

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Staffing Committee – 10 July 2023

Report Title

Working Location Update

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

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Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

None

Report Summary

This report provides an update on the impact of employee working arrangements following the introduction of the Hybrid Working Policy in October 2021.

Recommendations

1. That Staffing Committee note the review of the Council's working Location arrangements.
2. That Staffing Committee approve the implementation of the revised Working Location Policy.

List of Appendices Included

Appendix 1 Working Location Policy

Background Papers

[Year Ahead Delivery Plan](#)

[Chartered Institute of Personnel Development \(CIPD\) Planning for Hybrid Working Staffing Committee meeting 21 September 2021](#)

[Workforce Plan](#)

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

None

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public
No

Working Location Update

1. Background

- 1.1 When Council employees first moved to Riverside House in late 2011, desk ratios averaged six desks to every ten employees due to the size of the workforce at the time.
- 1.2 During the COVID lockdowns approximately half of the Council workforce were forced to work from home due to the restrictions and do so using technology to interact with customers, colleagues and access information remotely to deliver Council services.
- 1.3 Since the start of the pandemic, the Council has seen over 2000 new starters join the Council, equivalent to 41% of the workforce. Of these, around 500 are office-based staff.
- 1.4 Prior to the lifting of lockdown restrictions, a new Hybrid Working Policy was approved in September 2021 but not implemented fully until March 2022 when Covid-restrictions were lifted. This focused on delivering the best possible services for residents, whilst also recognising the benefits of staff working more flexibly.
- 1.5 Staffing Committee requested a review of hybrid working arrangements after six months of operational use. This paper sets out the findings of the review following twelve months of use across the Council. The review has been delayed so that a more detailed assessment of desk requirements across the Council estate could be undertaken with a particular focus on capacity requirements for Riverside House.
- 1.6 The title of the Policy has also been changed from 'Hybrid Working' to 'Working Location' in order to better reflect the range of options for staff when attending a work location within the Borough.

2. Key Issues

Review undertaken

- 2.1 When approving the Hybrid Policy in September 2021, Staffing Committee requested that a review of the arrangements was undertaken after six months of operational implementation and use. Covid restrictions were fully lifted in March 2022, which is when the full implementation of the current Hybrid Policy was undertaken, although many front-line services had continued to be delivered to residents throughout the pandemic.
- 2.2 This meant that the policy review was due back to Staffing Committee in the Autumn of last year, however this has been delayed whilst a more detailed analysis of the desk requirements was undertaken with a particular focus on Riverside House.
- 2.3 Approximately half of the workforce were forced to work from home during the Covid restrictions and lockdowns and although services were maintained through the provision of new technology and tools such as Microsoft Teams, some staff reported feeling isolated, with their mental health and wellbeing being impacted as a result. Younger employees who commenced employment with the Council in their first full-time role since leaving education, also reported that their experience was negatively

impacted – they also reported feeling isolated and missed out of the informal learning experiences from colleagues that in-person contact would have brought. In addition, building professional working relationships and starting out in a new role were highlighted as being adversely affected.

- 2.4 As the Council returned to more normal ways of working, clarity began to be sought by both managers and individual employees, in terms of expectations around their working arrangements. This included queries about the number of days that they would need to be based from work locations across the borough, to enable them to provide the best possible services to residents, whilst still making use of the technologies and new ways of working that Covid restrictions brought about.
- 2.5 From the lifting of restrictions the Council's Strategic Leadership Team (SLT) and Wider Leadership Team (WLT) have focused on being visible to all stakeholders, both internal and external, providing leadership and supporting staff in and across the borough.
- 2.6 Many Council services require face to face delivery, in order to deliver best outcomes for residents and customers. Social Care & Early Help within Children and Young People's services continue to provide face to face support for children and families within the localities of Rotherham, which helps them to build trust and develop strong, lasting relationships and makes it easier in certain circumstances easier to make connections and find common ground. Meetings are often more focused and productive as there are fewer distractions and it is easier to encourage engagement. The return of face-to-face meetings within the Contact Team is an example of where the benefits of direct interaction between children and parent(s) is essential in the development of building relationships and parenting.
- 2.7 As part of continually improving services, the HR Consultancy Team has provided increased face to face working with internal customers in line with their business needs, where physical attendance ensures improved or more efficient contact and communication. For example, providing support and advice in person in the education settings, where due to the nature and complexity of cases it is the preferred option of schools that these meetings are undertaken on site face to face. Another example is at Hellaby depot where a physical presence is more beneficial on a regular basis, to work together on high volume, detailed information, team building, whilst at the same time improving and building on our customer relationships.
- 2.8 Within Adult Social Care, the Access Team returned to office-based working at the point that covid restrictions were lifted, on a rotational basis, which improved case discussion and team working. Colleagues are based at Riverside House and undertake face to face meetings with service users within Council buildings. The Integrated Discharge team were on site at Rotherham Trust throughout the pandemic and this continues to be the working practice. Localities teams undertake face to face meetings with adults and their carers and mirror the practice applied within CYPS.
- 2.9 The review that has been undertaken, has considered feedback from the Employee Opinion Survey of 2021, performance outcomes and further feedback emerging from both service events and team meetings, in addition to discussions that have taken place with elected members and the Trade Unions.

- 2.10 Also feeding into the review have been the monthly assessments of occupancy levels across the Council's workplaces. In Riverside House, occupancy levels are averaging circa 40%. However, it should be caveated that occupancy checks are undertaken on single days and may not include those staff who are using meeting rooms or who use the workplace as a touchdown space when working at other locations within the Borough.
- 2.11 From the combined feedback, it is clear that there is the need to ensure an ongoing balance between ensuring that first and foremost, the Council is able to deliver high quality, effective services to residents, making better use of its operational assets, with having a degree of flexibility that many staff appreciate.

Benefits of working from a broader range of locations

- 2.12 Management of employees working to the principles of the Working Location Policy requires clear, open communication from both the manager and the individual employee. Whilst a more flexible working location model can facilitate a happy and engaged workforce, more efficient workplaces with lower operational costs and an improved organisational culture, it can create challenges in terms of working collaboratively and blur the lines between work and home life.
- 2.13 Regular engagement is essential to managing employees working autonomously requiring frequent communication through well-established channels. Some managers have expressed concern over the lack of in-person interaction with staff and the detrimental impact this may have on team building, staff support and service delivery.
- 2.14 A key benefit of having more flexibility in terms of working locations is to provide an engaged, diverse and skilled workforce who feel empowered to adopt new ways of working to meet the needs of all customers. National research undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), indicates that 59% of employees feel they are more productive working under these arrangements and 62% feel communications and the culture of the organisation has improved.
- 2.15 The 2021 employee opinion survey results support CIPD's findings, showing an increase in a range of indicators and overall employee engagement went up to 71%, 3% higher than in 2019. Engagement is a good indicator of how connected employees are to the organisation and in helping it to achieve its goals.

Employee Opinion Survey Question	2021	Difference from 2019
I am able to organise and prioritise my work in order to get jobs done on time	80%	-1
I understand the One Rotherham Values	76%	+2
I have a clear understanding of the standard of performance expected of me	91%	+2
My line manager trusts me to do my job properly	93%	+4
I am satisfied with my physical working environment	75%	+13

I am able to strike the right balance between my work and home life	71%	+6
I have enough information to do my job well	80%	+4
Information is available to me so I can keep up to date about what the Council is doing	76%	+8

- 2.16 In addition to staff engagement, the current recruitment market is increasingly candidate-led and for some roles, more flexibility in working location can be a key attraction strategy which also helps to widen the geographical talent pool the Council can recruit from (where the role can be performed with a mix of office attendance and homeworking).
- 2.17 Increased use of technology that facilitates staff to undertake their duties from a large number of working locations across the borough, including from within the heart of communities, potentially provides an opportunity to reassess service operations and how services are delivered to residents in their locality.

Key considerations

- 2.18 Feedback from the Employee Opinion Survey and from engaging directly with colleagues across the Council has highlighted issues with regard to feelings of isolation and a lack of support. This aligns with a number of reviews conducted by CIPD and other organisations that highlight the risks that can be associated with homeworking, including mental health issues, an inability to separate work from home life and inadequate support from colleagues. This can be a particular issue with new starters to an organisation who risk losing opportunities to meet colleagues face to face and orientate themselves with the culture of an organisation. Longer term, a lack of inclusivity due to working location arrangements may also present risks of a two-tiered workforce; where those who are not regularly attending the office may feel they have less opportunities for career development and advancement.
- 2.19 During the pandemic, the Council saw reduced levels of sickness absence in directorates where officers worked predominantly from home (Finance & Customer Services and Assistant Chief Executive's). The reduced absence levels continued throughout 2020 but began to increase again during the second year of the pandemic, with absence rates returning to pre-pandemic levels by the beginning of 2022. The reduced absence levels across the circa 50% of the workforce that were able to work from home was more than offset by increased absence levels in frontline services, resulting in the corporate absence rate increasing from 10.55 days lost per FTE in Q4 19/20 to a peak of 13.91 days lost per FTE in Q1 22/23. The Council is currently seeing sustained decreases in absence levels as the impact of Covid and the additional support to managers and staff in dealing with absence in a consistent and supportive way.
- 2.20 The first principle of the Working Location Policy is ensuring the Council delivers the best possible services for residents. Teams need to ensure they meet regularly to maximise opportunities for collaboration and creative problem solving, within and across teams. Although this can be done virtually, feedback from many services has highlighted the value of regular face to face interactions and the benefits this brings. All

managers should ensure Working Location practices are regularly reviewed alongside their teams to ensure performance is optimised.

- 2.21 With the introduction of Hybrid Working arrangements, there has been increased scrutiny from stakeholders and customers on the potential impact on Council performance and a range of performance measures have been reviewed, particularly where a comparison can be drawn to the same performance measure pre-pandemic.
- 2.22 Whilst performance activity remains strong and milestones are being met on the whole, perceptions and confidence of stakeholders is important and particularly, connecting the visibility and delivery of the Council and council staff is equally important to ensure continued confidence.
- 2.23 At the introduction of the current Hybrid Working Policy, the decision was taken not to update the contractual workplace location for staff that can work from alternative locations, including home, for a proportion of the week to retain the requirement to attend the workplace as and when required due to business need. To mitigate against any implied contractual term due to custom and practice, the Policy states within the management and employee responsibility sections, that any working arrangement is subject to regular review depending on business need and can be changed.
- 2.24 During the development process for the current Hybrid Working Policy and since launch, regular discussions have taken place with South Yorkshire Local Authorities to share their approach and insights on implementing a more flexible working location proposal. Working Location arrangements in other local authority settings have also been reviewed as part of the lessons learned activity.
- 2.25 Other council in the neighbouring areas have instigated similar arrangements.

Impact on Asset Management Plans

- 2.26 Work has been undertaken to assess the impacts on the Council's estate strategy, including revisions to desk requirements within Riverside House and an assessment of how the space could be used differently.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

Discontinue the Hybrid Working Policy

- 3.1 Hybrid Working arrangements could be discontinued across services with employees returning to pre COVID working arrangements. This would increase staff visibility, facilitate connection, collaboration, creativity and help build relationships in the office.
- 3.2 However, it is not recommended that this approach is taken due to the continued delivery against the Council Plan milestones and activities and the potential negative impacts it would have on employee engagement and productivity. There may also be negative impacts on the recruitment and retention of employees, particularly in the current competitive recruitment market. In turn, this would impact upon the Council's aspiration to become an employer of choice and to increase the diversity of its workforce (Council Plan actions OCO5a, b & c).

There is a recognition that there are benefits to being able to deliver Council services from a wide range of council locations, including from within the heart of the borough's communities.

Maintain current approach

- 3.3 The current application of the Hybrid Working Policy is overseen by Directorate Leadership Teams and has had a positive impact on staff engagement, which is reflected in the employee opinion survey results.
- 3.4 No grievances or disciplinaries related to the current Policy have occurred and Trade Union Representatives have not raised any issues or concerns.
- 3.5 To allow maximum flexibility for managers and staff, the current managerial approval process and six-monthly review of working location arrangements could be maintained and oversight be undertaken by the Workforce Strategy Board, reporting into the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT periodically) and to Staffing Committee as required.
- 3.6 However, this option is not recommended because it is recognised that further clarity is required on the expectations of the Policy, given feedback from both managers and individuals. Visibility of staff delivering services and connecting to communities and each other remains the primary focus of the Policy, yet in its current form, it does not provide this clarity.

Review and revise the Policy – Recommended Option

- 3.7 The recommendation is to revise the Hybrid Working Policy to ensure that there is visibility of staff within the borough, providing more opportunities to connect with communities and with each other. This option has been built on feedback captured across stakeholders.
- 3.8 Amongst the changes recommended, is the proposal to change the name of the policy from Hybrid Working Policy to Working Location Policy, as hybrid seems to imply that there are only two working locations - home or the individual's usual place of work, when in fact there is the opportunity to work from many different places across the borough and within the heart of communities.
- 3.9 One of the main benefits of the Policy is achieving the balance between autonomy and collaboration. Specific days could be set for in-office work to focus on collaboration activities.
- 3.10 At present under the Policy, Strategic Directors are required to ensure that the services they are responsible for have appropriate working arrangements and through their Directorate Leadership Teams determine the working arrangements that best deliver outcomes and services. The vast majority of employees are contracted to a specified office location and should remain available to attend as required subject to business need. In addition, the more flexible approach at 3.2 has led to different interpretations and perceived unfairness in terms of the application of the policy in some areas.
- 3.11 In order to reiterate the benefits of workplace attendance, including opportunities for collaboration, inclusion, development, performance and leadership visibility, an

expectation of a minimum office attendance will be applied. The recommendation is to stipulate a minimum three days' attendance at a work location across the borough (such as attending meetings with partners on behalf of the Council or working in communities).

- 3.12 The three days' minimum requirement would apply to all full time staff (pro-rata for part time employees), subject to the requirements of the role, service need and Directorate Leadership Team oversight. Any exceptions to the application of the minimum attendance levels should be agreed by Strategic Directors through Directorate Leadership Teams based on application of the Working Location Policy principles, with oversight at Workforce Strategy Board. The implementation of the changes to the Policy will continue to be monitored by Directorate Leadership Teams and through asset management undertaking occupancy surveys, with a particular focus on Riverside House.
- 3.13 The Policy at Appendix 1 has been updated based on the recommended option in this report. Key changes include:
- The change of policy from 'Hybrid Working Policy' to 'Working Location Policy'. The change reflects the variety of settings that are available for staff to work throughout the Borough, rather than the binary options of home or office working.
 - A minimum of three days' attending a work location in the Borough for full time staff (pro-rata for part time employees), subject to the requirements of the role and service need.
 - Employees should be flexible to attend any Borough wide working location as determined by the service.
- 3.14 Staff have worked hard during pandemic to continue to deliver services in very challenging situations and as the Council has moved back to more usual ways of working, the importance of being visible and connected to the place remains the primary focus. At the same time, it is also recognised that flexibility enables the Council to have engaged staff who continue to deliver more, year on year for communities.

4. Consultation on proposal

- 4.1 Consultation has taken place with recognised Trade Unions.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 5.1 Strategic Directors will be accountable for monitoring the implementation across their services and ensuring the best possible service is maintained for service users and customers.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 6.1 There are no direct procurement implications associated with the recommendations in this report.
- 6.2 Whilst there will potentially be savings to be generated through a reduction in the Council's Assets due to a reduced need for office space, there needs to be consideration of any potential impact of increased costs in equipment to support

homeworking, though decisions will need to be assessed on a case by case basis and based on insight from home working and DSE risk assessments.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

- 7.1 Legal Services were engaged early in respect of the drafting of the Policy and advised specifically in respect of the impact upon reasonable adjustments. Current Policy has now been in place for around 2 years, some employees may argue that this has now become an implied term so could face challenges if the Council force any changes.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 A detailed assessment of the workforce impacts is set out in detail in the main body of the report.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 The use of Working Location arrangements will continue to have a positive impact on service delivery, increasing staff engagement and with benefits for productivity.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 10.1 In making any decision the Council is required to have due regard to its equalities duties and in particular with respect to the Equality Act 2010, section 149, part 11 of the public sector duty:

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and eliminate any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act,
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who are a protected characteristics and persons who do not share it and to
- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

- 10.2 The recommendation will be monitored so as not to have any adverse impact on anyone with one or more protected characteristics, namely age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

11. Implications for CO₂ Emissions and Climate Change

- 11.1 The introduction of the Policy has meant reduced emissions from commuting in the Borough, and the introduction of the recommended approach will maintain commuting levels at lower than pre-pandemic levels for Council staff.

- 11.2 A separate review of the Council's estate, including potential to rationalise based on occupancy rates and maximising service delivery, is currently under review. This may present opportunities to reduce CO₂ emissions generated by Council buildings in the longer term.

12. Implications for Partners

- 12.1 At service specific level, managers will be required to consult partner organisations on the impact of any agreed Working Location arrangements involving delivery of services with partner organisations, subject to maintaining the best possible service for residents.

13. Risks and Mitigation

- 13.1 Continuing to provide the flexibility of Working Location arrangements, subject to service need *and* workplace attendance, will ensure staff remain engaged and mitigates against any attraction or retention issues.

Accountable Officer(s)

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