

REPORT TO:		Management Review Committee	
DATE:		17 th October 2022	
PORTFOLIO:		Cllr Joyce Plummer - Resources	
REPORT AUTHOR:		Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and OD	
TITLE OF REPORT:		Flexible Working Policy	
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 present a draft Flexible Working Policy for approval.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Management Review Committee approves the draft Flexible Working Policy.

3. Reasons for Recommendations and Background

- 3.1 After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations had no other choice but to adapt to conducting some work remotely. All HBC employees had previously worked all their working week from a work location, with the exception of a few occasions, generally to support someone with a short-term mobility or other medical issue, or to work on a particular piece of work demanding uninterrupted, quiet concentration.
- 3.2 In March 2020, Hyndburn staff had to rapidly adapt to new ways of working. To give just a few examples:
- our Waste and Parks teams implemented alternative covid-safe travel arrangements;
 - our Cemetery staff changed how they dealt with paperwork and bookings and ensured that funeral services were conducted in line with covid regulations;
 - several staff across different teams were redeployed away from their normal duties to support clinically vulnerable residents via food deliveries and Hyndburn Hub calls; and
 - our revenues and admin teams ensured that vast amounts of new business support grants were sent out promptly, with national recognition.
- 3.3 Many of our staff were told to stay at home, in line with the instruction from the Prime Minister, and we quickly provided the ICT equipment and infrastructure to enable them to work from home and access networks remotely. People willingly turned spare

rooms or dining areas into office spaces and, despite high levels of fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, ensured that the Council continued to deliver services. There were new ways of keeping in touch, via virtual meetings, MS Teams chats and calls, and use of mobile phones.

- 3.4 Homeworking was a crucial element in keeping services running and helping to make our workplaces safer for those staff who needed to attend.
- 3.5 By July 2021, 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.
- 3.6 As covid restrictions were relaxed in Autumn 2021, we moved to a position whereby all staff were instructed to return to the workplace for 2 or 3 days each week. Of course, for some of our staff, being in Hyndburn for these days does not mean that they are completely office-based, as their work may take them on site visits.
- 3.7 Also in July 2021, a working group was set up to look at future working arrangements. This included:
 - the Leader;
 - the Portfolio Holder for HR;
 - the Leader of the Conservative group (now Deputy Leader);
 - a further Labour member and Conservative member;
 - Unison representatives;
 - the Head of Policy and OD; and
 - the Head of ICT.
- 3.8 Members made a decision on 7 September 2021 to recommend retaining hybrid working into the future, and asked that officers work with Trade Unions on the policies and practices required to make this work effectively.
- 3.9 A Smart Working Strategy was approved by Cabinet on 9 February 2022, following formal consultation with Trade Unions, setting out the agreed approach and principles. Recognising that this would be work in progress, to refine and adapt to take full advantage of the opportunities offered, a Smart Working Strategy group has continued to meet including the Head of Policy and OD, the Head of ICT, the Regeneration and Property Manager, the Head of Audit and Investigations, the Head of Environmental Health and the Safety and Emergency Planning Officer.
- 3.10 The public health guidance changed in April 2022, lifting formal restrictions. People are now advised to work from home if they can where they have symptoms of respiratory illness or a positive covid test. Our hybrid working arrangements have meant this national guidance has been reasonably easy to implement and it is likely that this has stopped workplace transmission and subsequent sickness absence and interruptions to service delivery. Where staff cannot work from home, we have considered alternatives to minimise risks to colleagues.

- 3.11 Our Teams have continued to adapt. This has included ensuring time for teams to spend face to face time all together, and in some cases teams have moved temporarily to full-time office work to complete specific pieces of work, where that has been seen as helpful, or to support new members of staff.
- 3.12 Many regional meetings are still held virtually and we are moving towards having the technology widely available for hybrid virtual / face-to-face meeting.

Next steps

- 3.13 Where there are reported concerns about the operation of hybrid working arrangements, these are mainly centred on the ability of customers (including elected members) to directly contact staff members.
- 3.14 We propose trying to improve the experience of our customers in the following ways, in addition to asking the Committee to agree this redrafted Policy:
- Concerns around contactability / communication appear to be focused on specific areas and potentially made worse because of existing staff shortages. Like many other Councils, we are experiencing recruitment difficulties in certain areas, partly driven by public sector pay restraint. We will work with managers in those areas to support them to recruit suitable staff or reorganise staffing resources and put processes in place to update customers in a timely fashion.
 - We will reinforce key messages about the expectations on staff. For example, we will use mechanisms such as Hyndsight to highlight good practice around Smart Working, such as where teams have organised their time smartly to help complete significant pieces of work.
 - The Customer Contact Manager is joining the Smart Working strategy group and we will focus on customer service generally over the coming months.
 - Our ICT team is looking at our telephony systems and we hope to direct desk phone extension numbers through to network profiles. This will then allow people to phone someone's extension and experience no difference in the call, regardless of where the member of staff is working. Again, if they are out on a site visit, then they will not be immediately contactable by telephone, but this is no different to pre-hybrid working.
- 3.15 The proposed Flexible Working Policy strengthens our guidance around hybrid working. It has been agreed by Management Team and Trade Unions.
- 3.16 There has been some reorganisation to other sections, grouping these together more logically. This should make it easier to navigate given that it is a lengthy document.
- 3.17 A Scrutiny item is scheduled for March 2023 to review the operation of the Smart Working Strategy.

4. Alternative Options considered and Reasons for Rejection

- 4.1 The updating of this policy is one of the actions to support the agreed Smart Working Strategy.

5. Consultations

- 5.1 Management Team, the Smart Working Strategy Group and JNCC have all been consulted during this process.

6. Implications

Financial implications (including any future financial commitments for the Council)	None
Legal and human rights implications	None
Assessment of risk	None
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 previously.

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

- 7.1 Smart Working Strategy – agreed at [Cabinet](#) 9 February 2022