

Public Report
Improving Places Select Commission

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Improving Places Select Commission – 02 February 2021

Report Title

Outcomes from Working Group – Building Use

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

No

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Not Applicable

Report Author(s)

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Ward(s) Affected

Borough-wide

Report Summary

To receive on the findings and recommendations from the working group on Building Use which was established by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board.

Recommendations

1. That the briefing be noted and the following recommendations be submitted to Cabinet for consideration:-
 - a) That the principle be agreed that the future usage of buildings be determined in accordance with the needs of services located therein.
 - b) That, prior to buildings being brought back into use by staff or the public, consultation take place with Trade Unions and staff following completion of risk assessments in respect of the building or location concerned.
 - c) That any decision to return employees to Council buildings beyond the minimal number that have been required to be present throughout the pandemic be made having regard to advice from the Corporate Health and Safety Team and Human Resources, as well as being subject to Government guidance around the safe use of Council buildings.
 - d) That Members be notified when main operational buildings are to be brought back into use, specifically the Town Hall as the civic hub of the Borough.

- e) That, having regard to the positive implications associated with virtual meetings in respect of the Council's carbon footprint, the Leader of the Council lobby the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to legislate for the ongoing provision of virtual meetings beyond 7 May 2021.
- f) That Asset Management and Digital Services work together to identify the necessary changes or solutions required in Riverside House and Rotherham Town Hall, as well as any changes required to equipment or software for Members and officers, to enable continued use of remote working whilst permitting physical presence in a Council building.
- g) That the Head of Democratic Services prepare guidance and training on the procedures and operation of hybrid meetings.

Background Papers

Minutes from Overview and Scrutiny Management Board, 16 September 2020

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

Not applicable

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Outcomes from Working Group – Building Use

1. Background

- 1.1 Due to the national Coronavirus emergency, Central Government have issued regulations to allow remote attendance and participation in Council meetings. Councillors have not been identified by the Government as essential key workers, nor are they employees of the Council.
- 1.2 The Government guidance also asks all workers including essential key workers to work from home if possible. Citizens are asked to avoid all non-essential travel and use of public transportation to limit the transmission of the virus and protect the National Health Service from undue burden.
- 1.3 The Government guidance also reflects an evolving picture. At the time of writing the report, an extended national lockdown has been put in place to respond to growing pressure on the NHS and the emergence of a novel strain of COVID-19 which has shown higher transmissibility and mortality rates, even affecting children. This lockdown is in place amid the roll-out of a large-scale vaccination programme.

2. Key Issues

- 2.1 The Council have developed a new home working plan to comply the government mandate that everyone who can work from home do so. Workforce planning has to take into account local transmission rates and restrictions, resident expectations, operation delivery, changing government expectations, and facility services implications of any decision. Priority services have been identified and prioritised, based on an assessment of which services are needed, not merely wanted as well as which front-line and back office services are already operating.
- 2.2 Human Resources have monitored the experience of employees during the transition to exclusive home working, and have ensured that things like reasonable accommodations and proper kit/equipment continue to be provided to employees who need them. Human Resources have anticipated that some aspects of remote working will continue to stay with the Council after the mandate to work from home has been lifted, as employees now have the technology to facilitate working from home, and a strong majority of employees have reported that they either like or love home working.
- 2.3 Therefore, Human Resources have developed a strategy for safely transitioning back to partial office working when the public health climate improves and government regulations allow. The strategy also considers those employees who need to return to the office for personal rather than business reasons. The strategy will continue to be reviewed and informed by further information, for example, from the full staff professional wellbeing surveys that have been undertaken in Autumn 2020. These efforts ensure staff know the plans on a quarterly basis, and that discussions with managers are ongoing. Risk assessments will be particularly important for building resilience into front line services where there has been more sickness and impact on service delivery.

New, innovative ways to support staff will be needed. This strategy is flexible as it is built to respond to an evolving public health picture.

- 2.4 Similarly, Asset Management have developed a strategy for following the government guidelines as regards the Council's operational buildings that are not designated for the delivery of specific services, that is, its office buildings. This strategy ensures services are delivered as usual, but with employees working from home rather than utilising office spaces, which currently requires additional precautions during use and additional cleaning after use.
- 2.5 In terms of Riverside House, 30% of the capacity can be used safely in the current layout configuration. This means that of 1300 desks, 440 can be safely occupied at a given time. There are facilities implications of any use.
- 2.6 Following an extensive examination, it was determined that Riverside House air conditioning has not been found to be a contributor to transmission. The servicing of the air conditioning is maintained, and the air change frequency has been increased to bring fresh air into the building every 35 to 40 minutes through filters that are regularly changed.
- 2.7 Members expressed concerns that at times remote access can create obstacles to performing their responsibilities as Councillors. Broadband connections can sometimes drop, and applicants who are interviewed as part of the work of some smaller committees of the Council cannot be interviewed in person. For these reasons, advice was sought around the return to use of a Council space for in-person meetings of some smaller committees. The response cautioned that whilst this is physically possible, it would be against the national guidance against public gatherings, and while Councillors are not considered key workers, nor are they employees of the Council, their presence in Council operational buildings would require employees to be present, and extra precautions and cleaning would have to be undertaken as well. It was also noted that the Council's position is that just because an office space can be used does not mean that it should be used. It is important in terms of Public Health perception of the Council, that the Council play by the same rules that the community are asked to follow. Therefore, it remains necessary to limit face-to-face meetings wherever possible.
- 2.8 As for which buildings are open, these are reduced to skeleton services. Some buildings need to remain open because they also house NHS or GP services. These are constantly reviewed. Bookable systems are used where possible to ensure controls are in place to reduce transmission. It is down to teams to decide how their model works.
- 2.9 At the 14 December meeting, Members received a presentation about the life cycles of Council Owned sites, for example, how Asset Management makes decisions about sites, including changes of use and sale, and how those decisions are progressed. The goal of this meeting was to demystify the Asset Management process by perusing examples of the process in action.

3. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

- 3.1 The timetable and accountability for implementing recommendations arising from this report will sit with the Cabinet and officers. The Overview and Scrutiny Procedurals require the Cabinet to consider and respond to recommendations made by scrutiny within two months.

4. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

- 4.1 There are no financial or procurement implications directly associated with this report.

5. Legal Advice and Implications

- 5.1 There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

6. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 6.1 These are set out in the report.

7. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 7.1 These have been set out in the relevant sections of the report.

8. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

- 8.1 Members have had regard to equalities implications when considering recommendations and other matters arising from the working group.

9. Implications for Partners

- 9.1 There are no implications for partners directly arising from this report.

10. Risks and Mitigation

- 10.1 Members have been advised previously of risk assessments and mitigation plans, and these have been taken into account in their consideration of potential recommendations.

11. Accountable Officer

Craig Tyler, Head of Democratic Services and Statutory Scrutiny Officer
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