

Agenda Item No: 4



Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Hybrid Working

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked:

1. Review the progress made with hybrid working
 2. Note the impacts that hybrid working has (or hasn't had) on performance, customer satisfaction, savings and HR metrics
 3. Note that this approach will continue to develop as we learn from our experiences
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Date of O&S meeting: 13 September 2022

Chair of O&S Committee: Cllr Ovenden

Relevant Portfolio(s): Cllr Pickering

Summary: Members of the committee were interested in exploring how well the hybrid arrangements were working and in particular wanted to consider this in terms of performance, customer satisfaction, savings, human resources and recruitment. This report will aim to provide a review of these areas.

Exempt from Publication: NO

Background Papers:

Contact: Michelle.pecci@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330602

Report Title: Hybrid Working

Introduction and Background

1. Since the pandemic, and the major change in attitudes around more flexible forms of working, hybrid working in particular has created new employee expectations and desires. At Ashford we already had flexible working policies and the ability to work remotely but the pandemic, and the emerging picture that hybrid working was likely to be widely adopted across other organisations, meant that we needed to ensure we could respond effectively to the wider employment market.
2. As the restrictions on workplaces eased, it became more evident that organisations who were not supporting flexible forms of working risked increased employee turnover, reduced employee engagement and limited the ability to attract talent in the future. This meant that we had to be flexible in how we adapted to hybrid working recognising that it would not be for everyone, and one size may not fit all.
3. A number of staff could not work remotely (AMC staff, Facilities staff, Civil Enforcement Officers, Aspire) and a number of staff do not wish to work remotely, and have been accommodated in the civic centre throughout pandemic, as the rules allowed.
4. We reviewed our homeworking/remote working and flexible working policies in early 2021 so that as restrictions eased we were prepared and could make consistent decisions within a framework of guidance.
5. The remote working policy supports requests for hybrid work giving flexibility for both the staff member and the organisation recognising that needs change and both sides benefit from a requirement to review the success of the arrangement. The flexible working policy is a route to be taken where both the individual and council needs certainty about working hours or location and becomes a contractual term. An individual can only make one flexible working request per year so it is less flexible in this respect.

Hybrid working

6. We have been careful to keep engaging with staff throughout the pandemic to establish the likely demand for hybrid working and to understand the perceived benefits and challenges from a staff perspective.
7. It has widely been reported that despite the many complexities and challenges of living and working through the global pandemic, staff have still identified many benefits from working from home, for both them and their employer. These benefits include a better work–life balance, greater ability to focus with fewer distractions, more time for family and friends, saved commuting time and costs

and higher levels of motivation, job satisfaction, improved productivity and reduced absence rates.

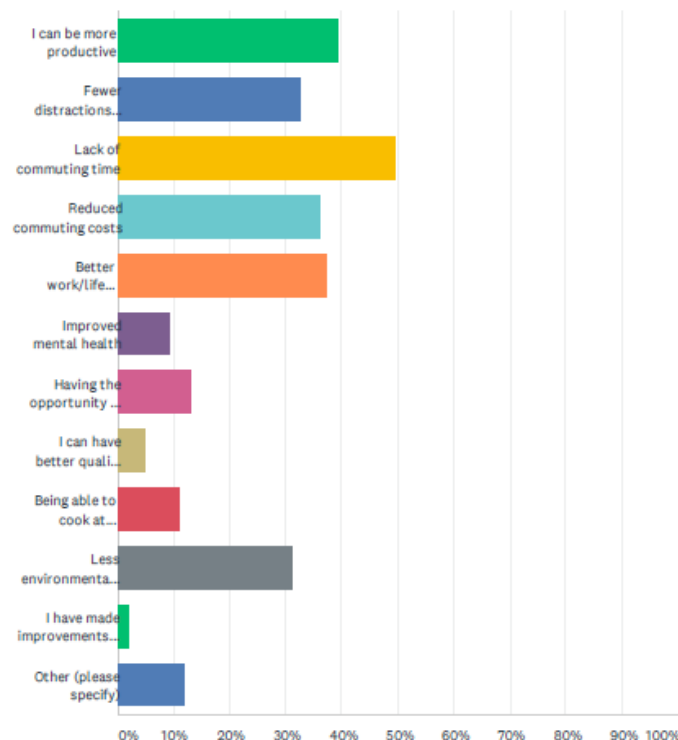
8. Hybrid working also provides other opportunities for organisations in terms of enabling employee wellbeing, supporting inclusion and diversity and reducing facilities costs, with some employers reducing their office space to help make savings
9. The reported benefits for employees are consistent with the feedback we have had from staff in the surveys we have conducted during the pandemic. (Appendices 1 and 2).
10. The data from the staff surveys told us that staff were interested in continuing to work remotely but most felt they would want to be in the offices some of their working week, the survey also asked staff to identify the benefits of remote working for them:

Given the choice, would you like to work from home more frequently
once the offices re-open?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Work from home - all of my week	9.56%	28
Work from home - UP TO 80% of my week	21.84%	64
Work from home - UP TO 60% of my week	22.87%	67
Work from home - UP TO 40% of my week	18.09%	53
Work from home - UP TO 20% of my week	14.33%	42
I do not want to work from home in future	10.92%	32
My role requires me to be onsite e.g. Facilities, AMC, CEO	2.39%	7
TOTAL		293

What are the TOP THREE benefits of working from home?
MAXIMUM THREE ANSWERS

Answered: 292 Skipped: 45



11. Whilst the full benefits/dis-benefits of hybrid working as a specific form of flexible working are yet to be fully researched, the CIPD have conducted a study of homeworking during the pandemic that has provided a useful snapshot of issues to consider:

- a. Increased productivity among homeworkers is often achieved through work intensification.
- b. For some workers, homeworking can provide a more productive environment because there are fewer distractions.
- c. Knowledge sharing and team relationships often suffer – unless task-related processes are designed to take location into account.
- d. Innovation can suffer if knowledge sharing and team relationships deteriorate.
- e. Social isolation can be a problem for some workers, but this depends on personality and lifestyle.
- f. Avoiding the commute is a major benefit for most.
- g. Attention to work-life boundaries is helpful not just for homeworkers but for anyone in the digital age.
- h. The career downsides are real and need to be managed.

Source: [Working from home: assessing the research evidence | CIPD](#) September 2020

12. This CIPD research underpins the fact that homeworking working can be difficult to get right, and the importance of ensuring there is face to face contact to help

build team relationships, share knowledge, learn and to innovate. These are crucial elements we have had to consider as we have shaped our approach to hybrid.

13. As case studies and examples emerge it is clear that there is no single way to implement hybrid working, and its exact form is likely to vary from organisation to organisation. Ways of addressing some of the challenges that are associated with remote working will vary from team to team depending on the nature of the service provided and this will require us all to be flexible and adaptable.
14. We are still working through some of the challenges and it is likely that our approach will need to change as we learn from our experiences, and learn from the feedback from staff, customers and members. We will also need to be flexible as technology, service design and customer demands/needs changes to ensure service delivery is responsive, efficient and effective.
15. We have already seen how learning and development, for example, has had a seismic shift in approach. Many programmes have gone online through virtual/zoom/Teams for their person to person sessions. Developments in the software now mean that traditional breakout groups are possible and this has broken down the barriers to remote learning. Many programmes now have a blended approach with a mixture of virtual seminars, independent eLearning and face to face. It is fair to say that the days of traditional learning are changed forever due to the advancements in hybrid technology.
16. At Ashford we have taken care to regularly survey staff to ensure that hybrid working practices continue to deliver benefits to both staff and the organisation, enabling us to tackle problems in a timely way. i.e. how to accommodate people who did not want to/could not work remotely, providing space for colleagues to sit, and work together, how to promote team working etc. as well as to gain a common understanding of what the new office norms could look like.
17. Managing remotely is very different to managing in a face to face environment and the skills and behaviours of managers need to take this difference into account. Whether they have a whole team working remotely or just a small number of the team working at home for a couple of days a week, we have therefore produced a guide (appendix 3) to help to support managers in the communications they have with their team, how to building team morale, tackle difficult conversations, setting objectives and supporting development.
18. We have developed a similar guide (appendix 4) for staff designed to assist them in understanding the basic requirements and tools available, as well as to emphasise the importance of looking after their wellbeing and especially that although they are physically distanced it is important to remain socially connected.
19. Further important considerations for us were cyber security, data protection and health and safety. We have ensured a varied comms plan has been rolled out for each of these including staff training and awareness across all three areas.

20. Once the Covid restrictions were lifted we set about reconfiguring the office spaces. It was clear that time in the office would need to provide opportunities for collaboration (as this is the aspect that is more difficult remotely) as well as space to have hybrid meetings with people not physically in the office.
21. Covid-secure meeting rooms were set up with webcams and speakers so that hybrid teams meetings could be held. The Port Health team were based on level three of the civic centre and would be for a number of months so initially we decided to reconfigure levels one and two of the civic centre so as to accommodate everyone on two floors. We would then reconfigure level three to meeting, collaboration and flexi space once Port Health were able to move into their building at Sevington.
22. The IT team have spent some time to research and test hybrid meeting equipment that is suitable for the committee rooms so that larger meetings and committee meetings can be held in a hybrid environment. The selected equipment is due to be installed in the committee rooms in early August; this will enhance our ability to hold effective larger meetings. Whilst legislation does not allow some formal council meetings to be held virtually, this will open up options for interested parties to observe meetings increasing citizen participation and potentially improving the diversity of people being able to access local democracy. Member services are currently working with a provider to design a hybrid meeting solution for the Council chamber too.
23. The staff surveys indicated that likely working patterns would be up to 60% of people in the office at once and so after a mammoth spring clean a new layout, providing 60% of the desk numbers we had previously, has been implemented.
24. The spring clean enabled us to destroy unimportant files and documents that hadn't been needed for more than a year and scan those hard copies we needed to retain. Importantly this meant that we did not need the storage space (bookcases, cupboards etc.) and we were able to space-out the desks more than previously acknowledging that Covid security would continue to be a concern for people as they returned to the office.
25. Services are now located in zones and a set number of desks are allocated per service. Staff use a booking system to ensure there is a desk for them to use in their service zone when they come to the office and in addition, there are banks of 'hot desks' that anyone is able to book. The hot desks are intended to be able to accommodate additional staff should all the team be in the building and extra desks needed, or to encourage collaboration between staff working on common projects etc.
26. Port Health have not fully moved out of the building due to the delays with the import checks, and they are likely to need some space for a while so plans are being developed for one or two wings on level three. What our experience so far has taught us is that as well as more meeting and collaboration space we need more confidential space to make long telephone and Teams calls. The office environment is much quieter than pre-pandemic as we have no desk telephones to ring and fill the office with noise, consequently telephone conversations can

be more disruptive and so longer calls are better to be taken in a confidential space when possible.

27. Fewer days in the office has contributed to a reduction in our carbon footprint. Before the pandemic we asked people about their commute to work, 85% said they travelled to work by car. We also asked staff how long their commute was, 43% of respondents live 11+ miles from the civic centre.
28. By way of a modest estimate, if all these staff who live 11+ miles away remote work for one day per week (and usually drive) this would give an annual reduction of circa 184k* commuting miles. This is a significant contribution to our carbon reduction strategy.

[*Based on 46 working weeks x 22 miles per day=1,012 miles per person per year. 85% of 500 staff= 425 staff drive to work. 43% of those 425 staff that drive live 11+ miles away =182 drivers. 1012 miles x 182 drivers= 184,184 miles]

How long is your commute to work?]

Less than 5 miles	44.71%
5-10 miles	11.60%
11-20 miles	27.30%
More than 20 miles	16.38%

How has it worked out so far?

29. Members were interested in exploring how well the hybrid arrangements were working and in particular would like the Committee to consider this in terms of performance, customer satisfaction, savings, human resources and recruitment. The rest of this report will aim to provide a review of these areas.

Performance

30. Better productivity is cited as a major benefit of homeworking, in some teams it can be difficult to measure this objectively by having tangible measures. For example the accountancy team will be measured on whether monitoring and reporting is complete and if budget pressures etc. are highlighted in a timely way, it will not necessarily measure how many or how long a piece of work took. However there are teams where it is easier to objectively see how performance was before widespread hybrid working compared to now.
31. We have always seen the Customer Service and R&B homeworkers with higher productivity than equivalent office based staff. The following table shows Customer Service data for the fourth quarter of 2019/20 (pre pandemic), compared to the fourth quarter of 2021/22 (this year).

Month	Calls Answered + Callbacks Handled	Emails Handled	Wechats	Telephone Appointments	Face to Face	Total Tenderden	Total Contacts Dealt With	Percentage Answered	Average speed of answer (hh:mm:ss)	Average ACD handling time (hh:mm:ss)
Jan-20	7173	1669	0	0	2206	298	8842	70.79%	00:01:14	00:04:41
Feb-20	6317	1196	0	0	1675	175	7513	73.48%	00:01:09	00:04:25
Mar-20	7175	2707	0	0	2168	416	9882	74.47%	00:01:14	00:04:23
Jan-22	7549	2142	90	34	413	8	10236	82.84%	00:01:30	00:04:57
Feb-22	7545	2779	95	41	456	20	10936	84.20%	00:01:31	00:04:46
Mar-22	9107	3426	104	54	695	29	13415	87.26%	00:01:23	00:04:50

32. It can be seen that the percentage of contacts answered have increased from circa 73% to circa 85% across each quarter despite the total numbers of contacts increasing by around 8,000 contacts. Some of this can be attributed to fewer face-to-face contacts (that take longer and have more down time) but much of this is as a result of fewer distractions than being in the office and therefore higher productivity.
33. The following data for R&B shows that average time to process a change in benefit has improved whereas average time to process a new claim has increased slightly. What this data does not show however is that the R&B teams have also taken on a significant level of additional work including: distributing business grants, test and trace isolation payments and Council Tax energy Rebate schemes. This has resulted in tens of thousands additional applications/payments/correspondence for the team to deal with and this has been managed within existing resources, with some overtime being worked in the team with a minimal impact on processing time.

Average time to process a change in benefit			
2019/20	Q1	Q2	Q3
	2.82 days	2.64 days	2.61 days
2021/22	Q1	Q2	Q3
	1.75 days	1.94 days	2.02 days

Average time to process a new claim			
2019/20	Q1	Q2	Q3
	25.63 days	23.5 days	22.27 days
2021/22	Q1	Q2	Q3
	26.35 days	24.27 days	25.2 days

HR measures

Sickness

34. During the pandemic the council's sickness levels dropped from 9.1 days per full time equivalent (FTE) to 4.7 days per FTE. This reduction was attributed to a lower incidence of seasonal colds and flu, lower exposure to things that may

cause stomach upsets etc. and reduced physical activities that may give rise to musculoskeletal problems/broken bones etc. In addition staff were able to log in remotely if they were able to work, when previously they may have called in sick and not worked. The reduction in absence levels was always a temporary dip in sickness as the environmental factors that cause sickness absence would be reintroduced as restrictions eased.

35. Our current sickness rate (2021/22) is 6.3 days per FTE (excluding covid related absence). A full report on sickness absence is due before the O&S committee in September, this will provide analysis on the breakdown of sickness absence, but compared to pre pandemic levels sickness levels continue to be lower.

Employment Relations

36. There have not been any trends in formal employment relations cases linked to hybrid working. Case numbers generally have reduced; in the six months to the end of 2019/20 the HR team opened 110 cases. These were all types of cases i.e. included welfare issues, organisational change, H&S, performance, capability, probation sickness etc.
37. For the same period in 2021/22 the HR team opened 66 cases. This suggests that 'organisational health' is much improved compared to the previous period. Some of this will be due to fewer sickness numbers, and some due to fewer flexible working requests as the hybrid model provides the flexibility that would otherwise need to be wrapped up in a formal HR process.

Recruitment/vacancies

38. Our turnover due to all reasons in 2019/20 was 11%, with 9% due to resignations. In 2021/22 ABC's turnover increased to 12.5% overall in 2021/22 with 10% due to resignations. The national figure for turnover is circa 15.5% for 2021/22.
39. Of those who completed exit interviews the reasons for leaving were varied with one person who resigned for another role and one retiree specifically highlighting their difficulties with remote working as the reason for leaving. Other leavers specified flexibility as an element they appreciated whilst working at ABC.
40. With vacancies now being reported as being higher than unemployment it is clear it is a candidates market. 45% of employers saying they have hard-to-fill vacancies. Many are increasing pay, offering a wider range of benefits to attract and retain workers, as well as upskilling and training the existing workforce. These other benefits are important to note because it suggest that employers may be reaching a limit in terms of raising pay in response to recruitment and retention challenges.
41. When other employers are offering the ability to work remotely it is important that we also open to supporting flexible working arrangements and the remote working policy includes this as an option from day one for new starters; if we are to remain attractive as a potential employer. There are clearly constraints around some roles, and these must be made on a role-by-role basis, taking into account the needs of the service.

42. We have continued to be flexible in how we conduct interviews, supporting managers and candidates to conduct some or all of the process remotely. We have found that in most cases candidates and managers want to meet face to face before making a final decision before offering/accepting a job.
43. Key considerations for us as we continue to learn from working in a hybrid way is both not making assumptions about how candidates and recruiting managers want to work.
44. From an equality and diversity perspective, hybrid working opens up opportunities to individuals who, for example have health difficulties that make being in an office all day difficult, or who have caring responsibilities and benefit from less commuting time to fit these responsibilities into their day. This is a benefit to the council in that the staff feel supported by their employer and are motivated to do a good job, they are also more representative of the communities they serve and provide insight to how we deliver services to our community. Being more inclusive through offering hybrid-working arrangements also widens the recruitment pool for us generally which is important especially as the recruitment market is challenging.

Customer satisfaction

45. A review of our complaints tracker has shown that there are no incidents of complaints related to staff working at home. The phone system allows a seamless direct dial to officers and the customer should therefore not know if the officer is in the civic centre or working elsewhere.
46. The current resident survey asks questions about:
 - Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way Ashford Borough Council runs its services? and
 - To what extent do you think Ashford Borough Council understands the needs of customers?

Once analysed, the feedback to these questions, compared to the previous survey results, will help us determine if customer satisfaction has changed and whether we need to explore this further in light of hybrid working.

Savings

47. Utilities

With the increase across all utilities, we will not be able to show savings per se. It is easier to consider the usage rather than the costs. The table below shows the data for the use of water, gas and electricity for the fourth quarter of 2019/20 (pre pandemic), compared to the fourth quarter of 2021/22 (this year).

	Water (m3)	Gas (KWH)	Electricity day (KWH)

2019/20			
Jan	240.00	109474.35	27200.65
Feb	228.89	100018.53	22185.60
March	173.00	107019.83	19864.60
2021/22			
Jan	76.00	128482.02	19922.40
Feb	82.00	100783.86	17585.70
March	108.00	96965.32	18503.70

48. You can see from the table that the water consumption has reduced despite the facilities team having to run off hot and cold water more frequently to ensure legionella compliance temperatures are achieved.
49. Gas usage increased in January and February, partly due to having to set hot water storage temperatures higher than they were set overnight to ensure no legionella bacteria can form whilst less water is being run through the taps, and to compensate for having to have windows open for Covid ventilation measures. The comparison for March shows a reduced gas usage.
50. Finally, electricity usage has decreased, this will be as a result of fewer items left on desks on standby, fewer printers left on standby, a proportion of level three not being used and generally fewer people being in the building using power.
51. **Printing**
Hybrid working has further reduced the costs of printing for the council. Pre-pandemic we had 13 printers on lease in the civic centre, we now have eight and are looking to rationalise this further.
52. The volume of printing has reduced as people are not in the building and this has reduced the 'click charges' per page printed and the volume of paper.

	Costs of printers and paper
2019/20	£ 39,899
2021/22	£ 18,931

53. **Refreshments**
The council provide tea, coffee, milk and sugar in each of the kitchenettes. Fewer staff in the building has resulted in reduced consumption with a pre pandemic spend of £495 per month to a spend in Feb 2022 (post pandemic) of £86. This is likely to increase as visits to the building become more frequent but is unlikely to return to pre pandemic levels.

	Refreshments	
Jan-20	£	495
Feb-22	£	86

Actions in the pipeline

54. The latest staff survey aimed to highlight any barriers to coming into the office so that these could be addressed. The issues highlighted were practical issues and these have been, or are being addressed. They included:
- a. Covid security-some staff continued to be concerned about being safe from Covid. Whilst we have removed many measures we continue to have well ventilated offices, anti bac wipes and hand sanitiser. We have also introduced red and amber lanyards as a visual sign for colleagues that an individual would like a bit more space
 - b. Staff asked for developments to the desk booking system that allow staff to see which other staff have booked a desk, to see a floor plan and desk lay out so you know if you are near a window, next to a noisy/quite team etc.
 - c. There were some practical issues such as somewhere to keep personal items such as a mug, or stapler etc. empty cupboards are currently being relocated for this purpose.
 - d. The availability of meeting rooms was highlighted as a challenge at times, but level three is currently being looked at with a view of providing additional meeting space.
 - e. Staff, and managers asked for refreshed remote working guidance that included meeting and office etiquette and good practice. This has been reviewed and updated and is available on the intranet.

Conclusions

55. We can conclude that hybrid working will become/is now a permanent feature of a modern workplace. If we are to remain relevant as an employer, we will need to ensure that we can meet candidates and existing employees expectations; but equally that managers are well equipped to manage issues that crop up as a result of remote working.
56. As we have seen there are both financial and non-financial benefits to both the staff member and the council of supporting hybrid working. We do however need to strike the balance and bear in mind that one size will not fit all and there is no single way to implement hybrid working. Its exact form is likely to vary and change between services and as we learn from our experiences as well as learn from the feedback from staff, customers and members. This will require us all to be flexible and adaptable. We will also need to be flexible as technology, service

design and customer demands/needs changes to ensure service delivery is responsive, efficient and effective.

57. This need to be flexible can be a challenge, management team recognise that it will take hard work to get hybrid working right but are committed to make it work to realise the benefits for the council, and its staff.

Contact and Email

58. Michelle Pecci
Michelle.pecci@[ashford.gov.uk](mailto:Michelle.pecci@ashford.gov.uk) 01233 330602