

FAREHAM

BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to the Executive for Decision 11 October 2021

Portfolio:	Policy and Resources
Subject:	Proposal for a new way of working
Report of:	The Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Corporate Priorities:	A dynamic, prudent and progressive Council

Purpose:

To seek approval for a new approach to the way we work.

Executive summary:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most of our staff worked in the Council's offices, at other Council facilities (such as sheltered housing schemes) or worked across the borough maintaining our parks, collecting household waste, visiting people and homes, all with one thing in common; to provide high quality customer services across Fareham borough.

Although we had already started the move to mobile and cloud-based ICT solutions, the pandemic led us to a rapid step-change in our use of mobile technology and working remotely. What we learnt from this experience, is that many of our services can be provided very effectively through remote working, and this led to a review being undertaken to consider how we might build on this approach in the future.

A vision for the way we work in the future has been developed, as set out in Appendix A to this report, and the Executive are asked to approve the new approach.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Executive agrees the vision for the new way of working.

Reason:

To enable the new approach to flexible working to be implemented.

Cost of proposals:

There are no immediate costs associated with delivery of the vision, as the cost of technology investment and building refurbishment are covered in the approved capital programme, which is kept under annual review.

Appendices: **A: Proposed Vision for the Way We Work**
 B: Hybrid Working Employee Guide

Background papers: Project documents associated with research and engagement.

Reference papers: None

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BOROUGH COUNCIL

Executive Briefing Paper

Date:	11 October 2021
Subject:	A Proposal for a new way of working
Briefing by:	The Deputy Chief Executive Officer
Portfolio:	Policy and Resources

INTRODUCTION

1. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most of our staff worked in the Council's offices, at other Council facilities (such as sheltered housing schemes) or worked across the borough maintaining our parks, collecting household waste, visiting people and homes, all with one thing in common; to provide high quality customer services across Fareham Borough.
2. The Council was already embracing mobile technology, and our ICT strategy was moving quickly towards cloud-based solutions, to help support this. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced a step-change in the use of mobile technology and working remotely. From this experience, it became clear that many of the Council's services can be provided very effectively through remote working, and this report sets out how this approach will be developed in the future.

THE APPROACH

3. As it was clear that aspects of the Council's COVID response had potential long term benefits, both in the way that services are provided, but also the flexibility offered as an employer, a review was undertaken to understand the issues and benefits of a remote working arrangement, learning not only from our own experience but also from those organisations that had established this hybrid approach well before the pandemic.
4. As part of its research, an Officer review team was established to understand what a dispersed workforce arrangement would look like, how teams continue to interact effectively, the pitfalls in managing and working in a hybrid team, and how others have addressed these issues.
5. The team engaged with 12 local authorities, an NHS Trust and 8 private sector companies, all of whom had adopted a hybrid approach and were willing to share their experiences.
6. All employees had the opportunity to comment, and a comprehensive survey was undertaken in February, to understand the experiences of the workforce in the remote

working environment. The survey also sought to understand what mattered to employees in these arrangements, the potential benefits from an employee's perspective, and the concerns they may have if this arrangement was permanent.

7. Discussions also took place with Heads of Service, to understand how well the organisation performed in transitioning to a remote working arrangement, the issues they were confronted with in managing a remote team and delivering customer facing services, and the tools they felt would be necessary to support them in managing a dispersed workforce permanently.

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE RESEARCH WORK

Engaging with Other Organisations

8. It was clear that each organisation has its own particular motivation to move to a dispersed workforce, but there were some common themes that were highlighted, and these have been considered in preparing our vision for the way we work in the future. These were:-
 - Changing your workstyle should be considered a “culture change” programme, as it will require teams to think and operate differently.
 - This cannot be just about changing people's place of work, and must also address the implications for technology solutions, data security, building and facilities, etc.
 - Trust is central to working within a dispersed workforce, and HR policies should reflect this, but with good management arrangements in place to address issues where they arise.
 - Permission to prudently adjust boundaries and learn from that experience, with an acceptance that not all ideas would be workable, allowed organisations to iteratively improve and develop solutions which worked best for them.
 - Adopting a corporate approach will ensure consistency and fairness, and provided that the new arrangements offer meaningful benefits to employee well-being, then it will result in a positive outcome, and make the Council a more attractive employer.
 - Managing a team proactively is critical to building team spirit, for example through regular physical and virtual team meetings.
 - Obvious benefits from a hot-desk approach can be achieved, provided there are sufficient desk spaces in the right places, to underpin a team ethos.
 - Everyone needs some “personal” space (such as storage, lockers, etc), and plenty of space to conduct virtual meetings without causing disturbance.
 - The transition to a dispersed workforce had removed some geographic boundaries as organisations could recruit staff with specific abilities which they had not been able to previously find locally.

Engaging with our Employees

9. 233 office-based employees responded to the survey, half of whom work in front line customer-facing services. The key themes from the survey were that while the majority of employees had not worked regularly from home prior to the pandemic, the experience had been generally very positive, and they were able to do their jobs very effectively.
10. The flexibility offered by the Council enabled them to manage the competing priorities in their personal life, while still doing a full day's work. Issues such as caring responsibilities for relatives, childcare and school runs, personal commitments, etc, were all issues that our staff cited as important to them.
11. On the whole, the technology and the work environment were suitable for staff to do their job and there was positive feedback about the remote support they received when things went wrong.
12. There was a strong desire from our staff to continue some form of home working, citing a better work/life balance in a more focussed working environment whilst allowing them to juggle all the competing priorities in their daily life, as important aspects.
13. It was, however, also evident that there remains a proportion who would not want to work at home permanently (12%), and irrespective of where they work, all staff expressed the value they placed on maintaining the links with their teams and relationships with their colleagues.
14. Another 15% of respondents expressed a preference to work from home full time.
15. There was also clear support for maintaining our town centre location as the office base.

Engaging with our Managers

16. It was clear that our managers recognised the benefits of home working and were generally very willing to embrace a remote working approach for their teams. The need for a clear corporate approach was recognised as important, to ensure consistency across the teams, and also recognising that the ultimate priority is delivering services to our customers.
17. Managers felt that the town centre location remained important to their staff and customers, especially as a base to use flexibly to meet with their teams.
18. The issues that they felt should be considered if the Council moved to a more dispersed workforce were:-
 - How we will ensure the well-being of staff and maintain good morale;
 - How we can overcome "intuitive awareness" of issues within teams when they are not physically present;
 - The steps we can take to ensure team bonds do not weaken;

- The importance of maintaining professionalism in the way we work;
- The importance of robust technology to underpin working arrangements;
- The importance of data security while working remotely;
- Balancing the needs of the team and the wishes of the employee;
- Providing the appropriate training and support network to help managers manage in a different way.

A Vision for the Way We Work in the Future

19. Learning from the research and engagement work undertaken, a set of key principles were developed to guide the future way of working. With the customer at the heart of what we do, it is important that we ensure that any new way of working still enables customers to access the services we provide.
20. This is likely to mean enhancing our use of technology so we can offer services securely and in the way that our customers would want them.
21. This will also require some new skills for staff and managers, to get the best from working differently, but always with the aim of being inclusive in offering flexible working arrangements and preserving the goodwill within the organisation.
22. Appendix A to this report sets out the draft vision for the way we will work in the future.

Our Vision for the way we work

- *We will be a flexible employer, offering working arrangements that suit the home and work life commitments of our employees.*
- *Because the needs of our customers continue to be our most important consideration, the way we work will contribute positively to delivering customer services*
- *We will be accessible when customers want to talk to us, using channels of communication that customers want to use.*
- *A central location will always be important, but with a more dispersed workforce, it will be a smaller, multi-functional facility, with a focus on serving customers and the focal point for local democratic activities.*
- *As a flexible employer we will offer flexible choices for where staff can work, whether it be at home, in the office or a blended approach*
- *All employees can expect to be supported equally, no matter where they are based, and we will ensure staff have the right tools to do their job*

- *We will encourage staff to manage their work and home life commitments in a way that best supports their well-being, and in return, we will trust that our staff will give “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”.*
- *We will equip our managers with the skills to manage a dispersed workforce and encourage measures that maintain a strong team ethos*

THE VISION IN PRACTICE

23. As we move forward with the vision for a new way of working we recognise that we will need to adapt many of our working practises, our HR, ICT and Property policies and strategies will need to be reviewed, and we will want to be sure that our staff and our managers are well equipped with the skills to work in a different way. This work is already underway and will evolve over time.
24. There are clear benefits from retaining a central location for our office base, as it provides easy access for our customers, it supports the town centre economy and is a focal point for service delivery and civic/democratic activities.
25. In practical terms, our new approach will present opportunities to make better use of the office accommodation by adopting a shared desk approach. Consequently, there will be scope to consider further sharing of the Civic Offices with other partner organisations who may be looking to dispose of their accommodation as they adopt similar hybrid working. There may also be opportunities to consolidate the use of space at the Civic Offices and Broadcut depot in the longer term, as the demands upon the depot space change, (due to the Government’s emerging waste strategy, for example).
26. Future investment in the Council’s office buildings will take account of the changing demands arising from a new way of working and could result in positive outcomes in terms of reducing the Council’s carbon footprint.
27. The Civic offices will also remain as the central location for democratic business, public meetings and civic activities, but the investment in new technology may offer opportunities to widen the Council’s reach to local communities, as was successfully achieved during the pandemic period.

CONCLUSION

28. Our response to the COVID pandemic has shown that we can provide the same high level of service in a variety of ways, whilst offering greater flexibility to our workforce to manage their work/life balance. This vision embraces the lessons learned over that time, and with continued investment in technology and in our teams, we hope to attract and retain the best talent to continue delivering services to Fareham residents.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Andrew Wannell, Deputy Chief Executive Officer. (Ext 4620)

Vision for the Way We Work

Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most of our employees worked in the Council's offices, at other Council facilities (such as sheltered housing schemes) or worked across the borough maintaining our parks, collecting household waste, visiting people and homes, all with one thing in common; to provide high quality customer services across Fareham Borough.

We were already embracing mobile technology, and our ICT strategy was moving quickly towards cloud-based solutions, to help support this. However, the COVID pandemic very quickly moved us from a gradual transition to a step-change in our use of mobile technology and working remotely.

What we learnt from this experience, is that many of our services can be provided very effectively through remote working. We also learnt that, for some employees, working from home allowed them to manage their home and work life commitments more effectively. More broadly, less commuting meant less journeys on the local roads, which would have contributed to reduced congestion and improved air quality.

This vision explains how we intend to build on the very significant steps in response to the pandemic, on a journey to become a more flexible employer.

What Did Our Staff Think?

In February 2021, we asked our employees about their experience working from home throughout the pandemic. We also asked our managers about managing service delivery with a largely dispersed team. This has helped us to understand what matters, as we shape our vision for the Council, as an employer, in the future.

Whats matters to our employees	What matters to the organisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being part of a team• Having reliable ICT• Keeping a central location as a base• Easy access to colleagues• A blended approach to office/home working that improves my work-life balance• Continue to feel supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customer services are easily accessible• Democratic decision-making is transparent and accessible• Data security is protected• A professional approach is maintained• Our "One Team" approach is strengthened

What we learnt from others

As we developed this vision, we wanted not only to capture the progress made already, but also learn from those organisations that have embraced a flexible, or dispersed, approach to managing their workforce and delivering services. We have engaged with other local authorities, other public sector bodies as well as a number of large private sector organisations, to understand how their experiences can influence our approach.

As we adopt a more flexible approach in the future, we need to recognise that this is a culture change for many of our loyal and long-standing employees. We have established a strong team ethos across the organisation, which has underpinned our approach to delivering customer services, and this must not be eroded. We also want to preserve the sense of identity within teams, as this encourages us to go the extra mile for our colleagues and our customers.

Finally, we need to recognise that a different way of working will offer many opportunities which need to be harnessed, as well as new challenges, which need to be addressed. This will ensure that the Council continues to offer excellent value for money for residents.

Our Vision

Our vision has been developed from a set of key principles.

With the customer at the heart of what we do, we must ensure that any new way of working still enables customers to access the services we provide.

This is likely to mean enhancing our use of technology so we can offer services securely and in the way that our customers would want them.

This will also require some new skills for the workforce to get the best from working differently, but always with the aim of being inclusive in offering flexible working arrangements and preserving the goodwill within the organisation.



Our Vision for the way we work

- We will be a flexible employer, offering working arrangements that suit the home and work life commitments of our employees
- Because the needs of our customers continue to be our most important consideration, the way we work will contribute positively to delivering customer services
- We will be accessible when customers want to talk to us, using channels of communication that customers want to use
- A central location will always be important, but with a more dispersed workforce it will be a smaller, multi-functional facility, with a focus on serving customers and the focal point for local democratic activities
- As a flexible employer we will offer flexible choices for where employees can work, whether it be at home, in the office or a blended approach
- All employees can expect to be supported equally, no matter where they are based, and we will ensure staff have the right tools to do their job
- We will encourage employees to manage their work and home life commitments in a way that best supports their well-being, and we will trust that our employees will give “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”
- We will equip our managers with the skills to manage a dispersed workforce and encourage measures that maintain a strong team ethos

How Will this Work in Practice?

When it comes to delivering our vision, we recognise that we will need to adapt many of our working practises, our HR, ICT and Property policies and strategies will need to be reviewed, and we will want to be sure that our employees and our managers are well equipped with the skills to work in a different way.

With the flexibility to request a different work pattern, we expect to see our “office-based” employees working either at home, at the office, or a blended approach of the two. As a result, we would expect to see fewer people in the Civic Offices or Broadcut Offices on a daily basis, and to take advantage of the need for less space, we will move to a desk sharing approach. All teams will have dedicated areas to maintain team cohesion, but with fewer desks required, we will gradually release space for other uses.

Provided that our customers can access our services during our normal operational hours, individuals may wish to spread their work over a longer working day, to help them accommodate home-life commitments (such as caring responsibilities, school runs, etc). It will be for managers to agree working patterns within a corporate framework, to find the right balance for the team and each individual.

It is important that we take an inclusive approach irrespective of where our employees are based. Compliant workplace furniture and equipment will be essential to ensure the welfare

of our employees, and suitable ICT equipment to fulfil the roles is also a necessity, with ready access to all the support services.

Managing a team and working remotely can be positive, but also brings with it its own challenges. Our managers will be provided with training and guidance to manage a remote workforce and team events will be strongly encouraged. Employees will need to attend the offices on a regular basis to maintain physical contact with their team, and a flexible approach to this will be important, to overcome peaks in work, sickness absence and other unforeseen pressures. Arrangements will be needed to ensure all staff have an appropriate work environment and the right technology to do their job, to ensure we maintain the well-being of individuals and uphold our professional approach to work.

This flexible approach relies heavily on trust, and our policies will reflect this.

		
Home-based worker	Office-based worker	Hybrid worker
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home-worker IT supplied • Access to mobile technology on demand • Workstation must be compliant (FBC-supplied chair on request) • Requirement to attend offices (team bonding, etc), regularly (for example twice a month) • Performance based on outcomes • Can expect same contact from managers as office-based colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fixed ICT supplied at a hot-desk • Uses hot desks in team zones • Personal locker space • Access to breakout spaces for online meetings • Access to fully enabled meeting rooms for “Teams” meeting • Performance based on outcomes • Can expect work to be shared fairly with home-based colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile ICT available for use at home and work • Access to hot-desk space in their team zone in the office • Optional fixed screens at home supplied • ICT docking space in the longer term for laptops • Personal locker space • Performance based on outcomes

Other opportunities that we will explore

Our vision will offer our employees the opportunity to change their traditional working pattern and benefit from an enhanced work-life balance. But the transition to a new way of working also offers broader opportunities for other aspects of the Council’s day to day business, that we will consider as new arrangements bed in.

Information and Communications Technology

The ICT Strategy determines the Council's approach to investment in new technology, along with our approach to data storage, cyber security, networking and telephony. The Strategy has been reviewed in light of the proposed new way of working and opportunities have been identified to support this vision. This includes accelerating the transition to cloud-based solutions, improved network resilience and enhanced cyber-security measures. These changes will be incorporated into the ICT Strategy and delivered by the ICT team over the next 2-3 years.

Telephony arrangements will need to be improved, so that a more seamless approach to call handling can be achieved, irrespective of the location of our teams.

And as our existing equipment comes to the end of its useful life, we will move to mobile solutions (such as laptops), so that we can fully benefit from flexible working arrangements.

We have also undertaken a review of the technology that Councillors need in carrying out their roles, to ensure this is complementary to the operational arrangements for our teams.

Customer Access Channels and Opening Times

As we move to more flexible working arrangements and continue to expand our use of technology, this may present opportunities to broaden the channels available for our customers to contact the Council.

For example, this could include our use of social media channels to communicate with customers, broadening customer access online and continuing the use of virtual media to engage with residents on important matters.

As we embrace further technological developments, we would also review the Council's normal opening hours, to ensure that customers can access our services when they need them, in a way that makes good use of the resources available.

Operational Buildings and Planned Maintenance Programme

The operational buildings (Civic Offices and Broadcut Depot) are significant corporate assets and consequently require periodic investment to ensure they remain fit for purpose and fully operational. There are clear benefits from retaining a central location for our office base, as it provides easy access for our customers, it supports the town centre economy and is a focal point for service delivery and civic/democratic activities.

The capital programme has c.£4m allocated for refurbishment works in the Civic Offices, the majority of which relates to replacing the dated windows and air handling, heating and cooling plant, which is approaching the end of its useful life. Having established that a central location is important to our customers and our employees, work will proceed in delivering the refurbishment works.

As we adopt a hybrid approach to working, there will be a lower demand for office floor space as more people work from home. At the same time, our increased use of online meetings will mean that we will need more "quiet spaces" for people to use and a greater availability of spaces for regular team engagement.

While it is important that we retain a sense of identity for every team space, our move to shared desks within teams will open up opportunities to create the necessary quiet spaces and meeting spaces that a hybrid approach will require.

A smaller floorspace requirement will also provide opportunities for other organisations to relocate to the Civic Offices (although it is acknowledged that demand may be limited at this time), or to explore consolidating all our office uses into the Civic Offices in the longer term.

Our approach to heating, cooling and air handling in the future may also present opportunities to improve zonal controls. In turn this will allow us to isolate the unused areas and reduce our energy consumption and our carbon footprint.

Democracy and Decision-Making

Embracing technology during the pandemic period extended to our democratic functions, allowing members of the public to view and engage in committee meetings virtually, for the first time.

While many people still choose to engage in person, these added options have broadened the Councils openness and accessibility, and we will explore if this should continue in the future.

Next Steps

As we move towards the hybrid approach to working, the project team will continue to develop the necessary procedures to ensure that the transition is clear and seamless.

The vision has been developed, taking account of the feedback from our employees, and it is important that we continue to engage not only with employees and union representatives, but also take account of customer expectations as well.

Delivery of the new way of working needs to be an evolution, starting with the discussion with our workforce on their preferred individual approach. This will inform our revised office layouts and our understanding of our floor space requirement.

Summary

Our response to the COVID pandemic has shown that we can provide the same high level of service in a variety of ways, while offering greater flexibility to our workforce to manage their work/life balance. This vision embraces the lessons learned over that time, and with a continued investment in technology and in our teams, we hope to attract and retain the best talent to continue delivering services to Fareham residents.