

URN: 23-161
Report Title: Agile Working Review
Report to: ELT 18 October 2023
Cabinet 4 December 2023

Responsible Cabinet Member: Councillor Carl Smith

Responsible Director/Officer: Sarah Tate, Head of Organisational Development

Is this a key decision? No

Date added to Forward Plan of Key Decisions if a Key Decision: N/a

SUBJECT MATTER – This report presents a review of agile working and makes recommendations on further ways to modernise the Council’s working practices.

RECOMMENDATION

1. That Cabinet note the review of agile working, its success and support the next steps to continue to modernise our ways of working.

1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, the Council introduced an agile working policy and started to embed new ways of working. Whilst the pandemic accelerated the new modern, transformative working practices, focusing on performance and outputs, staff, over the last 2 years have made it a success.

Agile working enables the council to:

- continue to deliver its services to the highest standards,
- retain flexibility to meet business needs,
- attracting and retaining staff,
- be able to compete for the best talent and to be an employer of choice.

Whilst we recognise that not all employees are able, or want, to work in a more agile way and that it will not suit everyone, we now have an agile workforce successfully embedded in the organisation.

It is important to note that not all teams work in an agile manner due to the nature of their work. For example, some teams have always worked out in the communities, and always will, whilst others will need to be in the office at certain times to meet customers face to face. Some staff will not be able to or want to work from home for health and wellbeing reasons or home set up and it is important that we continue to support this and all of the different ways of working across the Council.

FEEDBACK FROM STAFF, MANAGERS AND MEMBERS

Over the last two years, feedback has continually been sought from staff and managers about agile working and its impact, through staff briefings, conferences, workshops, and extended management

team meetings. Feedback has been sought in a number of areas, including the impact on service delivery and performance, the customer experience, performance and outputs, and trust and culture. This feedback has helped to inform the review of how agile working has been embedded in the Council, what benefits and challenges it has brought and whether any changes were required to improve current practices.

The overwhelming feedback is that agile working is working well, it is well embedded in teams and managers and staff are ensuring that it is based on business needs.

There is work to do with managers and staff to better understand that no one size fits all, as there have been some concerns raised that agile working is not consistently available across the Council. It never will be, and this needs more work to help staff understand this. It should be noted that this feedback is not dissimilar to feedback about flexitime, which, like agile working, does not and cannot apply to all staff. To help staff better understand can be achieved through staff briefings, our ongoing engagement with staff, through team meetings and 1:1's and through the support of our Staff Engagement Group and UNISON.

Members have reported some concerns about how they contact staff when they are not in the office all the time. This was discussed with the extended management team and feedback was sought from managers on how we can support members to overcome those challenges.

Whether working at home, in the communities, or in the office, there should be no difference in officer/member contact. MS Teams had become the recognised method of contact in most cases, and this is working well with officers. Pre booking time with officers also facilitates that face-to-face contact where required.

It was acknowledged that whilst staff are not always in the office, they are contactable, where working from home, via MS Teams, which will also accept landline calls.

Training is always available on the technologies to ensure the most efficient use. This is something which officers have already requested more of, and this is also available to members.

Our Customer Services Charter provides details on how quickly officers will respond to all types of contact, including responding to voicemails within 24 hours, emails within 5 working days, letters within 7 working days. The only caveat to this will be when an officer is on leave, but an out of office message or voicemail will clearly explain this.

There have been a number of recommendations from staff to take agile working a step further to continue to modernise our ways of working to include a review of the use of core hours, flexitime, recording of working hours on time sheets, looking at different work patterns, and for less rigidity over being in the office two days a week but maintaining that important face to face contact time, not only with our customers as required but as teams, and for health and wellbeing purposes.

It is also important to note that agile working practices are allowing us to look at building rationalisation and deliver long-term savings for the council whilst continuing to deliver our services.

IMPACT ON SERVICE DELIVERY

Technology has enabled us to work from anywhere. Whilst there is more to do with our digital transformation agenda and more we can do to better use technology, the digital strategy continues to support agile working and grow and develop new technologies and systems. IT also enables our customers to contact us virtually, have information available to them on our websites and interact with us from the comfort of their own home without the need to come and see us. IT also enables officers and members to keep in touch no matter the work location. It is recognised that there will always be a need for that face to face contact and agile working continues to support that.

Our service delivery has not been negatively impacted by agile working, this is evident from staff feedback, our performance data and from our customer survey. The feedback about improvements which we can still make are not directly linked to agile working, they are things that existed before we moved to work in an agile manner. Some of which will be resolved with better use of and understanding of the technology we have available to us and improvements in working practices, processes and procedures rather than the location or times we work.

PERFORMANCE DATA AND OUTPUTS

When considering the impact of agile working, performance data is a good indicator of how the Council is performing. Whilst this report has not gone into great detail about performance as this can be found in our performance reports, having discussed and reviewed performance data from 2019/20, 2020/21 and the outturn for 2022/23, with our Information Governance Lead and Data Protection Officer, the performance data shows that there has been no overall negative impact on performance since agile working was introduced 2 years ago. In fact, of the 43 measures in place, 23 have increased in performance and 22 have decreased. Of those 22, a number of these measures are within Planning and GYN and it is widely acknowledged of the challenges which these areas are facing, that are not about agile working.

The number of corporate complaints has also reduced, with 319 in 21/22 and only 270 in 2022/23.

Staff reported that they work better and are more effective working in an agile manner with a balance of home and office working. Managers continue to manage performance through regular 1:1 meetings, objective setting and monitoring. Feedback suggested that where staff are not performing, they are brought back into the office environment. Performance is not based on the location someone works but the outputs they deliver. Therefore, feedback suggests that there is more work to do with managers to give them the tools and confidence to manage performance by outputs, with SMART objectives, and setting clear expectations of performance, and not by the location someone works.

CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEY FEEDBACK – ACCESS TO COUNCIL SERVICES

The survey was launched on the 7th of August 2023 and ran until the 8th of October 2023. The objective of the survey was to understand how customers currently interact with us, their preferred method of contact and looked to identify areas where we could improve our service delivery.

Our aim is to provide effective and accessible services to our residents and visitors to the borough and promote equality and inclusion for all. The results of this survey will help us to identify where we can

improve and shape our service delivery for the future meeting the needs of everyone in our community.

In total, 157 customers participated in this survey. The survey was anonymous and only captured the post code of the participant. Most respondents are from most deprived wards.

The preferred method of communication from the customer is e-mail (43%), followed by telephone (28%) and coming to see us in person (14%).

There was a large culture change during the pandemic and how we delivered drop-in services. For a considerable period of time people were not able to come in face to face without an appointment. Since this time, we have continued to offer bookable appointments and drop ins.

Therefore, it is fair to say that agile working and how customers access our services is working well, and we are still able to meet the demand of people who want to communicate with us in different ways.

Office rationalisation will help us to reshape to prebooked only appointments except for emergencies which will still be available.

Staff reported no negative feedback about the customer experience if anything they felt it had improved.

Staff did report an increase in email traffic and back-to-back meetings on Teams negatively impacting on the ability to have thinking time, complete actions and undertake work that was not meeting based. What Teams meetings has enabled is more effective meetings, better ability to collaborate with partners without the need to have excessive travel and improved meeting attendance. The digital wellbeing principals within the handbook cover best practice on how to manage this time, and managers are encouraged to work with their staff to ensure that this is well managed. We all have a personal responsibility for our wellbeing, and we can do better in this area to enable more focused time, not in meetings.

TRUST AND CULTURE

Managers report that agile working has prompted and promoted trust and confidence in staff. The culture shift in ways of working has not negatively impacted on the overall culture of the organisation. It has enabled a more agile culture.

As already mentioned, there is still work to be done using new tools, new processes, and new approaches to management and teamwork. Whilst some of this work has already been done, feedback suggests there is still more we can do with this new approach.

WIDER IMPACT OF AGILE WORKING

The CIPD reports that when looking at the wider impact of hybrid working, employers are most likely to say it has brought a positive impact for:

- attraction and retention of talent
- ability to recruit from a wider geography in the UK
- ability to recruit a more diverse workforce
- employee financial wellbeing

They are most likely to say it has brought a negative impact for:

- employee connection to organisation purpose
- ability of managers to lead teams effectively
- the culture of the organisation.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Agile working helps us to remain competitive in a difficult recruitment market and be an employer of choice.

Whilst the Council's turnover rates for Q1 and Q2 of 2023/24 have showed a reduction compared to the same time in 2020/23 it is important to understand what employees are looking for from their roles. At the end of Q2 in 2022/23 our turnover rate was 8.76% compared to 5.39% this year.

New research from the CIPD ([Flexible and hybrid working Practices 2023](#)) finds that an estimated 4 million people have changed careers due to a lack of flexibility at work, while an estimated 2 million have left a job in the last year for the same reason. In response, the CIPD has warned that businesses may face a talent exodus if they fail to offer flexible working options.

The CIPD's latest report, which explores employee and employer perspectives towards flexible and hybrid working practices, highlights that offering flexible working is key to retaining and attracting staff, addressing the current skills shortage and fostering inclusive workplaces.

Flexible working is pivotal when looking for a new role. When thinking about a new role, 71% say being able to have a flexible working pattern is important to them and 69% say the ability to work remotely is important.

Employees also highlight flexible working (53%) and remote working (53%) as key when considering a new job, only overtaken in importance by pay and benefits (77%).

The CIPD also reports that job satisfaction is greater for those with both formal and informal flexible working arrangements.

- Almost half (44%) of employees with flexible working arrangements describe this as informal. More than a fifth (23%) describe it as formal, with a further 30% describing their arrangements as a combination of formal and informal.
- Employees with a mixture of formal and informal flexible working arrangements are more satisfied with their job overall, their line manager and opportunities to progress. Those with only informal flexibility are more satisfied with their work-life balance and control over work.

- Only around half of employees feel comfortable asking their employer for informal (53%) or formal working arrangements (47%).

We will always have hard to recruit to posts like planning and environmental services, location challenges and difficulty competing with others, if we do not continue to offer agile working, we will not only lose staff but have an even greater difficulty to recruit.

FLEXIBLE WORKING

There will be legislative changes to flexible working in 2024 making it a day one right to request flexible working, with the opportunity to make two applications in any year. In addition, the onerous obligation on the employee to explain what effects the proposed change has on their employer and what solutions are available to mitigate these effects, is no longer required.

ACAS highlights the different types of flexible working that are options for employers and employees to consider, as highlighted in the graphic below:



The Council already offers opportunities for flexible working through its flexible and agile working policies and includes hybrid working, job sharing, shift work, remote working, part-time working, compressed hours and flexitime. The overarching principles of these policies is that the business needs are met and maintained.

As at the end of March 2023 our staff headcount totalled 446 (385 FTE). Of those, 125 work part time. Staff already have the ability to request different working patterns through the Council's Flexible

Working Policy and there are already a number of staff who not only work part time but also on a different work pattern, including compressed hours patterns.

The feedback suggests that there is work that can be done to further modernise our approaches to flexible working practices and to raise awareness with staff of the options available to them, that will continue to meet the needs of the business.

WORKING TIME DIRECTIVE (WTR) CHANGES

The government has also announced that it intends to make changes to the working time regulation record keeping requirements on daily working hours.

CONCLUSION

Agile working provides greater flexibility particularly in relation to the time and location employees can work, subject to the requirements of the service and individual jobs. It has been successfully embedded into the Council over the last two years. The key principals of agile working are still relevant and include:

- **Agile and flexible** working is based on the **business needs**
- A **commitment** to investment in **technology**
- Staff are **supported, motivated, engaged** and feel **part of the organisation**
- To support and **increase opportunities** on recruitment and retention
- **Productivity, outputs and performance** are increased
- Improved **resilience** and ability to flexibly **deliver** our services
- Reducing the running costs of the Council through **making best use of our assets**
- Reducing our **environmental footprint**

The impending changes to the flexible working legislation, working time regulations and this review, gives an opportunity for us to continue to modernise our working practices and ways of working that will benefit the Council, its staff and communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into consideration all of the feedback, the evidence of performance, the latest research and the office rationalisation the following updates are recommended:

- Minor updates to the Agile Working Policy & Handbook to clarify points raised including the need to work flexibly to meet the business need, no fixed days in the office but appropriate levels of cover to meet the business needs, clarity over commuting time and mileage claims and what happens when technology is not working and the need to come into the office.
- Modernise the flexitime policy and encompass flexible working times and an ability to work in a flexible manner to meet the business needs within the Agile Working Policy. Remove the

need to record daily working hours on time sheets in line with the changes to the WTR and remove core times.

- TOIL and overtime only authorised where appropriate, and pre-approved to meet extenuating circumstances
- Support for managers to manage performance and outputs – where we can support and buddy's where this is going well to help learn from them
- Look into options to offer the ability for staff to buy additional annual leave

These changes will go through the usual consultation processes with UNISON and the joint consultative working group as well as engagement with the staff engagement group.

The next steps will be to review the policies and procedures and go through the consultation process, not only with UNISON and the JCWG but also with staff through the staff engagement group and extended management team. The updated policy will then be brought back to Cabinet for final approval.

FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

Agile working has enabled us to be adaptable, flexible and responsive and has given us additional capacity which has been a consequence of introducing at-pace agile working during the pandemic.

Removing the ability to work in an agile way will have a negative impact on our ability to recruit and retain good staff and be an employer of choice. We already know the positive impact agile working has had on service delivery, staff health and wellbeing and productivity and we do not want to lose this. The policy will continue to support and enable maximum efficiency, with modern working practices, whilst balancing working and needs of customers.

There will be financial implications from this policy. However, they will be balanced against the benefits and tangible savings for example travel expenses, printing costs, time and productivity.

The policy will continue to be subject to regular review in response to changing service delivery needs and with the ongoing development of new technologies.

4. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Agile Working Policy and handbook.
- Flexitime Policy
- CIPD research paper

Area for consideration	Comment
Monitoring Officer Consultation:	Considered through ELT
Section 151 Officer Consultation:	Considered through ELT
Existing Council Policies:	Considered
Financial Implications:	Considered
Legal Implications (including human rights)	Considered
Risk Implications:	Considered

Equality Issues/EIA:	Considered.
Crime & Disorder:	N/A
Every Child Matters:	N/A