
Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee
4th November 2020

Report of the Chief Executive

Changes in Working Practices and use of new technology

Purpose

1. This report is intended to provide the Health and Adult Social Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the impact on the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the Council's workforce, our working practices and the utilisation of technology.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the Committee note the report and comment on the issues set out below.

Background

3. Detailed consideration of the potential impact of a coronavirus pandemic on our workforce began in early February 2020. With the focus on making sure our workforce was protected whilst preserving continuity of service delivery. In order to ensure our that Policies and Practices were consistent with emerging public health recommendations, temporary adjustments were made to the relevant People Management Policies, Procedures and Practices as deemed appropriate during a pandemic situation, in order to:
 - protect employee health and safety
 - implement flexible working practices, agile working and time management arrangements
 - enable closer monitoring of the welfare of employees
 - ensure clear communication on risks to our employees
 - enable a supportive approach for employees who have caring responsibilities
 - Ensure staff are supported in making difficult decisions
 - ensure support to employees to address psychological effects arising from bereavement of family and friends



4. Changes in People Management Policies:

Temporary adjustments to the following policies were implemented at the start of lock down which officially began on the 23rd March 2020:

- Annual leave
- Attendance Management Policy –
- Special leave Policy
- Recording of COVID absences
- Recording of Covid test results
- Quarantine guidelines following holiday

These continued to be updated in line with Government guidance/LGA advice.

5. An immediate change in working practice was the move for much of the workforce to work from home, however with children also being at home amendments were made to the Council's agile / flexi arrangements to enable increased flexibility on working patterns. This supported employees unable to work their usual hours or pattern of work; due to the need to look after children as well as to react to personal crisis and buy supplies.

6. Working from Home and Conducting Business virtually

Pre-lockdown there were 4708 members of staff across the Council (excluding Schools). The latest information indicates that 1786 were fully working from home, 1088 were partially working from home and 1177 continued to work on site/office with the remainder deployed to other services or voluntary services working from either other locations or from home. Most Council services have operated seamlessly throughout the lockdown period with the majority of office-based staff working from home.

7. The Council's ability to work effectively with much of its workforce based at home, working remotely and conducting business via virtual means relied on technological capability. Digital & ICT Services mounted an urgent response to enable as many Council staff as possible to do this. The changes implemented being as follows;

- An immediate move to virtual meetings – initially using WebEx, but rapidly followed by a Council-wide deployment of Microsoft Teams
 - *Over 36000 Microsoft Teams meetings and almost 100000 chat messages 7th July to 4th October 2020.*
 - *Extended from internal-only meetings to include public meetings with recordings, including Full Council.*



- Moved to 'softphone' technology, rather than physical handsets – using the existing Jabber product for voice communications and instant messaging
 - *Over 962000 internal Jabber calls made 1st April to 5th October 2020.*
 - *Over 551000 external Jabber calls made 1st April to 5th October 2020.*
- Made changes to cope with the greater reliance on electronic forms of communication
 - *In July and August 2020, between 140000 and 190000 emails per day were being received.*
- Sourcing, building and deploying large volumes of personal computer equipment
 - *Over 1000 laptops acquired between 1st March and 30th September 2020*
 - *New policy and online form allowing staff to taken monitors, keyboards & mice home.*
- Enabled a move towards more citizen self-service access to online services
 - *Access to 'my house' website pages increased 250% between February & April 2020*
 - *Web address searches (used by online forms and searching for bin collection dates) increased by 340% between February & April 2020*
- Increased internal Service Desk resources to provide easier access via telephone where people unable to connect to the Council network
 - *Redeployed ICT staff to provide greater amount of telephone support to homeworkers, gradually transitioning this back to self-service channels by August 2020.*
 - *Support calls to ICT service desk saw a large spike (around 15%) in March/April 2020 but have since fallen back to levels in line with previous years.*
- Enabled a reduction in local printing and introduced changes required to continue outgoing physical mail
 - *Printing volumes reduced by around 75% between February and May 2020*
 - *66% increase in number of users of the 'myMail' centralised printing service between February and April 2020.*
- Increased quantity and timeliness of Website information on covid and developed new online forms
 - *New web page design to simplify access to Covid-19 information*



- *New online forms for business grants, discretionary grants, emergency grants (food & emergency supplies), self-isolating hardship grants*
 - *New process and online form for booking Stourbridge recycling centre ('tip') appointments*
- Enabled new arrangements for payments when unable to pay cash via kiosks
 - *Around 3600 payments made at Dudley Council Plus cash kiosk in February 2020. Majority of cash payers moved to direct debit, telephone payments, post office or paypoint.*
 - Maintained essential on-site services
 - *Some key ICT staff remained working through lockdown – engineers receiving deliveries and building equipment, print unit, ID card production.*
 - Move to modern digital “ways of working” accelerated
 - *Key elements of original 3-year ICT strategy delivered in 6 months*
8. The move to remote working required employees to develop new digital and resilience skills that were supported by learning and development initiatives with training methods adapted to suit new circumstances, A number of virtual sessions were co-developed by Human Resources & Organisational Development and ICT services to this end. As employees have continued to work remotely, the Learning & Organisational Development team developed a number of remote working sessions that were available to all employees via the use of MS Teams. Coaching sessions have also been made available.

9. Responsive Employee engagement

Workforce engagement, essential to the psychological contract between employee and employer, became a more prominent need during the covid crisis. A psychological contract being an unwritten set of expectations between the employee and the employer, which includes informal arrangements, mutual beliefs, common ground and perceptions between the two parties. A balanced contract shows employees that their employer values and respects them and finds their role within the company important to its success, which in turn can lead to increases in productivity and a positive impact on the business itself.

10. Engagement with employees during Covid, moved from a planned bi- annual model to a more responsive model delivered over a shorter timescale with outcomes shared within a couple of weeks council wide Employee Survey, entitled “How are you?” was undertaken during May 2020. Feedback was very positive; with the majority of staff adapting well to working from home. The table below gives details of the feedback received:



KEY STATS FROM THE EMPLOYEE SURVEY How are you? Coronavirus remote working & wellbeing survey	
2074	responses received
90%	of staff feel the council treats them fairly
4.02	out of 5 is our staff engagement score
86%	of staff have felt supported during covid-19
93%	know what is expected of them to do their job
83%	said there had been good communication
90%	of staff are currently working remotely
89%	are proud of the work that they do and do their best every day
89%	of managers are checking-in with staff more regularly than before Covid-19
60%	of managers have changed their view of remote working for the better
73%	of managers would support more remote working
4455	positive comments were received about remote working
1191	suggestions have been made to help support and encourage further remote working
1298	people described their new normal
57%	of staff feel their skills have improved
86%	of staff have changed the way that they work
56%	of staff feel their productivity has improved
82%	of staff are embracing new ways of working
89%	staff feel trusted to do their job
86%	of staff feel their colleagues are doing good work



11. Engagement with Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) employees was also undertaken, following evidence from Public Health England that the impact of Covid is more significant among BAME communities. In recognition of the heightened anxiety this evidence may cause to BAME employees a bespoke engagement exercise was implemented quickly comprised of 19 group and 10 one to one sessions involving a total of 199 employees. Following these sessions, an action plan has been developed focusing on actions that can quickly be implemented to support BAME staff and ensure robust arrangements are in place to ensure a safe return.
12. The My Annual Review process was adapted to enable the opportunity for managers to discuss with individual members of their team, the impact of COVID-19 has had on them from a work-related and personal perspective. the introduction of a template/guide to aid the conversation as well as enabling questions to be tailored that may more appropriately to suit individual needs.
13. Managing and supporting employees working remotely

Remote working has required managers to manage and communicate with staff differently including managing by outcomes rather than visibility or time. Health and safety needs for the whole workforce promoted the need for different conversations to be held between managers and individual team members. Focused sessions for managers were developed to support managing a remote workforce. As needs emerge, new sessions are being developed.

- 14 Mental health first aiders have supported informal networks and provided safe space for staff to share feelings, the resurrection of mental health first aid training (being delivered remotely) has seen an increase attendance and the remote sessions delivered across the organisation provide time for cathartic discussion.

15. Deployment

The deployment of staff was organised, and staff mobilised to resource areas of need, through a small deployment team focused initially on two distinct areas:

- The creation of a temporary food bank to help support DCVS and Black Country Food Bank, including a process for administration and a payment line
- The creation of a single contact point for service areas and DCVS to request help and support from the deployed workforce.

The deployment exercise gave the council the opportunity of working with Dudley CVS and its partners in a more robust way, offering help in areas where they were struggling. In addition, employees were deployed to council service areas in need of additional capacity. Work has subsequently progressed to develop a Core skills matrix which will be used to capture skills of employees across the Council to be completed by early 2021. This together with agreed protocols that will enable the



swift mobilisation staff with specific required skillsets into key roles during future emergencies.

16. Virtual recruitment

Whilst many recruitment campaigns were initially paused at the onset of lockdown, changes were introduced to enable more effective use of virtual processes. A Digital Guide to Recruitment with tips for managers and candidates in partaking in a virtual process has been produced. In addition, a virtual approach is now in place for all pre-employment checks including, for example, DBS and Right to Work. This approach has had a positive impact in reducing the time to hire and therefore a permanent shift to this new way of working will be explored. Such a change will be influenced by decisions from the Disclosure and Barring Service who may impose a return to the checking of physical documents.

17. Collaborative working

The Covid crisis strengthened collaborative working across the Council with colleagues from across the council united on a shared purpose encompassing keeping front line service delivery on track, meeting the needs of vulnerable communities, ensuring the health, safety and well-being of all and implementing rapid change. Discussion is ongoing about how we harness, retain and embed this unified one council approach and working practices in the future.

18. Support to Schools

Schools remained open during the lockdown period with full reopening in September. Human Resources partnered and collaborated with other services to provide support and guidance for Children's Services and schools during this time interpreting government guidance and developing new working practices to support the changing needs of schools and services.

19. Conclusions

Whilst the Covid crisis has been challenging for the Council, its employees, partners and wider communities, it's impact on our working practices has seen an acceleration towards achieving some of our longer-term goals in a shorter timescale. Examples identified include the achievement of a 3 year ICT strategy in 6 months, moving closer to the 2030 future workforce goal of "managers having developed new competencies to lead and develop staff in a much more agile working environment" as well as demonstrating our ability to adapt and respond quickly to rapidly changing HR and employment guidance. The next challenge is to retain and embed the positive changes to the way we work. A commitment to retaining a shared purpose is evident in ongoing discussions across a wide group of leaders across the council.



Finance

20. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report

Law

21. There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

Equality Impact

22. Government, Public Health England and health reports including PHE 'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of Covid-19 report, highlighted the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on people from BAME communities. Within the Council Independent focus groups were held with BAME staff around their concerns about Covid-19 and returning to work, which has led to the Council developing an action plan which will focus on actions that can quickly be implemented to support staff.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

23. There are no additional HR/Organisational Development implications to those outlined in the report.

Commercial/Procurement

24. The changes to the way in which our workforce operates, alongside potential opportunities to change how we deliver our services has the potential to make services more effective and efficient, ensuring the best possible customer service to our customers.

Health, Wellbeing and Safety

25. The health and well being of the workforce has been the paramount consideration in all decisions taken during this period. Staff have been supported by mental health first aiders and offered opportunities to get involved in a number of initiatives to reduce the impact of loneliness and isolation. As the pandemic continues the health and safety and well-being of the workforce remains a key priority to ensure organisational resilience to support our wider communities.

Kevin O'Keefe
Chief Executive



Contact Officers:

Jacqueline Branch
Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development
Telephone: 01384 811308
Email: jacqueline.branch@dudley.gov.uk

Andrew Tromans
Acting Head of Digital and ICT Services
Telephone: 01384 815658
E-mail: andrew.tromans@dudley.gov.uk

Rachel Jones
Telephone: 01384 815773
Email: rachel.a.jones@dudley.gov.uk

Jo Martin
Telephone: 01384 815025
Email: jo.martin@dudley.gov.uk

