

## Personnel Committee – 19 April 2021

### How Will We Work In The Future – A Blended Working Approach

Service: All

Wards: All

#### 1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 This report sets out the high-level considerations for how we will work in future, with the proposition 'work is what we do and not the location where it is carried out'.
- 1.2 Since 23 March 2020, we have found it necessary to work completely differently, to adapt processes and services to continue to deliver in a global pandemic.
- 1.3 Across Britain, lockdowns are starting to ease and there is a sense of a return to some degree of normality. However, there is still a lot of uncertainty and the extent to which everyday life will return to pre-Covid conditions is unclear.
- 1.4 Many aspects of working remotely have worked really well, we have been able to capitalise on the investment in technology, finding different and better ways of working. It will be a lost opportunity if we do not consider the advantages of working in this way and blend them into how we work in the future.
- 1.5 In order to make sure Walsall Council is in the best possible position to respond to ongoing challenges, making sure that our approach is people lead we need explore new and different models of working, looking at how we capitalise on investments to date consider any new investment that may be required.

#### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Personnel Committee are asked to approve that the first principles of blended working are as set out in points 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3.
- 2.2 Personnel Committee agree that officers test these principles and bring forward to Cabinet proposals for the future ways of working – a blended working approach.

#### 3. Principles

- 3.1 Agree work is what we do not where we do it.
- 3.2 To test the principle 'where staff have been able to work from home that they continue to do so that these staff do not return to work in any of our

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buildings to carry out their daily routine tasks. That we continue to predominantly work from home locations as we have done for the past year.'

- 3.3 Staff currently working from home will continue to do so and will only meet in our buildings for the purposes of collaboration, team building, on boarding and development opportunities.

### 4. Know

Blended working builds on the concept of flexible working and could be defined as a way of working that combines on and off-site working, as well as flexibility in when, and for how long, workers engage in work-related tasks based on service need. Whilst not all jobs can be performed in a flexible manner, a large proportion of Council roles can, and as a modern and forward thinking employer, we need to explore and embrace different ways of working.

- 4.1 **Assumptions:** In order to test the principles in point three the following statements are assumed to be correct:

- Social Distancing – Hands, Face, Space will need to be maintained going forward.
- There will be no change to working arrangements until at least September 2021.
- While staff are not returning to the Civic Centre then the First Stop Shop area does not re-open to the public.
- Notwithstanding that in future formal decision making and regulatory committees may need to be held as physical meetings from beginning of May 2021, the above principle regarding staff will apply to Members.

- 4.2 There is no consistent view or set of expectations regarding what will happen when Lockdown eases or restrictions are removed in June 2021, if indeed, all restrictions will be removed.

- 4.3 Perceptions of service need may be different when the population is not living under restriction.

- 4.4 The public may expect a return to 'normal service'. Normal service is planned to be different in future and new ways of accessing services through the Council's website and Customer Relationship Management System need to be prioritised to support the changes and maintain improve customer satisfaction.

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- 4.5 For some staff the job cannot be done at home and they have continued throughout this period to working as close to their usual way of working as possible.
- 4.6 Some service areas are looking at working differently but in a work base or locality.

### **5. Council Corporate Plan Priorities**

- 5.1 Internal Services – deliver quality and adapt to meet the needs of customer facing services.

### **6. Risk Management**

- 6.1 There are no risks directly associated with approving this report.

### **7. Financial Implications**

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications for this report. However, to progress blended working there will be costs associated with alterations to buildings and further enhancements to provision of information technology in respect of both software and hardware and cleaning regimes. These costs will be assessed as part of the overall business case for change and will require funding through the capital programme. There are likely to be permanent revenue cost savings on operational running costs. At this time, it is not possible to be exact but a full cost benefit analysis will be undertaken.

### **8. Legal Implications**

- 8.1. The position on Members' ability to continue to attend meetings remotely is uncertain, currently central Government has indicated that it does not intend to extend to The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020. However, a declaration is being sought from the High Court to clarify whether or not remote meetings can continue to be held in accordance with existing legislation governing meetings. This issue is due to be determined on 21 April 2021. The government is supporting this legal challenge and is seeking further evidence in relation to the continuation of virtual meetings.

### **9. Procurement Implications/Social Value**

None at this time.

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**10. *Property Implications***

- 10.1 How buildings are used in future is a key consideration, moving to using buildings only for one off purposes will require buildings to be adapted to meet future need.
- 10.2 Creation of dedicated meeting spaces equipped with appropriate technology to hybrid meetings where some attendees can be in the office and others in different locations, including home.
- 10.3 Capital investment will be required to make alterations.
- 10.4 A system for booking space will need to be in place so that numbers accessing the building can be managed. This would include continuing with Health and Safety assessments, and the requirement of an increased office cleaning regime which has a resource implication.

**11. *Health and Wellbeing implications***

- 11.1. Some staff, who have found it difficult to work from home but had done so because it was a mandate by Government, may wish to return to the office.
- 11.2 Conversely, staff may not feel safe coming into work.
- 11.3 Continued Health and Safety monitoring of workstations in the home will be required and additional equipment (e.g. monitors, keyboards, headsets) may be required for staff who had previously not been concerned as they believed that this was not a permanent arrangement.
- 11.4 Sickness absence has reduced significantly, there is likely to be a number of factors affecting this reduction, however the impact is fewer lost working days. Staff have benefited from not needing to travel to work which has contributed to reducing carbon emissions over the period.
- 11.5 Lack of social interaction at work has left some staff feeling isolated and vulnerable, a factor that has been exacerbated by not being able to socialise outside of work.

**12. *Staffing implications***

- 12.1 A full programme of communication and engagement with staff will be required including a follow up staff survey to the one that was carried out in October 2020. The output from the survey will enable a comparison of how staff are feeling then and now.
- 12.2 Focus groups on new ways of working will emerge from the issues identified in the staff survey.

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- 12.3 Skills, knowledge and experience of staff and managers will be different as new ways of working emerge / develop this will lead to a requirement for new and innovative Learning and Development programmes and Organisation Development interventions.
- 12.4 Systems and processes will need to change to reflect service improvements gained from new ways of working.
- 12.5 Review of Employment Policies will be required; consideration of a different remuneration package may also need to be considered if there is to be a long-term move to working from a home location. Alongside this as part of the 2021 pay negotiations the LGA may agree to develop guidance for Local Authorities on home being a work location.

**13 Reducing Inequalities**

- 13.1 A comprehensive Equality Impact Assessment(s) will be required to provide evidence based assessment to support the decision-making processes within the proposals. To understand the potential impacts on protected groups, ensuring proposals do not present barriers or disadvantage for those groups.

**14. Consultation**

- 14.1 Initial consultation with trade unions has taken place, there will need to be an ongoing dialogue with unions as blended working arrangements are developed and implemented.

**15. Options considered and discounted at this time.**

- 15.1 A full return to office accommodation working arrangements prior to Covid Pandemic. This option is not viable at this time, although there is no guidance currently available which covers the period when lockdown eases or for when restrictions are removed, it is illogical that some form of social distancing will not be required and most buildings cannot be adapted to accommodate volumes of staff that previously occupied them.
- 15.2 A return as described in 15.1 would negate the benefits of technology that have occurred throughout the past year and diminish the value of the investments that have been made. Technology can be exploited further and this will continue to bring benefits to staff in new ways of working, to residents in ease of accessibility to online services and to the efficiency of the Council as a whole.
- 15.3 A partial return to the office on designated days for particular teams or service areas to undertake routine activities is unlikely to maintain increases in productivity or be helpful to service delivery. It also seems counterintuitive to the concept of a modernised workforce / new ways of working. It could increase staff's feeling of wellbeing and motivation but this would need to be tested.

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**16. Respond**

- 16.1 Test the temperature with staff and establish how they feel about continuing to work remotely through the staff survey.
- 16.2 Ask Directorate Management Teams to undertake a more detailed SWOT analysis of what the principles at section 3 would mean for them – considering impact on service delivery, Service Transformation Plans (STP's), staffing, finance, new ways of working, service modernisation etc.
- 16.3 Take the findings from the above to test the first principle of blended working and develop for CMT consideration a full implementation plan.

**17. Review**

- 17.1 Review and reflect all of the information gathered in respect of blended to ensure that the blended working proposals enable effective and efficient service delivery.

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