

REPORT TO:		Cabinet	
DATE:		09 February 2022	
PORTFOLIO:		Cllr Joyce Plummer - Resources	
REPORT AUTHOR:		Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and Organisational Development	
TITLE OF REPORT:		Smart Working Strategy	
EXEMPT REPORT (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A)	No	Not applicable	
KEY DECISION:	No	If yes, date of publication:	

1. **Purpose of Report**

1.1 To seek approval for a Smart Working Strategy.

2. **Recommendations**

2.1 That Cabinet approves the draft Strategy.

2.2 That the Smart Working Strategy Group continues to progress the work identified within the associated action plan and the Executive Director (Legal and Democratic) be given delegated authority to approve updates to the action plan as they deem appropriate.

3. **Reasons for Recommendations and Background**

3.1 The pandemic has necessitated different ways of working, in particular to apply the working from home guidance which has been in place throughout various periods, from the initial lockdown in March 2020. Homeworking has been a key element in keeping services running and helping to make our workplaces safer for those staff who needed to attend. There has been considerable investment in ICT equipment and infrastructure to support the new arrangements.

3.2 All elected members were invited to a discussion on 7 July 2021. This included a presentation on the issues to be considered, the pros and cons of hybrid working as reported by staff and service managers, and an update on how staff were actually working. This showed that around 60% of staff were coming into the workplace all the time, including front-line operational staff, as well as some office-based staff. In most cases this was because their role did not allow remote working. About 20% of staff were coming in 2 or 3 days a week, with the rest at home, and the remaining 20% were almost entirely home-based.

- 3.3 On 19 July 2021, the Government's covid-19 guidance moved to step 4 of the roadmap, including the dropping of the requirement to work from home wherever possible. Since then, the Council has asked staff to come into the workplaces for a minimum of 2 or 3 days per week, providing covid-secure arrangements were maintained. This was reversed for a short period while "Plan B" restrictions were in place. We will continue to make decisions that are informed by national guidance.
- 3.4 It was agreed in July 2021 that a small working group would be set up to consider the issues and determine a way forward. It included the Leader and Portfolio Holder, a further Labour member, the Leader of the Conservative group plus another Conservative member, 2 Unison representatives, the Head of Policy and OD and the Head of ICT. This group met on 3 August and 7 September 2021 and considered further information, in particular around productivity, safety, communications and likely training needs.
- 3.5 Members made a decision on 7 September 2021 to recommend retaining hybrid working into the future, and that officers should work with Trade Unions on the policies and practices required to make this work effectively. In particular, officers were asked to note that there were still concerns about responsive and effective communication.
- 3.6 At its meeting on 15 September 2021, Management Team agreed the recommendations to develop a Smart Working Strategy with a small officer steering group. This includes the Head of Policy and OD, the Head of ICT, the Regeneration and Property Manager, the Head of Audit and Investigations, the acting Head of Environmental Health and the Safety and Emergency Planning Officer.
- 3.2 The group has developed the draft Strategy now being presented. This includes an action plan which captures the individual work elements envisaged, some of which are longer-term actions. This is intended to be a living action plan which will be added to and updated as necessary.
- 3.3 The draft Strategy sets out the overall approach and principles. It is likely to be necessary to continue to operate flexibly as the pandemic, any restrictions or identified risk measures change. The Strategy will also allow the Council to make changes to any ongoing arrangements if service needs require this.

4. Alternative Options considered and Reasons for Rejection

- 4.1 This proposal seeks to implement the recommendation of the Member working group set up to consider future ways of working.

5. Consultations

- 5.1 The draft has been shared with Service Managers, the elected member working group, and Trade Unions for consultation prior to bringing this for Cabinet approval. Unison have confirmed their agreement and no proposed changes have been suggested.

6. **Implications**

Financial implications (including any future financial commitments for the Council)	None identified at this stage. Work to support the Strategy (such as ICT infrastructure projects) will seek approval as required.
Legal and human rights implications	Hybrid working will be on a voluntary basis, with the Council's workplace remaining the contractual base.
Assessment of risk	n/a
Equality and diversity implications <i>A Customer First Analysis should be completed in relation to policy decisions and should be attached as an appendix to the report.</i>	Completed.

7. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985:**
List of Background Papers

7.1 None

1. Purpose

- What are you trying to achieve with the policy?

This Strategy is designed to progress the recommendations from a member working group into future ways of working. This considered the changes to working arrangements during the pandemic and recommended that officer bring forward proposals that will enable us to retain the option of hybrid working in our future working arrangements.

The Strategy covers buildings and technology in addition to people issues. Individual decisions will require their own CFA, in some cases, especially with HR policies.

- Who defines and manages it?

The work is led by the Head of Policy and OD in partnership with colleagues from Regeneration and ICT. A Smart Working Strategy Group also includes Audit and Health and Safety. Recommendations will be taken to Management Team. Consultees will include Trade Unions, service managers and relevant elected members.

- Who do you intend to benefit from it and how?

We believe that there are numerous business benefits from supporting hybrid working where job roles allow and these informed the decision to develop this work further. Employees may also benefit from having increased choice over work locations, within an agreed framework.

- What could prevent people from getting the most out of the policy?

Some job roles will not be suitable for hybrid working. Not all staff have the appropriate home environment for homeworking to be an option. Some teams will require more people to be in the workplace which may affect the degree of flexibility available.

It is important that managers take a consistent approach to applying the principles once these are agreed, while recognising that there are genuine differences in service needs across the Council.

- How will you get your customers involved in the analysis and how will you tell people about it?

We will consult with and communicate with staff, elected members and our customers, where the arrangements affect them or the way they interact with us.

2. Evidence

- How will you know if the policy delivers its intended outcome / benefits?
 - If we are able to successfully implement the required policies and practices that mean hybrid working supports our service delivery.
 - We have a set of performance indicators which can help us assess this.
 - We can consider and address any feedback from stakeholders.
 - If we avoid workplace covid outbreaks.
- What existing data do you have on the people that use the service and the wider population?

We know that about 40% of our staff have been working either hybrid or homeworking over the pandemic. This includes some people who have health vulnerabilities. We are now asking all staff to come into the workplace for part of the week, unless there are exceptional reasons not to do this.

Services collate data as required including performance indicators. We have data on customer contact.

- Are you breaking down data by equality groups where relevant (such as by gender, age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, religion and belief, pregnancy and maternity)?

Workforce data routinely includes protected characteristics and is reported and analysed at least annually.

- Are you using partners, stakeholders, and councillors to get information and feedback?

Yes, as described above.

3. Impact

- Are some people benefiting more – or less - than others? If so, why might this be?

Yes – see above “What could prevent people from making the most out of the policy”.

People with disabilities may benefit from having greater flexibility over working locations and the possibility of reducing travel.

People with particular religious needs may also benefit from increased flexibility when there are important events. It may support people with caring responsibilities.

Underpinning this will be a focus on service delivery. While staff may well experience benefits in this way of working, it is not an entitlement and must meet need of the service.

4. Actions

- If the evidence suggests that the policy / service / function benefits a particular group – or disadvantages another - is there a justifiable reason for this and if so, what is it?

There is no evidence that any group will be disadvantaged but it will be important to consider feedback from stakeholders and take action is required.

- Is it discriminatory in any way?

Not as far as we know but we must remain alert to this.

- Is there a possible impact in relationships or perceptions between different parts of the community? What measures can you put in place to reduce disadvantages?

Yes. There is already evidence of some sense of unfairness among staff, or concerns from those who need to be in the office about others returning and the impact on covid-safety. This all needs to be managed as part of detailed policy development and by working closely with service managers and trade unions, and supported by clearly communicated and up to date risk assessments.

- Do you need to consult further?

Detailed plans and policies will be developed under the umbrella of the Smart Working Strategy and there will be consultation requirements associated with these.

- Have you identified any potential improvements to customer service?

Improved technology will be implemented with our customer service in mind and should bring improvements. Some of the changes necessitated by covid restrictions have also bought efficiencies and will be retained.

- Who should you tell about the outcomes of this analysis?

Managers, staff, trade unions, elected members.

- When will this assessment need to be repeated?

If there are significant Strategy reviews or other new information.

Kirsten Burnett
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20/10/21