

**NORTH EAST DERBYSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

**HEALTH AND WELLBEING
WORKING FROM HOME
DURING THE PANDEMIC**

MAY 2021

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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Organisation Scrutiny Committee. It details the findings and conclusions and recommendations of the Committee from its Health and Wellbeing – Working from Home during the Pandemic Scrutiny Review.

Members of the Committee felt that it was timely and important to look at how the Authority had supported all its staff with their Health and Wellbeing during the Pandemic. Most staff had been working from home during this time but a limited number of employees had continued to run some services from Council premises. The Committee wished to place on record their thanks and appreciation for all the hard work staff had undertaken to help services continue to run during this difficult period.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for their input and also the stakeholders who helped inform the review. Additionally I would like to thank the Scrutiny Manager for her support of the Committees work and Democratic Services for the help they provided.

Councillor A Foster
Chair Organisation Scrutiny Committee

Review Panel

The review panel comprised the following members:

Councillor A Foster	(Conservative) – Review Panel Chair
Councillor J Birkin	(Labour)
Councillor P Bone	(Conservative)
Councillor J Funnel	(Independent)
Councillor M Jones	(Labour)
Councillor P R Kerry	(Labour)
Councillor H Liggett	(Conservative)
Councillor M Potts	(Conservative)
Councillor P Wright	(Conservative)

1. Recommendations

That:

- 1.1 The Council consider the comments made in this report when considering how we can best implement the Agile Working Policy
- 1.2 That the Council consider involving appropriate expertise from another organisation who has been through the process of introducing agile working successfully
- 1.3 That the Council consider the capacity within the IT section to support any future agile working arrangements including increasing digital skills of staff.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 At its meeting on 23rd June, 2020 the Organisation Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of Health and Wellbeing - Working from Home during the Pandemic.
- 2.2 The Committee felt it was important to review this area to ensure the Councils staff were supported effectively whilst they were working from home as a result of the Pandemic.

3. Scope of Review

3.1 The review aimed to:

- Understand the current policies and support available for staff working from home
- Gather evidence of how the health and well-being of staff was supported whilst working at home during the Pandemic
- Gather evidence of how other staff were supported who continued to work from the Council buildings during the Pandemic
- Identify measures that worked well and any improvements that could be submitted to Cabinet for consideration
- To ensure we capture what went well supporting staff and things not so well
- Gather useful information to formulate what we do in the future and present this evidence to Cabinet

- Ensure the Working from Home Policy is effective, being followed properly and fully by all managers in all area.

4. Method of Review

- 4.1 The review panel met on six occasions to consider the scope of the review, key issues they wanted to discuss and key people they wished to interview.
- 4.2 Evidence was gathered in a variety of ways including written sources and interviews with a range of stakeholders.

5. Evidence and Research

- 5.1 A number of documents and evidence were provided to the review panel for consideration. Details are provided below:
- Scene Setting Presentation by the Human Resources Manager
 - Working From Home Policy
 - Agile working Policy
 - Temporary Working Arrangements Guidance
 - Selection of Bulletins to staff
 - Health and Safety Briefings
 - Working from Home Survey

6. Key Findings

6.1 Strengths/Observations

- 6.1.1 The review panel considered a variety of documents which were available to staff to support them working from home. These included a number of staff bulletins offering advice and suggestions for maintaining physical and mental health during the Pandemic. Additionally regular updates on national advice, support available from the Councils ICT Service, Health and Safety briefings, advice on the balance of personal and work commitments, minimising risk and keeping safe were also provided. Early on in the Pandemic guidance on Temporary Working Arrangements was produced for staff to ensure business continuity. The Leader also provided regular updates to employees to keep them informed and up to

date on what was happening within the Council and with issues around the Pandemic. The Council also had an existing Working from Home Policy in place for staff support. On the whole evidence was provided that these documents were communicated well and generally well received.

- 6.1.2 The review panel was keen to speak directly with staff about their experiences of working from home during the Pandemic. Therefore a couple of discussion groups were held virtually with staff to find out how they were coping with working from home. Most staff felt home working and support that had been provided by the Authority had gone well. Several commented on how they had adapted and that they liked the flexibility and convenience it provided to them. However, this was not a view shared by everyone and further information is given in a later section of the report.
- 6.1.3 The Review Panel praised the resilience, flexibility and hard work of all employees in adapting to the changing circumstances of the Covid Pandemic. They expressed the view that for the future the ability to innovate and adapt had been demonstrated by many staff. A number of staff had moved teams during the Pandemic to help support the elderly and vulnerable residents in the Community with the delivery of food packages and collecting medicines from local pharmacies. The Panel had heard from the Director of Environment about other staff who had supported key services and the central response team. Staff had continued to operate services where permitted and maintained high standards. One example cited was keeping meetings going for both officers and members and ensuring public accountability continued.
- 6.1.4 The Panel also considered the results from the Home working Survey which provided supporting evidence of staff views. It reviewed how many people had worked from home/ remotely prior to Covid 19 and subsequently during the lockdowns. It aimed to review how staff had been coping working from home during the Pandemic and to highlight any issues, concerns and successes. Additionally it sought to gauge interest in future remote working, potential issues, benefits, savings, requirements, and areas for improvements and ideas for successful implementation. It highlighted that during Covid 19 90% of respondents did all or most of their work from home. Comments and feedback had been positive with many people saying how well it had gone and how surprised they were about their productivity due to less distractions and interruptions.
- 6.1.5 The Review Panel had also sought to assess health and wellbeing during the period from the Human Resources perspective. The Human Resources Manager provided a briefing to the Panel and provided further information on staff matters during the Pandemic including staff shielding and those who had self-isolated. She updated the panel on sickness data and advised that sickness levels had improved during this period. Several possible reasons were discussed including reduction in infections due to social distancing, lockdowns and the ability to keep working at home which might not be the case in the office. However, the Review Panel felt

this was not a reliable indicator for setting future targets due to Pandemic and managers needed to be alert to hidden sickness. She also advised the panel that a homeworking group had been established by SAMT. Additionally the Committee also discussed the redeployment of a number of staff who were unable to work from home during the Pandemic.

The Panel reviewed the draft Agile Working Policy and discussed its potential for the future. The Panel asked a number of questions including how situations would be managed in which there were disagreements and employees were not satisfied with their working situation, how the policy would work in relations to insurance and safe working environments when employees are working from home, maintaining links between managers and teams and how vacant jobs would be advertised in relation to agile working. Some further thoughts expressed included potential for building rationalisation, sharing offices, working in hybrid arrangements and provision of support for both staff and managers. It was also recognised that different services may have different rules due to how a service operates and the questions this may raise on equality.

- 6:1.6 The potential environmental impact of working from home was also raised. There had been a clear reduction in employees driving to and from places of work. The Council buildings and premises were not being heated as much due to the reduced numbers of staff being in them or where facilities had been closed. It was recognised that further assessment of this was needed to establish meaningful data. One member also raised the issue of staff using energy in their individual homes whilst working from home which needed to be balanced against this.
- 6.1.7 The Director of Corporate Services had also provided evidence to the Panel on the impacts of Covid 19 on a number of areas within the Councils transformation programme. This had included service transformation, organisational transformation and digital organisation. The Committee felt that the Council had been pushed forward very quickly due to the impacts of the Pandemic.
- 6.1.8 At the conclusion of its evidence gathering the Review Panel had heard from the Leader of the Council on his vision for the Council post the pandemic relating to home-working and support available for employees and managers. His vision included a modern, agile work force with well supported staff, delivering high performing value for money services to residents. He expressed the importance of finding a balance between home working and providing front-facing services and office based working, to find the best of both worlds between a virtual and physical working environment. He also discussed the impact on the environment and local economy.

6.2 **Areas for Improvement/Observations**

- 6.2.1 The Review Panel heard from some members of staff how they had found home working difficult. This had included issues with available space at

home, potential difficulties in separating home and work life, caring duties and mental health issues. Some commented on a sense of feeling isolated and missing the interaction with their teams and loss of contact with colleagues. The Committee thanked staff for their honesty on raising these issues. They concluded that the Authority would need to ensure support was available for staff in any move to agile working in future.

6.2.2 The Panel also considered the role of IT during the Pandemic. It had played an important role in facilitating working from home. The service had provided IT equipment including laptops for all staff working from home and offered ongoing help and guidance. Meetings were mostly held virtually and the IT team supported the technical side of this for a period of time before Governance took this into their role. Staff had felt that this provision had worked well but some had commented that the team's capacity was stretched. The lack of understanding on tools/technology had also been identified within the Working from Home Survey. Examples provided were many people were not using MiCollab, which could make it difficult to see who is in the office or how to contact them and some staff lacked the digital skills to maximise the equipment available. IT had resolved many issue including support around virtual meetings and people had acquired some of these skills over this period. Moving forward this was an area that would need further consideration.

6.2.3 The Review Panel had received a presentation from the Human Resources Manager on the draft Agile Working Policy that was being considered as part of the Transformation Programme. The Policy aimed to replace multiple policies and provide options for ways of working. She highlighted that a successful introduction of agile working needed to find the right combination of working arrangements for Services and Employees. It was agreed that agile working had the potential to be positive for recruitment and retention if staff can use it to support their work life balance. The Panel recognised the emphasis would need to be service driven but areas such as how the process might work including staff circumstances, whether the role was suitable for working from home, monitoring performance and hybrid arrangements would need to be considered carefully and managed well. The Panel felt this would be supported by involving experts who have undertaken this process within their organisation and successfully implemented agile working.

7. Conclusions

7.1 The review panel heard views from a wide range of stakeholders during the review process. This included discussion groups held with managers and staff. The review process identified a number of measures that was supporting staff during the Pandemic.

7.2 However, some suggested areas for consideration were identified around any planned implementation of the Agile Working Policy and learning lessons from the experience of staff working from home during the Pandemic.

APPENDIX A

Stakeholder Engaged During the Review

- M Broughton - Head of Transformation and Partnership
- A Dale - Leader of the Council
- S Gordon - Human Resources Manager
- K Hanson - Director of environment and Enforcement
- L Hickin - Director of Corporate Services
- R Hutchinson - Health and Safety Co-Ordinator

Discussion Groups with Managers and Staff