



CABINET – 14TH OCTOBER 2020

SUBJECT: FLEXIBLE WORKING

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION AND CORPORATE SERVICES

1. PURPOSE

The attached report was considered by the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee on 29th September 2020. The report sought the views of the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee of a more formal approach to flexible working that builds upon the progress made in respect of working in a flexible manner throughout the lockdown prior to its consideration and determination at Cabinet.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Scrutiny Committee were advised that because of the speed and nature of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Council was required to equip and train a significant proportion of its workforce to work and to provide services remote from their usual places of work and, in many cases, from home.
- 2.2 While the transformation to this new model of service delivery happened at a significant pace, the technology platforms that have formed the foundations of remote working have proven to be intuitive and stable.
- 2.3 Some sections of the workforce have been operating remotely and very effectively since the beginning of lockdown and, over time, further services have been enabled and brought back online with much less of a reliance on buildings, premises and travel.
- 2.4 This has enabled many services to the public to be delivered safely and continuously and for the Council's employees to manage multiple aspects of their professional and personal lives in a way that has brought about a much greater balance than was possible previously.
- 2.5 Of course, not everyone has found the isolated nature of working remotely a positive experience and the results of the Flexible Working survey provide a healthy note of caution. Whatever the Council does from here on in, must be truly flexible and meet the differing needs of its employees, as well as reducing any operating costs associated with service delivery.

2. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE COMMENTS

- 2.1 The scrutiny committee received evidence from Mrs L Dallimore of Unison on the report and noted that the Trade Unions are committed to working with the Authority on the proposals and her thanks to senior officers for their engagement.
- 2.2 Mrs Dallimore highlighted several issues that Unison wished members to be aware of when considering the proposals. She asked that Members consider who the beneficiaries of flexible working would be and how will the additional energy costs to staff that are home working can be mitigated. That further consideration of both the benefits alongside the drawbacks needs more consideration. The availability of staff working from home with clear boundaries put in place and the importance of establishing a culture that is embedded into the organisation. The differences between staff that carry out roles that are public facing and cannot be flexible was highlighted and how the flexible working hours system will work with this proposal. At present there is confusion and staff have been told they have to have managers approval to work beyond their contracted hours. This will mean many fundamental changes to many personnel policies and it was suggested that pilot schemes be established before policy changes are put forward alongside Equality Impact Assessments.
- 2.3 Members agreed that management support is needed for staff and by colleagues supporting each other. It is important for staff to have a sense of belonging and regular contact via team meetings and informal methods, to ensure appropriate safeguarding.
- 2.4 The committee were advised that this is the start of the process with a lot of work left to do and it should be noted that this is how the Authority has worked over the past 6 months. The views of trade unions are important for this process and it is appreciated that one size doesn't fit all but the overall aim is to make the organisation fit for purpose going forward. Further reports and policies will follow and scrutiny will be involved receiving reports and policies. The staff survey indicated that the majority who responded were in favour of a 50/50 split of home and office-based work going forward. However, it was important to note that flexible working also includes working from other locations such as other council offices, or partners organisations.
- 2.5 Members were assured that that managers have had the message that regular contact with staff must take place. The personnel manager has met regularly with the trade unions and there has been discussion on how authority and trade unions can work together to offer emotional support to staff. Members agreed that it was important to consider potential impact of working from home of those who may be isolated or perhaps at risk of domestic abuse. The need to consider how career paths and morale will be impacted was also mentioned.
- 2.6 The scrutiny committee asked if plans to close office were premature and there is a need to ensure that the pros and cons were thoroughly considered first. Members asked if consideration has been given to which buildings may be sold off and the impact of communities if office staff are no longer using local shops and facilities. Members were assured that there are no plans at present to sell off any buildings and we would need to be sure this approach was working, and further reports would need to come forward with any detailed proposals.

- 2.7 Members also asked for assurance that the public were considered as part of this proposal, with 25% still not having digital skills there is still a need for them to access services. The committee were advised that this has happened over the past six months, services have been maintained and the public supported. Members were also reminded of the customer and digital strategy approved last year this has given us a flexible customer service and this flexible working approach would enhance this allowing us to provide a 24/7 service.
- 2.8 The scrutiny committee appreciated that this is the start of the process and felt it was important that Members are kept fully informed and consulted going forward. The committee would like to see a report in January 2021 that will include details on the issues raised by staff in the consultation and highlighted by the trade unions on the impact upon staff, including their mental health with appropriate Equality Impact Assessments. The report to also include the potential impact on communities if offices close.

3. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 Therefore, the Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee recommend by the majority present that Cabinet approve the following recommendations as detailed in the attached officers report and for the reasons contained therein: -
- 3.2 Cabinet acknowledge the benefits of the flexible working arrangements that have supported service delivery across the council since March 2020.
- 3.3 Cabinet agree to formally adopt the flexible working principles set out at appendix 1 of the report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee as a core principle for supporting service delivery.
- 3.4 Cabinet delegates authority to the Head of Paid Service, in consultation with the relevant Cabinet Member, to determine on a service by service basis the optimum approach to flexible working and accommodation requirements.
- 3.5 Cabinet note the need to consider how the current flexi system can be aligned with and support the principles of flexible working through ongoing discussions with trade unions.
- 3.6 Cabinet note the potential investment associated with the deployment of flexible working in relation to it equipment and furniture as well as the potential savings that can be generated through the rationalisation of buildings and reductions in other operating expenditure.
- 3.7 Cabinet agrees to receive additional reports, as required, to agree funding and any associated hr and it policy changes that might be required.
- 3.8 Cabinet endorse the proposal to set aside an initial one-off sum of £500k to be funded from capital earmarked reserves to ensure that the council can respond proactively in the short-term to commence the roll-out of new flexible ways of working.
- 3.9 Cabinet endorses the development of an appropriate training and development programme for managers and staff to ensure the benefits of flexible working are maximised
- 3.10 Cabinet note the additional recommendation made that the Policy and

Resources Scrutiny Committee hold a special meeting in order to consider in detail the principles of flexible working and its impact on staff and service users and communities.

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Appendices: Report to Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committee 29th September 2020 – Agenda Item 7