Northern Ireland Civil Service
People and Organisational Development

Jill Minne
Director, People & Organisational Development
2-4 Bruce Street
Belfast, BT2 7JD
Tel: [redacted]
Email: [redacted]

From: Jill Minne
People and Organisational Development

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To: Finance and HR Advisory Group

PEOPLE & ORGANISATONAL DEVELOPMENT – REVIEW OF HYBRID WORKING POLICY

This paper provides a draft Hybrid Working policy, procedures and FAQs following the policy review.

The Group is asked to consider and provide comments by cop 23 January 2025 prior to presentation to Minister for approval to commence formal consultation with Central Trade Unions.

1. The NICS Hybrid Working policy has been reviewed, informed by feedback provided by FHRAG on the draft Terms of Reference, policy design principles and at various meetings. In addition, the NICS Estate Strategy was considered along with recent academic research and benchmarking of hybrid working practices across other Civil Service jurisdictions and public and private sector employers.

2. The revised draft policy is attached at **Annex A.** Draft Hybrid Working Procedures to support the policy, setting out process for requesting, considering, implementing, and reviewing requests for Hybrid Working are included at **Annex B** with accompanying FAQs included at **Annex C**. It should be noted that the

documents are in draft and have yet to be formatted by the Communications team (i.e. to improve the graphics/flowcharts included in the Annexes). Key changes included in the draft policy are set out below.

Workplace Attendance requirements

3. Research by CIPD on flexible and hybrid working in 2023, Flexible and hybrid working practices in 2023 | CIPD found that 83% of organisations have hybrid working in place. Over half (52%) require hybrid working employees to be in the workplace for a minimum number of days in the working week/month. Employees are typically required in the office two or three days per week.

4. Since the launch of the NICS Hybrid Working policy, some departments have indicated an expectation for staff to attend the workplace for a minimum of 40% of the working week. This has not been enforced and is not consistent practice across the NICS.

5. Feedback from FHRAG on policy design principles for hybrid working indicated that a minimum attendance in the workplace per week was desired to support business delivery and that this should be applied consistently across the NICS. FHRAG members highlighted that this would go some way to creating a more equitable approach (particularly for those staff who are unable to avail of hybrid working due to the nature of their job role) and may also help address recruitment/retention difficulties in certain job roles where regular or full attendance at the workplace is required.

6. The draft Hybrid Working policy defines hybrid working as a non-contractual, locally agreed, flexible working arrangement which, subject to business needs, blends working from: (i) a designated workplace, (ii) other work or remote locations; or (iii) home. It makes clear that any hybrid working arrangement requires attendance at the workplace for part of each working week which is prescribed as at least 40% of contractual working hours per week. For staff working an alternative working pattern, workplace attendance will be calculated on a pro-rata basis. Where attendance is calculated on a pro-rata basis and is less than 3hrs 45mins per week, the calculation may be based on a two-week basis.

Workplace definition

7. The revised draft policy defines ‘workplace’ as a member of staff’s designated office, or other work, or remote location as agreed by line management. Workplace includes travelling on official business, visiting other NICS sites on official business, including Connect 2 Hubs, face-to-face meetings with colleagues, suppliers, or external organisations and face-to-face conferences and training.

Management Roles

8. Feedback on the current policy indicated some confusion regarding levels of management and their role in the decision-making process including consideration of appeals.

9. The draft policy aims to resolve this by clarifying roles and responsibilities for senior management and line managers. For the purposes of the draft policy, senior manager is defined as Grade 7, with responsibility for considering business need; determining potential job roles suitable for hybrid working; and communicating business area workplace attendance requirements to their line managers. The policy procedures seek to support senior management in making decisions regarding the application of hybrid working.

10. Line managers will be responsible for confirming the business area workplace attendance requirements to their direct reports/staff and agreeing the implementation of hybrid working arrangements within their teams.

11. If staff have concerns about their business area workplace attendance requirement and are unable to resolve this with their line manager, they may appeal the decision under the Uniform Appeal process.

Workstyle Agreement application process

12. The current application process requires completion of a detailed form for either a regular hybrid working pattern or an abridged form where a regular pattern is not required.

13. Under the revised draft policy, the application process has been streamlined to one Workstyle Agreement. It is proposed that applications will be made via HRConnect Self-Service and the APEX FACES option. Where this is not available, a downloadable Workstyle Agreement form will be available on the Employee Service Portal (ESP).

Recommendation

14. You are asked to consider the draft policy, procedures and FAQs and provide any comments to [redacted] by cop **23 January 2025.**

Jill Minne
People and Organisational Development
Ext [redacted]

Copy distribution:
Aisling Quinn
Olivia Martin
Janine Fullerton
Catherine Shannon
[redacted]
Debbie Sherlock
Karen Wallace
Beverly Beggs
[redacted]