

REPORT TO:		Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee	
DATE:		16 March 2023	
PORTFOLIO:		Cllr Joyce Plummer - Resources	
REPORT AUTHOR:		Kirsten Burnett, Head of Policy and OD	
TITLE OF REPORT:		Smart Working Strategy – review of progress	
EXEMPT REPORT (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A)	No	Not applicable	
KEY DECISION:	No	If yes, date of publication:	

1. Purpose of Report

The Committee has asked to review progress on the Smart Working Strategy which was implemented in February 2022. This report will:

- outline current working arrangements;
- explain future plans to deliver the Smart Working Strategy; and
- consider the wider context around working trends.

The Smart Working Strategy Group welcomes suggestions from the Committee to help inform future work.

2. Background to our introduction of home / hybrid working

2.1 The March 2020 lockdown

After the onset of the covid-19 pandemic, the Council, in common with many organisations, had no choice but to adapt to conducting some work remotely. All of our employees had previously worked all their working week from a work location, with only rare exceptions: for example, 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.

In March 2020, with the first lockdown, Council staff had to rapidly adapt to various new ways of working. A few examples are listed below:

- Our Waste and Parks teams implemented different travel arrangements to minimise close contact;
- Our Cemetery staff changed how they dealt with paperwork and bookings and ensured that funeral services were conducted in line with covid-19 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.

The clear instruction from the Prime Minister and subsequent regulations required many of our staff to stay at home. Furlough was not available in the public sector in any case and there were still existing or new work demands. We quickly provided the ICT equipment and infrastructure to enable people to work from home and access networks remotely, meaning that staff were able to continue working. People willingly turned their spare rooms or dining areas into office spaces, alongside coping with children doing their schoolwork remotely, or shielding themselves. Despite high levels of fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, our staff ensured that we could continue to deliver services and the Council worked closely with community groups to support residents.

New ways of keeping in touch became the norm, via virtual meetings, MS Teams chats and calls, and use of mobile phones. Homeworking was a crucial element in keeping services running, as well as enabling democratic processes to continue. This helped make our workplaces safer for those staff who needed to attend.

The Government's instruction to work from home remained in place for over 15 months, to July 2021.

2.2 Initial lifting of the work from home guidance

In July 2021, when the government's working from home guidance was lifted¹, 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.

In July 2021, a working group was set up to look at future working arrangements. This included:

- the Leader of the Council;
- the Portfolio Holder for HR;
- the Leader of the Conservative group (now Deputy Leader);
- a further Labour member and a further Conservative member;
- 2 Unison representatives;
- the Head of Policy and OD; and
- the Head of ICT.

Elected members on this group made a decision on 7 September 2021 to recommend retaining hybrid working into the future, and asked that officers should work with Trade Unions on the policies and practices required to make this work effectively. As covid-19 restrictions were relaxed in Autumn 2021, we moved to a position whereby staff began returning to the workplace for 2 or 3 days each week.

2.3 Reintroduction of Government work from home instruction

The rise in cases due to the Omicron variant meant that, in December 2021, the Government once again asked people to work from home where possible² and we followed this. Once that instruction was

¹ [Coronavirus: Returning to work - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/library/research-briefings/briefing/snippets/2021-07-27-coronavirus-returning-to-work)

² <https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiCrfPi3fT8AhUCXcAKHenXDfsQFnoECCYQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fuk-59632424&usq=AOvVaw1RRA8fzJubclNUkgfJwh9w>

lifted again in January 2022, we asked staff to come in 2 or 3 days a week as a minimum. There was still legal guidance around working safely for businesses to follow: the use of hybrid working allowed us to maintain the recommended social distance. It also, in many cases, enabled people to work even when self-isolating, as this was also still a legal requirement.

2.4 Cabinet approval for Smart Working Strategy

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.

In seeking to continue to offer hybrid options, the Council was, and remains, in line with other local authorities and many other organisations.

Recognising that this would be work in progress, and to refine and adapt to take full advantage of the opportunities offered, a Smart Working Strategy group has continued to meet regularly. This includes 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. More recently we have been joined by the Customer Contact Manager.

2.5 Public health guidance since April 2022

The public health guidance changed in April 2022, finally lifting formal restrictions.

People are still advised to work from home if they can where they have symptoms of respiratory illness or a positive covid-19 test³.

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. While covid-19 has been a significant cause of sickness absence, most people have only taken a couple of days off work, because the capability to work from home has given them the flexibility to work safely and in line with their fitness to work. Where staff cannot work from home, but have felt well despite having covid-19 or symptoms, we have considered alternatives to minimise risks to colleagues, such as lone working outdoors.

Our teams have continued to adapt to new ways of working. This has included ensuring time for teams to spend face to face time all together. 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.

Many regional meetings are still held virtually and we now have the technology widely available for hybrid virtual / face-to-face meetings.

2.6 Investment in technology

The necessary move to homeworking for many staff required a significant investment in technology, with around £250k capital and revenue invested across the following areas: laptops; mobile telephony; remote working solution software; total Security Suite for Firewall; PC webcams; increased internet feed; Contact Centre Remote Agent; remote worker desk phone access and upgraded firewalls. Some of this was allocated to covid-19 funding provided for this purpose.

³ [People with symptoms of a respiratory infection including COVID-19 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/people-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection-including-covid-19)

3. Wider context and research

The UK has seen a major shift in patterns of hybrid and remote working which were brought in rapidly to allow many staff to continue working productively, while protecting the NHS and saving lives.

Organisations are still adapting and learning and finding what works best, and it is likely that research and models of good practice will continue to emerge and develop. We will consider these and apply lessons to our own organisation where relevant. This section of the report gives a flavour of some of the research and background data available to date which is relevant to the Council.

The recent LGA Workforce Survey⁴ outlines common recruitment difficulties throughout the sector. We recognise and share some of these at Hyndburn. For example, the report states that more than half of county, district and single tier respondents said they were experiencing difficulties recruiting planning officers and 36% were having problems retaining them. 45% of councils which run environmental health services were having difficulties recruiting environmental health officers. This very much mirrors our own experience.

The report goes on to say that the most common response (actioned by one in ten) was to offer flexible working. Of those taking actions in response, over a quarter said they considered flexible working to be the most effective one.

Public sector salaries have for many years now risen at well below inflation levels, with some key roles now struggling to compete with salaries on offer in the private sector. We have always had a good overall employee offer beyond pay, and the option for suitable roles to have an element of hybrid working has been seen as way to attract candidates. It is now the norm to see hybrid or remote working listed in adverts for professional local authority roles.

People Management magazine reports⁵ on a recent report by Hays, which found that more than half (56%) of employees are willing to accept a lower paid job in exchange for better work-life balance. A third (33%) consider this to be the most 'crucial consideration' when looking for a job.

A report to the UK Parliament⁶ in October 2022 notes that hybrid working has increased since the pandemic guidance instructed workers to 'work from home', and reports how the Government is looking to 'make flexible working the default', with a proposal to allow employees to request flexible working from day 1 of their employment. It also notes that:

- Before the pandemic, remote and hybrid working had been increasing, with about 1 in 10 working at least one day at home and around 1 in 20 working mainly from home. After pandemic restrictions had been lifted, in September 2022, around 1 in 5 (22%) of the UK workforce had worked at least one day from home and around 1 in 8 (13%) worked exclusively from home.
- 80% of employees who worked from home because of the pandemic prefer a hybrid model. Employer surveys range between a quarter and, in a CIPD survey⁷ in June 2021, 63% reporting that they intend to introduce or expand hybrid working to some degree.

⁴ [LG Workforce Survey 2022 - Final for Publication - Tables Hard Coded.pdf \(local.gov.uk\)](#)

⁵ <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1810688/work-life-balance-becoming-important-pay>

⁶ [POST-PB-0049.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)

⁷ https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/flexible-working-lessons-from-pandemic-report_tcm18-92644.pdf

- Impacts on employees increased wellbeing and productivity levels, and reduced sickness absence. However, there were also concerns of people feeling disconnected from their work organisations and difficulties collaborating.
- There is limited data on productivity (presumably research will continue on this as time goes on but is largely limited to anecdotal information at present).
- Generally flexible working (of all kinds not just hybrid working) is reported in the public sector (42%) over the private sector (21%), although, at least pre-pandemic, working from home was much higher in the private sector with only 3% of public sector working doing this⁸.
- Key factors influencing which jobs were most likely to be carried out from home included whether tools and equipment were needed, the level of risk exposure to burns, infections and other hazards, the amount of face-to face interaction needed and the extent to which digital communication is a feature of the role.

4. Feedback on arrangements at HBC

4.1 Staff feedback

It is important to note that most of our staff do not use hybrid working. Their jobs require them to attend the workplace every day, or allow only occasional homeworking. Smart working in the context of those roles will be about looking at the design of jobs, and how better use of technology can assist in providing better and more efficient services.

Our Flexible and Hybrid Working Policy sets out that people who can work in a hybrid way should attend the workplace a minimum of 2 or 3 days a week, unless there are specific exceptions made due to individual circumstances and where their work does not suffer. Many people actually come in 4 days, or increase their days in the workplace when there is a new starter or a specific piece of work.

Members of the Smart Working Strategy Group come from various teams within the Council and have sought feedback from staff. We also have had the benefit of discussions with our Service Managers and Trade Unions. Staff who have continued to work in a hybrid way tell us the following:

- They believe they can be more productive completing certain tasks at home, particularly detailed reports and bid-writing, as it is easier to concentrate. This enables them to better fulfil the demands of their role and simply get more done.
- They find homeworking better for days where they have significant time attending Teams meetings, if they are based in an open-plan office. This is especially applicable where the discussion is confidential, as private meeting space in our office buildings can be limited.
- Staff generally recognise the need for flexibility – that some meetings need to be face to face for example, and plans on work location may need to change at short notice. However sometimes there is resistance to change and we will need to pay attention to this.
- Time spent in the office is often essential when there are new recruits in a team, or people are learning new tasks.
- Working relationships are enhanced when people have face-to-face meeting time, as well as unplanned chats or incidental social interactions on corridors, when passing through offices and in kitchens. This does take time out of the day and can interrupt tasks, so can sometimes seem unproductive, but most people recognise that it also brings real benefits.
- A reduced commute is welcomed by many and people feel more energised if they can avoid this on, say, a couple of days a week. Some of our staff travel significant distances and even some

relatively local staff face long delays due to traffic congestion. This option can help reduce stress and burnout.

- Regional meetings which would involve losing a couple of hours' productive time to travel and parking are more efficient remaining generally virtual. This also reduces business mileage costs.
- Although some regular meetings are continuing to be held virtually, many are switching between virtual and face to face, or offering hybrid options, given the benefits of both.
- There can be some resentment from staff who do not work in a hybrid way. This seems to be reducing as people become accustomed to new ways of working and as we improve communication but it is important that we recognise this and deal with any issues that arise.
- There are occasions when people have needed to work additional hours to complete time-critical work, and have said that the additional flexibility homeworking affords them has meant they have been happy to log on after normal hours to get the work done.
- There have been times when injury or illness would have meant someone taking sickness absence, but they have felt well enough to log on from home and complete some work, albeit using the flexi scheme facility to work a shorter day.
- Hybrid working has helped us support staff with a long-standing medical condition or disability, supporting us to be an inclusive employer. This has allowed people to keep working as they can manage their condition more easily.
- In difficult to recruit posts, where there is a shortage of even agency workers, the option to allow some homeworking has sometimes been an essential factor to being able to get anyone to undertake key roles.
- Our business continuity arrangements are strengthened by having a proportion of staff who can work from anywhere immediately, as they already have the required equipment to do this. This helps at times such as severe weather or when unexpected demands come outside of the normal working day.

4.2 Member feedback

All 35 elected members were sent a survey on 30 January 2023, in line with a recommendation from Management Review Committee. This asked members to share their experience of staff communication, in particular since the Committee meeting, as a number of the actions listed [later in this report](#) had taken place since that date. The survey was open for 3 weeks until 17 February 2023. There were only 6 responses. These showed:

- 3 people said they had had problems contacting staff because of hybrid working
- 1 of the 3 said this had improved since October 2022 because it was easier to make mobile phone contact.
- 5 of the 6 did not know how to use MS Teams to check if staff were available, or to use this to send direct messages or make calls. 4 indicated they would like further training on this.
- We asked members to specify where they were still experiencing difficulties, to support us in making further improvements. 3 people chose Planning and Building Control; one chose Member Services.

4.3 Customer contact

One of our key principles is that we will consider the needs of our customers, and that any flexible working arrangement (including hybrid working) should not impact negatively on service delivery. We have acted on feedback to work with areas where this appeared to be an issue and will continue to do this, supported by feedback from our recent survey of elected members.

In an organisation like ours, there can be no single measure of productivity, and indeed studies rely on self-reported measures when looking at industries other than, say, manufacturing. Our Smart Working

approach is designed to help people be more productive by working in an intelligent way, using any time at home for tasks requiring quiet concentration, with workplaces as a more collaborative space.

Case Study: Customer Contact Centre

While there were restrictions, a number of staff were asked to work from home to reduce numbers in the office, and the associated business risks of covid-19 transmission. The team was extremely busy with Hub call as well as advice on business and other grants which were made available. The Council gained national recognition for the speed with which it issued certain grants.

Now most of the team are almost fully office-based, but 3 experienced staff work from home at least 1 day a week and others work from home on an ad hoc basis. All can answer calls and emails at home and their performance is monitored daily (in terms of number of emails and calls). There is no difference in performance, save that some can be more productive in terms of emails when at home as there are fewer distractions.

From time to time the team needs to take on additional staff via agencies and the Manager notes that for skilled agency workers, the ability to work from home now appears to be a key expectation. Without this we may not be able to appoint the best people to cover gaps while we recruit to vacancies, and the service would suffer.

The table below shows data comparing the period October to December in 2019 (pre-pandemic) and in 2022. This is clearly just a snapshot, but shows a slight reduction in calls, but a significant increase in emails and thus overall enquiries. Staff numbers overall are the same and during this time there have been a number of people leave and new starters recruited and trained.

	Oct - Dec 2019	Oct - Dec 22
Number of calls taken by CCC	13506	12743
Number of emails sent to CCC	8157	14817
Total enquiries (calls plus emails)	21663	27560

Since the pandemic, which saw a huge influx of calls on all sorts of matters, the use of emails and online submission of documents has increased. Improvements to our digital channels mean that, for most people, it is easier for them to make contact and report issues, and speeds up any response. This has been the direction of travel for many years as we have sought to continue service delivery with reduced resources. We do of course recognise that while “digital first” is the preference, we must consider alternatives for those who struggle to access services this way. Our redesigned reception area in Scaitcliffe House allows people to use Council iPads, and where necessary our team will support residents with this.

4.4 Key messages from feedback

It is clear that the key factors needed to making a success of Smart Working include:

- Giving considered thought as to what work is done from home and what is done from the office, to increase productivity (doing tasks which benefit from uninterrupted time at home, and using the workspace for collaboration);
- Ensuring that regular face to face team and colleague contact happens, as this has a positive impact on collaborative working relationships and the wellbeing impact of social interaction;
- Improving the use of tools for communication and collaboration, (including elected members) and building on these to innovate and upskill;
- There needs to be trust and autonomy; performance should be judged on task completion and outcomes, recognising that this will depend on the individual and their role;
- Ensuring there are clear boundaries between work and personal time;

- Ensuring leaders and managers have the skills and capabilities needed to support good performance and manage and communicate with staff working in different ways;
- There needs to be consistency in the principles applied to the use of hybrid working, but with flexibility to suit the needs of different teams, which may change according to circumstances at the time;
- Being contactable – that there should be no additional difficulty getting in touch with someone because they are working from home on a given day; and
- Responding to any feedback from customers, staff and elected members about the impact of working practices.

5. Actions taken since adoption of Smart Working Strategy

Since February 2021, we have:

- Updated our Flexible Working Policy. It is now a Flexible and Hybrid Working Policy⁹ and includes additional guidance around homeworking and the expectations of staff and managers in managing hybrid working;
- Updated our Health and Safety requirements so that the Display Screen Assessments can be adapted for staff working partly away from the office;
- Reinforced the need to be contactable and worked closely with teams where this was a particular concern to ensure that mobile phones are available and that there are clear routes for members, colleagues and customers to request updates or report concerns. Examples are asking members to use generic planning@hyndburnbc.gov.uk for planning updates and the creation of online forms for reporting instances of smoke;
- Provided and planned further technology for hybrid meetings, so that participants can attend in person or virtually;
- Surveyed members to establish where further work is required to improve communication; and
- Built a section on the impact of Smart Working into service manager reports to Management Team, so that any issues or concerns can be discussed at a senior level.

5.1 Future Plans

- Continue to monitor ways of working and review policy and guidance as required;
- Continue to work closely with teams where difficulties are reported, such as elected members being able to contact staff;
- Consider the needs of the organisation to remain agile and responsive to deliver on corporate priorities, in particular the significant number of bid strategic projects which are underway and need to be regularly communicated;
- Continue to monitor wider research such as from CIPD¹⁰ and the LGA to understand the potential impact on recruitment and retentions, especially in hard to fill roles¹¹;
- Regularly communicate our Smart Working Principles and look at how to do this in a more visible way;
- Continue to reinforce the need for flexibility, given that human beings naturally settle in to new routines and can be resistant to change.
- Ensure we consider any impact on those who do not have access to hybrid working arrangements; and
- Use available customer satisfaction measures to understand any impact which may arise.

⁹ <https://democracy.hyndburnbc.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=141&MId=2751&Ver=4>

¹⁰ [Planning for hybrid working | CIPD](#)

¹¹ [LG Workforce Survey 2022 - Final for Publication - Tables Hard Coded.pdf \(local.gov.uk\)](#)