

**REPORT TO:** SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**DATE:** 30 AUGUST 2022

**TITLE:** REVIEW OF COUNCIL STAFF WORKING FROM HOME

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**RECOMMENDED that:**

- A** Committee notes the practices and changes implemented to enhance service delivery and effects on staff from introduction of homeworking during the pandemic and beyond
- B** Committee advises any further information required to review this matter in full

**BACKGROUND**

1. This report is made at the request of the Committee following the submission of a review request for its annual programme. The scrutiny review seeks:
  - a) To identify current home/office working patterns at the Council;
  - b) To identify what changes the Council has made to its processes to enable effective home working, and what is planned;
  - c) To understand whether the shift from home/hybrid working has had a positive or negative impact on:
    - i) Productivity
    - ii) Staff morale
    - iii) Residents' experience
  - d) To establish, where issues have arisen, what can be done.
2. In March 2019 and in direct response to the pandemic, the Council moved a significant proportion of its employees to work from home in line with government guidelines. The transition, like most organisations, happened

quickly and operated on a “just in time” principle to get the workforce operational from home as quickly as possible. Some teams such as the Customer Contact Centre have remained in the offices throughout the pandemic owing to the setup of their ways of working at that time not least of which included a significant proportion of customer facing activities.

3. Service delivery during the two-year covid pandemic period was monitored centrally by an internal recovery group of Officers and services were adapted to meet emerging requirements and run as close to normal where restrictions in place nationally allowed.
4. As restrictions have eased the Council has adopted a phased approach to returning to the office based on staff safety and evidenced increased productivity in some areas of the Council achieved through remote working practices. In May 2021, Council buildings began reopening in line with national guidance with several staff in each team returning to offices on a rostered basis in line with health and safety risk assessments; this created an informal trial of hybrid working.
5. From 4 April 2022 hybrid working was introduced for all staff whose roles allowed it, with working patterns introduced on a team-by-team basis to match business needs. This practice was reviewed during July 2022 after initial three-month period had completed.
6. A topic review submission for Council Staff Working from Home was approved by Scrutiny Committee on 12 July 2022. A review of Council performance data, complaints data and staff survey has been carried out to understand the impact home/hybrid working has had on the provision of council services.
7. Where issues have been identified these have been incorporated into relevant existing areas of work to resolve and improve upon processes in place.

## **ISSUES/PROPOSALS**

### **Working patterns**

8. A baseline hybrid working pattern of a 60/40 home/office split was set by the senior management board based on staff feedback and review of patterns used elsewhere via engagement with the East of England Local Government Association. Individual working patterns were set for 4 April onwards on a role-by-role basis, linked to business needs for the activities carried out. Many staff work on the 60/40 split but there are many teams who work 100 percent of the time on site, including facilities and customer services teams and peripatetic staff who may only spend 20 percent of their time office working owing to the inclusion of site work alongside home working. Some teams work on a rota basis meaning their patterns change each week to ensure contact with other team members across each month whilst maintaining continuity of service.

9. A review of these patterns was carried out in July 2022, with Assistant Directors reporting that patterns were working well and flexibility to change where workloads or priorities require it was used where required without issue.

### **Changes to processes**

10. The work of the coronavirus internal recovery Officer group to implement changes to processes following national working from home directives during covid pandemic have been cemented and built on during the past 6 months as more staff have returned to operational buildings for part of their working week. Several processes were digitised via online forms rather than as paper-based processes, including Housing Applications, and the Council's payroll and other processes, such as planning applications, were delivered through digital platforms remotely without impacting performance.
11. Usage statistics from the Council's customer relationship management system and website show that unique online transactions per day have increased by 50 percent since pre-pandemic levels as residents are now able to access more services online or via telephone than ever before. Take up of the Council's digital tenancy portal for housing tenants, and self-service for all residents has also increased.

### **Impact on Staff Morale**

12. An independent and confidential employee feedback survey was carried out as part of the Council's Accommodation review (the Accommodation Review was commenced in 2019 and has been adapted to include changes to ways of working following covid pandemic). The survey was distributed to the workforce including those absent from work. In the results of this survey employees reported significant sustained benefits when working at home, including work life balance and less distraction throughout the working day.
13. Work Life Balance was reported to have been impacted positively with many reporting increased mental wellbeing because of less stress, more quality time with family with parents at home when children return home from school and the ability to be able to prepare home cooked meals. Many employees reported that on balance working from home had a significant increase in how happy they have been throughout the period of the pandemic despite the uncertainty that surrounded them. Other benefits include more flexibility to the working day, more autonomy over workload, less absence from work either because from home they feel well enough to continue to work or as a direct result of not being in an office with germs circulating freely. Some reported enjoyment through embracing new process and technologies and the increased opportunity for online learning.
14. Several covid related support mechanisms were put in place for staff whilst working remotely and to ensure the return to the office was a positive experience, especially for staff who had been classified as vulnerable:
  - a) Those employees who received letters from the Government advising that they were considered as 'Clinically extremely vulnerable' and

advised to stay at home and 'shield' or 'self-isolate'; whilst some other employees were considered as vulnerable. When the lockdown eased and employees were able to return to the office, Human Resources referred over 80 employees to Harlow Occupational Health Service (HOHS) to seek advice and guidance about a return to the workplace including supporting those who needed to work safely out in the community. HOHS provided individual advice dependent on the employee's health and any medical conditions.

- b) When a return to the workplace was advised, the employee's reporting manager undertook a Coronavirus risk assessment based on the HOHS advice which was reviewed and updated as and when required. Human Resources constantly review sickness absence across the Council with line management to ensure the correct support is provided and referrals to HOHS are arranged where appropriate.
- c) Stress Assessments are also arranged with Health and Safety via Human Resources with support mechanisms in place.
- d) Health and Safety updated the required Display Screen Assessment (DSE) online assessment to enable employees to carry out the self-assessment either within the office or working from home, or for many employees both assessments were carried out. If required, Health and Safety followed these up with individuals.
- e) Weekly briefings and bulletins referred employees to support for mental health 'Every Mind Matters' campaign signposting employees to Every Mind Matter website and the NHS approved Mind Plan and in addition included information on Council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). The contract for EAP was rescoped in October 2021 and now offers free advice and support on numerous topics including stress and anxiety. Provided via Reward Gateway it has a Wellbeing Centre access which has information on Move – get active, Munch – healthy eating, Money – financial wellbeing and Mind – mental health. There are videos to explore within the platform.
- f) HR works with the Council's Public Health Improvement Practitioner to produce the 'Your Health & Wellbeing' newsletter produced by internal Communications. These newsletters give employees a wealth of information with regards wellbeing including to online courses, campaigns, challenges, free health checks, Mindfulness drop-in sessions, activities in Essex, healthy eating, and nutrition, raising awareness of issues etc.
- g) HR are currently arranging Well-being events for all employees at the Civic Centre in September and then the Latton Bush Centre in October/November. The aim being to ensure all employees have access to pop into one of the events. These events will give employees the opportunity to talk to experts from the NHS and Essex Wellbeing

Service for health checks and take part in bite size activities whilst also connecting with colleagues.

### **Impact on productivity**

15. The staff survey found that 61 percent of those who had worked remotely felt more productive during that time and 31 percent reported to have similar levels of productivity to working in the office. This is supported by the Coronavirus Internal Recovery Action Plans which show services continued to run, where restrictions allowed, without any negative impact despite majority of staff fully remote working.
16. Staff have also been supported remotely by changes to IT provisions which have been rolled out and support agile working, these include a new Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) telephone system, Zoom meetings and latterly Microsoft Teams video functionality to maintain good contacts with staff and the introduction of Office 365 and other internal IT infrastructure that will support the aspirations for future working practices.
17. Analysis of Performance Indicators (PIs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Council services since remote working was introduced due to covid pandemic show no negative impact on performance levels for teams where remote or hybrid working was in place. Performance in areas of both customer services for call waiting times and revenues and benefits teams was impacted by the increased demand on services due to the covid pandemic, by quarter 4 of 2021/22 the impact on KPIs for revenue and benefits services had improved to pre-pandemic levels of service. KPIs related to complaint response times were also impacted during covid pandemic and performance levels have not yet returned to target levels. This is due to increased numbers of complaints in relation to services not delivered via remote working.
18. Internal operational monitoring of team productivity supports an increase in productivity for day-to-day tasks, specifically reported within the Planning services
19. During the Coronavirus lockdown sickness absence decreased, working from home may have attributed to this decrease due to employees staying at home and feeling able to continue working and the fact that employees were working in isolation meant there was less chance of infections spreading as would be the case within an office environment. The year-on-year reports for sickness absence at Quarter 4 including short- and long-term absence per FTE (Full Time Equivalent) were 11.42 days (2019/20) prior to lockdown, reducing to 5.03 days (2020/21) with a slight increase up to 6.97 days (2021/22) with the hybrid return to work demonstrating that working from home has resulted in a 37 percent reduction, mostly on short term sickness absence levels when comparing 19/20 to 21/22.

## **Impact on Residents Experience**

20. Statistics show that the majority of resident contact to the Council via Customer Services teams is for Housing or Revenue and Benefits services. Analysis of customer enquiries and complaints received over the past two years shows that no specific complaints or enquiries have been received in relation to staff working patterns impacting residents experience of service delivery, nor has there been a significant impact in performance which would demonstrate an impact on resident experience of receiving services differently to previous working practices.

## **Conclusions/next steps**

21. The Council recognises the need to develop modern working practices to enable employees to maximize their performance and productivity to deliver the Council Plan, whilst maintaining a good work-life balance. In addition, modern technologies are making it easy to access information remotely, work from a variety of locations, whilst promoting a more joined up service. Hybrid working builds upon previous flexible working policies and supports a culture of working wherever, whenever, and however is most appropriate to get the work done.
22. The Council will continue to build on good practice and address issues that have arisen through introduction of hybrid working practices through several existing work streams. Our approach to this newer way of hybrid working links to the Council's vision to address the climate emergency, placing emphasis on the importance of sustainability and the health and wellbeing of both staff and the community. The benefits of improved work life balance, employee engagement and reduced travel make a direct contribution to this strategic priority.
23. Following the success of digitising process and interactions with residents the Council plans to convert further processes online using web-based forms which integrate with the Council's IT systems so that data can be taken from the forms directly into systems creating efficiencies in these processes and increasing turnaround times for some service delivery. This is currently being explored for licencing teams and will be addressed for all teams through a new Customer Services Strategy and Action Plan.
24. The Council's Tenant Engagement Strategy will be renewed in the Autumn of 2022; this will include a review of current processes to establish opportunities to build upon increased use of online channels for tenant engagement to streamline processes, whilst maintaining engagement and always mindful of the accessibility of digital channels to the demographic being served.
25. Staff wellbeing will continue to be prioritised by the Council and a programme of events to complement the monthly wellbeing newsletter for all staff and members will be developed. In the Autumn two Wellbeing days are planned for all staff, focussing on both health, physical and mental wellbeing.
26. The staff survey highlighted that IT issues were the most common challenge at the start of the covid pandemic for staff working remotely and work to improve

and enhance the changes made over the past two years will be further addressed through a new IT Strategy which will look at increasing IT resilience and increasing its use as a tool to work more flexibly and efficiently.

27. Although the nature of a substantial number of the roles within the Council cannot be classed as agile, there is considerable scope in many cases for some form of hybrid working recognising that all decisions regarding hybrid working will start from what provides the best possible outcomes and services for our residents, service users, customers, and stakeholders.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### **Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)**

None specific.

**Author: Andrew Bramidge, Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration**

### **Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)**

None specific.

**Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance**

### **Housing**

As contained in the report

**Author: Andrew Murray, Director of Housing**

### **Community Wellbeing**

As contained in the report.

**Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment**

### **Governance (Includes HR)**

As contained in the report.

**Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Support**

## **Appendices**

None.

## **Background Papers**

None.

## **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

DSE – Display Screen Assessment

EAP – Employee Assistance Programme

FTE – Full Time Equivalent

HOHS – Harlow Occupational Health Service

KPI – Key Performance Indicator

PI – Performance Indicator

VOIP – Voice Over Internet Protocol