seems unnecessary.
- Staff preferences for homeworking and lack of flexibility around arrangements.
- Commuting and energy expenses at a time when the cost of living is rising.
- Introducing/embedding new members of staff into the team and building up job knowledge.
- Blurring of boundaries between work and home and the need to be able to switch off outside working hours.

In addition, a number of respondents commented on different approaches across the NICS in relation to communicating an average percentage attendance for the department/business and this being interpreted by business areas as a set number of days per week. A number expressed dissatisfaction with being asked to attend a fixed number of days per week stating that they could not identify any business reason for doing so. Some respondents also highlighted frustration at being in front-line jobs that are not suited to hybrid working and there being no incentives or formal recognition processes in place for them.

Sample Comments

"As a line manager it can be difficult to get collaborative work delivered at pace with staff working remotely."

"Starting a new post can be tricky with hybrid working."

"At times I experienced a feeling of isolation and I miss the opportunity to discuss work with colleagues face to face."

"The only thing that I miss and that I find a disadvantage of homeworking is the day-to-day interactions with colleagues. However, we counter this in my team by having daily morning scrum meetings for 15-30mins, that can involve some work discussion, but non-work conversations are just as welcome. We take whatever time we need to know where we are with work and how each of the team is doing. It sets us up for the working day."

"Staff over reliance on working from home with some intransigence around flexibility around days in office or requirement to attend additional days where necessary/useful."

"Although some aspects of our work can be more difficult to organise now, in general people are happier with a mix of home and office working."

"I enjoy being back in the office, but I would have liked the flexibility of being able to choose days in office and days at home as everyone's work life balance is different."

"No competition between an unattractive office versus a comfortable home."

"The blurring of the boundaries around working hours

"Departments are not taking a consistent approach. Some Depts require office working more than others. It should be consistent across the whole of the NICS."

"I find sometimes it's more difficult to gauge somebody's mood when you're not physically in the same space. You can't pick up so easily on issues that may be affecting their work when you have to email, chat or video call on Teams."

"No regard has been given to staff to cannot work from home. We still have to pay for travel, time taken to commute, parking, etc. No incentives, no recognition, no regard given to the work-life balance experienced by people who can work from home."

Question 10: Are you a line manager?

There were 5685 responses to this question with 44.7% of respondents indicating that they were line managers. The remaining questions 11-14 were posed to line managers. It should be noted that whilst 2541 respondents indicated that they were line managers, the number that responded to the remaining questions varied to a minor extent.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	2541	44.70%
No	3144	55.30%

Table 10: Number of Respondents who are line managers.

Question 11: Did you feel that you were provided with sufficient guidance/LINKs Training ahead of implementation?

Answers

There were 2549 responses to this question. Almost 88% of line managers felt that they were provided with sufficient training and guidance.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes	2238	87.80%
No - please suggest any additional guidance or training which you think would be beneficial.	311	12.20%

Table 11: Number of Line Managers who felt guidance and training was sufficient.

Additional Comments

There were 249 responses additional freetext answers to this question. A number of staff indicated that they had not received guidance or training and were not aware what was available. The main suggestions on what would be useful were:

- Improved communication around departmental/business area attendance expectations and business reasons for these approaches.
- More support in relation to what happens when line managers and staff cannot reach agreement.
- More information and advice on what other HR policies should be used when considering an individual's circumstances e.g. reasonable adjustment, disability and health issues.
- Specific training for new and existing Line Managers.

Sample Comments

"Training and guidance on how to communicate and manage staff's expectations and also maintain a team ethos."

“Additional guidance on the process to organise office and IT equipment for hybrid working would be helpful.”

“It would have been helpful if the detail of the departmental approach had been available more quickly after the general policy.”

“May have been useful to have a number of staff trained in offering guidance on the completion of the forms, FQAs etc.”

“Better coverage of disputes. What is the appeals process, what is resolved as a reasonable adjustment and what is an appeal under the uniform appeals process.”

“I think there could've been more guidance issued or potentially a training session for line managers.”

“The policy was clear enough and should have been easy enough to apply if staff were allowed to follow it, which we weren't.”

“There is plenty but in such a busy work environment we struggled to read any of this and still haven’t and most staff don’t even know that this exists.”

“No clear guidance was issued to line managers on exact steps to take when a member of staff refused to sign the work style agreement. This had to be sourced on a case-by-case basis.”

Question 12: Did you encounter any difficulties when agreeing Workstyle Agreements with your staff?

Answers

There were 2508 responses to this question. The majority of line managers (81+%) stated that they had not encountered any difficulties with workstyle agreements with 18.4% indicating they had encountered issues.

Response	Total	Percent
Yes - please tick all that apply	462	18.42%
No	2046	81.58%

Table 12: Number of Line Managers who felt guidance and training was sufficient.

This question asked the 2508 respondents to indicate (by ticking) what difficulties they encountered. It should be noted that in this part of the question, a number of respondents ticked more than one issue and the total number of issues ticked was 700.

The most common difficulty encountered by line managers related to agreeing the workplace/remote working split (9.25%). The second and third most common difficulties encountered are arguably also linked to agreeing the workplace/remote split – these were getting clarity on the approach for the business area (7.26%) and spreading flexibility across the team (4.7%).

Response from Total 2508 Line Manager Respondents	Total Ticked	Percent
I found it difficult to agree workplace/remote working split	232	9.25%
I found it difficult to spread flexibility evenly across the team	118	4.70%
I found it difficult to understand the Workstyle Agreement process	61	2.43%
I found it difficult to equip staff both at home and in the office with appropriate IT equipment	83	3.31%
I found it difficult to understand the Health & Safety processes	24	0.96%
I found it difficult to get clarity on the approach for my business	182	7.26%

Table 13: Number of Line Managers who experienced difficulties.

Additional Comments

There were 396 additional freetext responses to this part of the question. The main difficulties encountered by management largely reflected those relayed by all staff in Question 4 and can be summarised as:

- Lack of consultation with management on approaches adopted for minimum levels of workplace attendance left some line managers feeling they had little input or control over the workstyle agreement process.
- Differences of opinion between line managers and their management on the requirements for workplace attendance.
- Staff reluctance to return to the workplace following the Covid period and their preference for lower levels of workplace attendance or permanent homeworking.
- Staff being given pre-determined workstyle agreements by management with little or no scope for amendment.
- More guidance and support required when line managers cannot reach agreement with their staff and clarity on whether the more senior levels of management are able to overrule a line management decision.
- Some line managers felt that for consistency a minimum level of workplace attendance is required while other expressed the view that 'one size does not fit all' and that there should be more discretion for line managers to implement what they feel is required to meet the business needs of their area.
- Current workplace environment is not conducive to supporting hybrid working – references were made to layout, furnishings and IT equipment.

Sample comments:

There was no scope for consultation in this process. My management had already determined on 2 days a week with flexibility, so myself and staff all just had to accept this."

"Not everyone wants the same thing. But most wanted to be in the office 1 day per week, and a few others wanted to be in full time. There isn't a one size fits all."

"Staff reluctance to come back to the office was a huge obstacle to progressing WSAs. Significant time was spent on negotiating required office time. A definitive amount of time e.g. 2 days should have been made mandatory."

"My Line Manager dictated the work from home / office day split that I had to put forward to my own staff, with no real guidance on why or how they came to the decision. This was frustrating for me as I did not agree with it, and I felt it was counterproductive to the workstyle agreement process."

"My difficulty was dealing with individuals and getting staff to see 'bigger picture' in relation to front line services was extremely difficult. Staff were very used to WFH and didn't see why they could not continue working 100% of the time from home. Why they

needed to return to F2F interventions….Trying to persuade and encourage staff was extremely hard and very stressful."

"The guidance better supported managers in business areas with more flexibility and less so those dealing with staff who were unhappy that their business area required more onsite working than other colleagues."

"A particular issue is that the agreement is between the staff member and the line manager. In many cases the line manager disagreed with the approach taken at Directorate / Branch level. The policy requires the head of branch to sign an acknowledgement, but there is no "veto" within the policy."

"We have taken a pragmatic approach of indicating things that are better done when physically together and will keep these under review as understanding evolves."

"All staff forms were completed in advance by management and many just signed off this template. Only afterwards by the union where we informed that staff should've had the opportunity to discuss this with line managers."

"The main impediment at the moment is the lack of fit for purpose working space in my division's neighbourhood - there's no point of getting staff to come into the office if there are no external monitors and docking stations for their laptops."

"We were prevented from listening to, discussing or agreeing with staff - G5 & G7 gave a directive that staff must have 40% office attendance and any appeal against this directive must be supported by medical evidence of a disability and reasons why an adjustment is required, which would then be referred to OHS, and ultimately to HR for a final decision."

3. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the survey has indicated a promising start to hybrid working across the NICS and PPSNI with the vast majority of responses being positive. This is encouraging particularly given the timing of the implementation of the policy. Roll out coincided with the cessation of the prolonged period of homeworking for many NICS staff due to the Covid pandemic. Understandably, many staff were reluctant to return to the workplace and adopt a hybrid working pattern. They were perceiving the policy implementation as a move from the exceptional homeworking arrangements adopted during Covid rather than a change from their workplace attendance arrangements in normal (i.e. pre-Covid) times.

Despite the majority of the survey results being favourable, circa 8% of respondents overall expressed dissatisfaction. Their feedback was wide-ranging; from relatively minor aspects such as how the forms and guidance materials are presented to more concerning issues relating to some business areas or spans of control where the spirit and the collaborative, collegiate aspects of the policy do not appear to have been followed in all cases. A number of recommendations have been compiled by the author of this report to address the main issues that have emerged from the survey results and are included as Table 14 below. The recommendations are made in the spirit of ensuring that the Hybrid Working Policy and its operation continues to be successful and that the benefits of hybrid working positively impacts our customers, staff, operations and processes in our departments and business areas, and our environment. The recommendations have been prioritised high, medium and low where High = action within the next 4 months, Medium = action in the next 5-8 months and Low = action in the next 9-12 months.

No.	Topic	Recommendation	Priority
1	Governance	Reconvene the NWW G3 Group with the representatives from across the NICS and PPSNI to ensure buy in and support of senior management in addressing recommendations and any subsequent changes required. The group should also include DOF representation from NICSHR, Properties Division and Digital shared services to ensure alignment and understand timeframes for estate and digital improvements. It is recommended that the G3 Group is led by a senior stakeholder with good knowledge of the Hybrid Policy, the people, technology and place issues and the current and future challenges facing the NICS.	High
2	Governance	Reconvene the NWW Steering Group with the NWW champion representatives from across the NICS and PPSNI to take forward the recommendations collectively and ensure consistency across the NICS. It is recommended that the Steering Group and actions to address the recommendations is led and project managed by a NICSHR representative. Ideally the Project Manager representative will have had previous involvement in the development of the NICS Hybrid Working Policy and the NWW Steering/Workstream Groups.	High

3	Governance	Ensure outcome of survey is communicated via the appropriate CTUS Whitley and that CTUS are consulted regarding any changes required.	High
4	Comms	Communicate outcome of survey to G3 Group and raise the issues and feedback highlighted in relation to business areas with 'blanket' approaches to minimum workplace attendance and the use of pre-filled workstyle agreements in order to agree collegiate, consulted approaches that are within the spirit of the policy.	High
5	Comms	Collate all the Hybrid Policy documents, forms, reference and training materials on ESP (by using links to the Intranet where appropriate) and communicate to all staff to reiterate all the support that is available.	Med
6	Policy	Develop additional content for the policy that relates to and clarifies the arrangements for: - Part time members of staff - Dealing with disagreements and uniform appeals - Differences of opinion re: business requirements between line manager and more senior management - When an individual's circumstances make it is more appropriate to use other policies e.g. reasonable adjustment - Core hours and flexitime: management discretion in relation to hybrid working	High
7	Policy	Consider revision of workstyle agreement forms with the focus of using only one form (abridged) for all workstyle agreements but ensuring the conversation guide (outlined currently in the full form) is used in all cases.	Med
8	Policy	Repeat the Hybrid Working survey in 12 months, around April 2024 when the first annual round of updating workstyle agreements will have taken place. It is important to ensure that the policy is regularly reviewed to ensure that it meets the needs of the service and takes into account any new and emerging aspects of hybrid working and homeworking e.g. recent UK study that trialled a 4-day compressed working week, potential for tax changes in relation to working outside the UK and Ireland, recruitment of homeworkers etc.	Low
9	Benefits Realisation	Develop methodology and metrics for tracking benefits of hybrid working covering all aspects; work-life balance, health & well-being, performance & productivity, reduced costs e.g. accommodation, staff travel, commuting, energy & utilities, environmental benefits - these should include the results of this and subsequent surveys, relevant indicators from other resources e.g. staff engagement scores, days lost due to sickness etc.	Med
10	Training	Following completion of recommendations 6 & 7 - develop a training bundle for all staff and management roles in particular. Training roll-out should aim to be completed in advance of next year's round of workstyle agreement reviews.	Low
11	Reward & Recognition	Use the reformed NWW Steering Group to consider options for staff whose roles are not suited to hybrid working. This should include consideration of options ranging from job rotation, role-sharing, use of digital tools and AI, to recruitment to these roles and exploring any potential for some means of reward or recognition for these groups of staff.	Med

Table 14: Recommendations

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to take this opportunity to thank all those who participated in the New Ways of Working Steering and workstream groups from across all the NICS departments and the PPSNI. Without their help and co-operation and that of their Communications Teams, the roll-out of the Hybrid Policy and this survey would not have been possible within the timeframes required. Thanks also to all the staff who took the time to complete the survey and provide constructive feedback.