

Briefing Note

Post Covid-19 Opportunities: Working Arrangements

Background

Responding to Covid-19 demanded a radical transformation to the way in which many council services were delivered. This transition to an “Essential Services Model” was initially enacted to prevent the spread of the infection, protect the health and well-being of staff and safeguard the delivery of vital frontline services and provision of support for the most vulnerable.

What has become apparent is that the change to working practices, delivered at unprecedented pace and scale, provides a unique opportunity to lock in the progress made under lockdown and deliver a permanent shift to home or agile working as the default mode of operation for many staff. This briefing note summarises the transition in key areas to identify the progress made and identify areas for further review to inform any longer term policy proposals.

Current Position

Following the initial transition to an Essential Services Model, the Council has now reached a steady state with services, in the main, continuing to be delivered effectively with limited disruption. Many of these services are delivered effectively through home and agile working. The [Cabinet report of 11 June 2020](#) set out the approach for the restart of services, with further restart measures and any changes to the status of services communicated to Councillors, at Council and through regular group leader briefing sessions.

It is anticipated, however, that social distancing measures are likely to endure for the immediate future, and the reintroduction of more restrictive lockdown measures remains a possibility. The practical consequence of this is a material reduction in the occupancy rate of core office accommodation. As buildings are repurposed to comply with Health and Safety requirements and become designated Covid-19 safe working areas, their capacity to accommodate staff will reduce. County Hall’s operating capacity, for example, will reduce to around 400 desk spaces which places a clear need to pursue home working arrangements for the immediate term, irrespective of longer term policy options.

Whilst the Council continues to respond to the pandemic, a programme of work is currently ongoing to review and assess how home and agile working can be continued, with a focus on improving service delivery, enhancing staff well-being, locking in productivity improvements and releasing potential efficiency savings.

Enabling Service: Digital Infrastructure, ICT equipment and Virtual Processes

The Council had already established a comprehensive Digital agenda, with the digital strategy setting out a clear direction of travel, prior to lockdown. It is clear that without the progress made in delivering this strategy the Council would not have been able to support the scale of homeworking which it currently does.

It is likely that the impact of the Council’s investment in digital infrastructure, programme of software upgrades and migration to the latest operating platforms would not have been as visible without the pandemic. The extensive demands which Covid-19 placed on the Council’s digital

infrastructure demonstrated the extent to which the Council has established modern and resilient digital capacity. Simply put, the Council would not have been able to support home working at this scale only two years ago.

The ICT service performance data over the past 3 months demonstrated the enhanced capability of the service:

- Provision of equipment, software upgrades and migration to the latest operating platforms
 - Over 5200 staff were migrated to Office 365 in just 3 weeks to enable wider access to council systems from remote and mobile devices;
 - Microsoft Teams has been rolled out to over 5200 users within 2 weeks, to provide additional video, audio conferencing and collaboration tools;
 - Over 850 new laptops and tablets distributed in the last 4 months and over 500 existing devices rebuilt or reconfigured for home use;
 - The ratio of fixed devices to mobile enabled devices has shifted considerably between quarter 3 2019/20 (57%/43%) and Q1 2020/21 (46%/54%). This demonstrates that over half the workforces is now equipped for mobile working.
- Enhanced Support Arrangements
 - All ICT Service Desk staff are working from home with no change in the level or quality of service
 - 96% of the wider ICT service have worked from home with the equipment they need to operate as normal.
- Supporting Service Provision
 - The Network team supported the NHS establish temporary network connections between the new field hospital in the Millennium Stadium and Global Link;
 - The ICT and the Web Team supported Waste Services to ensure that all collection changes were correctly synchronised between back office systems and the various customer facing digital channels;
 - ICT staff have resolved twice as many service request tickets as usual, working extended hours and at weekends, to accelerate mobility options for the council partner organisations such as the WLGA
 - Key telephony systems were extended for use at home, this in conjunction with the 4400 corporate mobile contracts has allowed service areas to continue to function with telephony from home
 - C2C have been enabled to operate with staff split between a home and office based operation

Supporting Safe and Effective Homeworking

Whilst the Council's digital strategy enabled a number of staff to work from home, a recent staff survey revealed high levels of staff satisfaction with little or no drop in productivity:

- 90% of surveyed staff are temporarily working from home on a full time basis, mainly doing same job
- 82% reported being satisfied with home working
- 95% felt safe working from home
- 83% could work productively from home

With the highest level of government, and leading scientific advisors, advocating the continuation of homeworking¹ where possible, the Council will continue its temporary homeworking arrangements. Whilst this remains the default position, strict exceptions apply to enable the delivery of Business Critical Services or to support those with physical or mental health requirement

Each directorate has therefore undertaken a Home Working Assessment of who needs to return to core office accommodation identifying staff who:

- are a priority for return (red)
- need for some office space to deliver aspects of service (amber)
- can work effectively from home (green)

For those categorised as red or amber, procedures are in place to ensure a safe return to work. For those categorised as green, support is being provided to ensure safe homeworking. This has included a Health and Safety Temporary Homeworking Guidance and Checklist, which was issued to all members of staff, supported by Occupational Health. A review of equipment is also being undertaken (physical and ICT) using current equipment in offices with delivery of office equipment being arranged to meet any identified homeworking support need.

Over the longer term, any change to the working arrangements would require a change to the contractual arrangements of staff. The measures currently being progressed to support temporary homeworking ensures that the Council is well positioned to build on the policies already in place for home or agile working arrangements, should it choose to, and in the areas considered appropriate, in the future. Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Council already had a number of services with permanent homeworkers and agile working staff. This meant that policies were already in place which can be reviewed and developed further as required.

Workforce Management

At the same time as responding to the immediate implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council has continued to review the service delivery impacts of a revised approach to workforce management. Perhaps one of the most immediate impacts on productivity is the marked reduction in sickness absence achieved during a period of extensive homeworking. When considered alongside the results of a recent staff survey on homeworking, which demonstrated that staff felt there was little or no fall in their productivity as they continued to deliver largely the same tasks, there are clear efficiency gains being recorded.

¹ Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister: *“Our advice is that you should stay at home and work from home if you are able to do so”* | Dr Frank Atherton, Wales Chief Medical Officer- *“Our position is that if you can work at home, then it’s better to work at home and many of us are able to do so”* | Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser- *“Home working is a “perfectly good option... I think a number of companies think it’s actually not detrimental to productivity and in that situations, there’s absolutely no reason... to change it.”*

The Council's workforce development approach will consider in detail the impact of the workforce management changes enacted during the lockdown period. Moving forward, the focus will continue to be on improving the quality of service delivery. What has become clear is that home and agile working is not only possible, but potentially desirable across a greater range of council services. The workforce management approach will therefore review the efficacy of greater home and agile working in the delivery of services and in the Council's approach to constituting its workforce.

County Hall and Operational Property

For the immediate future, the Council's operational property will only be used where absolutely necessary to deliver critical services. Currently, therefore, strict Corporate Process are in place to manage a safe return, including

- **Director Approval:** Covid-19 re-occupation checklist must be signed off by H&S and approved by the Director
- **Symptom Free:** If any Covid-19 related symptoms are experienced stay at home and follow Public Health guidance
- **County Hall Safety Precautions, including**
 - Face coverings provided to move around the building
 - Seating arrangements with 2 metre social distancing
 - Use of lift restricted to 1 person
- **Common Area & Office Area Principles**

The significantly reduced staff footprint operating from core office accommodation will provides a unique opportunity to test the impact on service delivery of a fundamentally different operating model. This will see a greater number of staff working from home with digital engagement with residents and service users promoted where possible. Each directorate will review the impact of this model to determine the efficacy of the approach should a more permanent shift in working arrangements be pursued.

Moving Forward

In the longer term, the Council will not do away with core office accommodation as the office will remain an important component of workforce development, collaboration and interaction. The opportunity for new working practices are clear, affording greater flexibility to many staff with the ability staff whilst delivering productivity gains, efficiency savings and service improvements. This will, however, require careful assessment in autumn 2020 and officers are working on a programme of reviews, which will include:

- Digital Infrastructure, ICT equipment and virtual processes
- Property and Assets
- Staff Terms and Conditions;
- Staff Wellbeing (Physical and Wellbeing);
- Management Support and Performance Management Arrangements.

Once completed, the outcomes of these reviews and assessments will be made available to the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee in order to inform any future consideration of working arrangements, including homeworking, and related policies by the Committee.