

Subject: REMOTE WORKING POLICY - UPDATE

Meeting and Date: General Purposes Committee – 21 March 2022

Report of: Nadeem Aziz, Head of Paid Service

Classification: UNRESTRICTED

Purpose of the report: To provide an update on remote working since the adoption of the Remote Working policy on 19 July 2021

Recommendation: To note the report

1. Summary

1.1 This report seeks to update members on the application of the Remote Working policy, since it was approved by General Purposes Committee on 19 July 2021.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 On 23 March 2020, in response to the COVID 19 pandemic, the Government announced the first lockdown, ordering people to “stay at home” and to “work from home” where possible. These requirements became law on 26 March 2020.

2.2 In line with these requirements the Council required staff to work from home, in cases where their role could be conducted remotely.

2.3 In cases where an individual’s role could not be conducted remotely, the Council put in place other measures to keep employees safe.

2.4 As part of the Council’s response to the COVID 19 pandemic, a number of Recovery Workstreams were identified. One of these was the Organisational Recovery Group, whose purpose was to identify how the Council’s workforce could be more flexible, agile, and effective. As part of this work, a policy was developed, and the Council adopted the Remote Working Policy which was approved by General Purposes Committee on 19 July 2021. It took effect immediately.

2.5 Since the implementation of this policy, there have been several changes to Government advice and the Council has continued with remote working. Now the restrictions have been removed, the Council continues to work in a hybrid fashion.

2.6 Although the requirement to isolate ended on 24 February 2022, with a complete withdraw of all COVID measures planned for 1 April 2022, the Council is encouraged to remain cautious and consider their duty of care to employees going forward.

2.7 The ability to work remotely, provides reassurance to employees that their risk of contracting COVID whilst at work is minimised through enabling people who have symptoms to remain working from home.

3. Benefits of remote / hybrid working

3.1 In an employer survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), April 2021, 63% of employers said that they planned to introduce or expand the use of hybrid working to some degree, combining time in the workplace with time at home, depending on the needs of the job, the individual and the team, team working practices and business need.

3.2 The highlights of the survey revealed:

- (a) Collaboration and upskilling have been boosted
- (b) Wellbeing has increased

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- (c) Inclusion is improving
 - (d) Homeworking is not without distractions

3.3 In relation to the Council, over the period where most employees were required to work solely at home, it was noted:

- (a) Sickness absence - Give or take the fluctuations due to the pandemic that correlate with covid absence, sick absence has remained stable at pre-pandemic levels, there was a slight reduction during the working from home period.
- (b) Council Key Performance Indicators - Since the pandemic began and homeworking became a Government requirement (where possible), the Council has seen no unexpected dips in performance or detrimental effects on service provision that would be directly linked to home working. Any changes we have seen in service provision have been largely due to the impacts of COVID 19, for example, no access to properties for repairs, delays in materials, contractor illness, etc. or due to the large-scale change in the waste contract and national shortage of HGV drivers.

The overall performance for the year ending 31 March 2021, saw a steady state and the year to date shows an increase in the number of green indicators and a reduction in the number of red indicators.

3.4 With some normality returning, the Council has started to see a move from employees wanting to work from home all the time to that of a more hybrid / agile approach. This is now supported by the Council's investment in technology solutions to allow attendance in a remote capacity at "in person meetings" in the Council Chamber, offering a truly hybrid approach to working.

3.5 In the latest response from managers when asked about the preferences of their staff, excluding those in a role that cannot be carried out from home, the Council has seen around 75% of employees wanting to return to the offices and work in a hybrid manner, compared to a complete remote working model.

3.6 This figure is encouraging and contributes to the Council having a flexible and agile workforce, that can respond to, and maintain business performance, in times where office working is not possible.

3.7 It is crucial to recognise and understand that hybrid working is now a benefit that people will actively seek in a job role. Research shows that the pandemic has had such a significant effect on employees' priorities, that they would forgo a 10% pay rise in favour of retaining the option to work remotely or in a hybrid way.

3.8 In the same survey, 83% of workers would now be more likely to apply for a position if it offered a flexible way of working. This aids the Councils recruitment and retention strategy, in a period where recruitment is already challenging and is likely to get more so.

3.9 With Dover's model clearly pointing towards a hybrid flexible working approach, and given the other employee benefits on offer, including the recently approved salary sacrifice car lease scheme, the Council is in a strong position to become an Employer of Choice and will continue to attract and retain talent.

4. **Further Considerations**

It is recognised that managing staff in the new environment can cause challenges, in particular:

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- It is harder to pick up on how staff are feeling when working remotely. In a remote environment, managers need to create opportunities to talk about non-work issues and actively encourage openness to talk about wellbeing.
 - Loss of boundaries – in time and place – could lead to working longer hours. In addition to longer hours, the temptation to work without taking breaks could also be a challenge.
 - Brainstorming and problem-solving may be particularly difficult because some of the shared ideas, energy and creativity is lost.
 - Managing performance

To recognise the challenges faced the Council, in conjunction with the HR team where necessary, will:

- Reintroduce business plans, which will set out the vision and key objectives of the department.
- Implement a revised personal development procedure, enabling individuals and the Council to understand performance issue and employees' aspirations and training needs.
- Design and deliver management training programmes to increase skill and confidence of the managers in dealing with employee performance and absence.
- Ensure all communication channels available to customers are monitored and, where necessary, improved to enhance the customer experience.

5. Identification of Options

5.1 To note the report

5.2 To refuse to note the report and ask the Head of Paid Service to take some other action

6. Evaluation of Options

6.1 None

7. Corporate Implications

7.1 Comment from Section 151 Officer: The report has been passed for comment by the Section 151 Officer and Accountancy. There are no funding issues encompassed within this policy update therefore we have no further comments to make. (LS)”

7.2 Comment from Solicitor to the Council: The Solicitor to the Council has been consulted in the preparation of this report and has no further comments to make.

7.3 Comment from Equalities Officer: This report does not specifically highlight any equality implications however in discharging their duties members are required to comply with the public sector equality duty as set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/149>

7.4 Comment from Climate Change Officer: Hybrid/remote working reduces the need to commute resulting in a reduction of vehicle emissions.

8. Appendices

8.1 none

Officer contact: Louise May, Head of Governance & HR