

**FLEXIBLE WORKING INFORMAL GROUP**

**13 September 2012**

Attendance:

Councillors:

Chairman: Lipscomb (P)

Achwal (P)

Byrnes (P)

Nelmes (P)

Warwick (P)

Simon Eden – Chief Executive (P)

Alison Gavin - Head of Organisational Development (P)

Others in Attendance:

Dave Shaw – Principal Democratic Services Officer

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**1. FLEXIBLE WORKING OVERVIEW AND UPDATE AND CONSIDERATION OF THE INTERNAL AUDIT PROGRESS REPORT TO 29 FEBRUARY 2012 RELATING TO FLEXIBLE WORKING (REPORT AUD027 REFERS)**

The Chief Executive set the context for the Council's adoption of flexible working practices. These included the objectives of being an employer of choice (including staff retention); to achieve the efficient use of buildings to generate financial savings and to improve effective service delivery. The flexible working scheme had proved popular with staff and the Council's comprehensive approach to its introduction had resulted in an award nomination from the Municipal Journal. The Informal Group also required reassurance that flexible working provided good customer service and support to Members.

The Head of Organisational Development submitted at the meeting background information in relation to flexible working at the City Council. This information included copies of the Flexible Working Hours Policy and Procedures; Flexible Working Protocols and Home Working Procedures, copies of which can be viewed on the Council's intranet.

The Head of Organisational Development explained the various facets of flexible working including mobile working; home working; flexible employment patterns and hot desking. This varied approach produced a mix of patterns of work across the Council dependent upon the solution which was most appropriate to provide service delivery. For example officers working in the field would be provided with mobile technology to allow them to communicate

to and from site visits whereas more office based solutions, such as revenues and benefits, would utilise other appropriate technologies. A key consideration was to provide core principles which would be applied consistently across the mix of solutions.

There had been a number of overarching infrastructure changes to support the flexible working initiatives. These included improved use of information technology to create roaming profiles to allow staff to login from any machine and e-booking systems for desks and meeting space. Additional infrastructure changes were the introduction of electronic document and record management systems; an update of human resources policies; an investment in the work environment to create new office layouts and furniture and storage solutions and also training programmes to support the new approach.

The introduction of flexible working had been carefully considered including the opportunities for improved service delivery by enhancing the synergy between departmental working, for example by locating building control officers close to planning colleagues and housing officers close to the customer service centre to answer personal enquiries.

There were a number of benefits obtained through the support of staff for flexible working including a 77% satisfaction rating for staff welcoming the adoption of flexible working; successful investors in people re-accreditation; improved sickness absence figures and it was also part of a package to attract new employees to work for the City Council.

In reply to Members' questions, it was explained that flexible working also had strict rules on information governance including policies on the use of IT and document storage.

The methods of management control that related to flexible working practices were discussed. The Head of Organisational Development stated that managers were aware of the service performance outputs for their team and what could be expected of individual members of staff. For example, within Housing Benefits, there were parameters for the length of time taken to process a housing benefit claim and therefore the resultant output could be estimated and shortcomings addressed. It was possible to measure customer response times from office based staff compared with home workers and for managers to establish the reasons for any decrease in response times should these occur. It was also for managers to exercise discretion as to which members of their staff would be eligible for home working.

It was noted that for new members of staff that required training, home working might not be suitable. Requests for home working also varied between staff age groups, with it being least popular with younger members of staff who perhaps did not have the space at home to homework and who enjoyed the social interaction of the work place.

The Group considered the Internal Audit Progress Report to 29 February 2012 (Report AUD027 refers). Attention was given to the findings on home working that there appeared to be an inconsistent approach in the monitoring of performance on a day to day basis reviewing whether the actual outcomes achieved improved productivity. Members enquired whether staff were accessible when they worked from home.

The Chief Executive stated that communications technology allowed for seamless answering of calls for home workers as if they were in the offices. In certain cases the present telephone system would not provide a fully comprehensive service and the Council was in the process of acquiring a new system that would extend the possibilities for seamless communication. There were occasional behavioural issues where staff forgot or deliberately did not divert their telephones. These were issues for line managers to address to ensure performance standards. The system required robust management to get the most out of it. In certain circumstances working patterns of teams had been amended in order that a member of staff was retained within the offices to provide urgent advice on site.

It had also been an Audit finding that there were concerns that policies may not be consistently and equitably applied as managers may find it difficult to access the latest guidance due to poor linkage between relevant documents on the Council's intranet. It was explained that this comment was in relation to where guidance could be found within Council's information systems. Policies were applied consistently, such as those for lone working and health and safety, but it was acknowledged that a concern of the Group could be the inconsistency in application within the management culture relating to flexible working. Successful implementation required consistency in managers doing their jobs properly and appropriately. There was the opportunity for the Head of Organisational Development to monitor the application of flexible working policies to ensure that they were consistent but a key role rested with senior managers and the standards that were expected of them in applying the policies and practices. This included managers assessing productivity in terms of satisfactory outputs and outcomes and identifying variances in productivity. Employees had a right to ask to be considered under flexible working policies but acceptance rested with managers following consideration of business needs.

The Chief Executive added that the flexible working initiative should also be looked at in the wider context in that savings had been made through rationalising office space; there was improved time on site for field officers and improved staff retention and reduced sickness levels.

It was also clarified that employees that were accepted for 100% home working would have a health and safety inspection of their homes.

In conclusion, the Informal Group agreed that overall the flexible working system worked well. There was the opportunity to enhance good practice in certain areas, particularly in managers being consistent in its implementation.

An example was applying good practice in providing colleague cover to deal with customer enquiries.

Staff should also be made aware of the outcomes of the review including the communication of the Informal Group's key findings to the Senior Management Team. This included reinforcement of the clear desk policies and their importance for health and safety considerations and ensuring confidentiality.

The actions in the Audit Report would be completed by the allocated officers and progress would be reported back to the Audit Committee.

No further meetings of the Informal Group were required and an update report on progress would be submitted to the Personnel Committee in 12 months' time.

**RECOMMENDED:**

1. That Managers be reminded of the need to be consistent in the implementation of Flexible Working policies and practices including:

In applying good practice to provide colleague cover to deal with customer enquiries.

Ensuring that proper use was made of the telephony system so that officers could be contacted when required.

2. That all Staff be made aware of the outcomes of the review.
3. That an update report be submitted to the Personnel Committee in 12 months' time.

The meeting commenced at 6.00pm and concluded at 7.45pm