

Scrutiny Board (Strategy and Resources)
Inquiry into Agile Working and Estate Realisation
Summary of evidence to-date (March 2021)

1.0 Background

- 1.1 During its November 2020 meeting, the Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board received a report from the Director of Resources and Housing and the Director of City Development setting out how the Council has adapted to continue operating during the Covid-19 pandemic and how the development of new working methods could become a permanent feature of future working arrangements at the Council.
- 1.2 The Board acknowledged that the pandemic had enhanced recent trends towards home working and in light of recent Pulse staff survey results noted the potential for enhanced home working as the Council moves towards Covid-19 recovery in 2021 and beyond.
- 1.3 Key related issues included; the need to continue to operate in financially challenging circumstances and to make savings by developing new ways of working and rationalising the estate through asset realisation and changing the way some services are delivered; the need to ensure staff satisfaction and well-being as essential elements of any revised working arrangements; the improvements to be brought to the council's carbon footprint by adopting more home working as part of future working patterns; the improved work life balance that staff could enjoy through operating more remotely and striking a balance between home and office based working; how the Council can continue to support local centres and local communities by continuing to have a presence in town and district centres; the need for staff to collaborate and have face to face contact to enhance team working and work more effectively whilst maintaining the bonds that are formed through collaboration and team work and the need for more in depth staff engagement to find the right balance between remote and more traditional ways of working.
- 1.4 The Board has now considered this work item on three different occasions comprising of an update item and general introduction in November, a HR and staff focussed session in January and a third report on estate realisation and rationalisation at its February meeting.
- 1.5 The March meeting is the last meeting of the 2020/21 municipal year and acknowledging that this work stream is still developing and that there remains a degree of uncertainty as to when staff will be able to access office buildings more regularly the inquiry will form part of the work programme for the 2021/22 municipal year, with a view to finalising the work early in that year to coincide with the expected return of more staff to office buildings as opposed to permanently working at home.
- 1.6 This summary of evidence document has been produced to reflect the position reached by the Scrutiny Board as part of this Inquiry and will also be

a helpful reference document when the Board's Inquiry work looks to conclude in the next municipal year.

2.0 Summary of evidence provided to the Scrutiny Board

2.1 Session one – Scrutiny Board Meeting – 16 November 2020

2.2 The following information was reported to the Board:

- A summary of the Changing the Workplace (CtW) programme
- Findings from the June working from home survey that sought to explore how staff felt about working from home, how productive they felt they could be, what they needed in terms of equipment and support, and their attitudes towards working from home and returning to the office in future.
- Findings from the first two staff Pulse Well-being surveys carried out in May and June 2020.
- Information on the Council's estate including the headline figures that shows that the Council has over 700 operational properties of which c200 are core operational buildings such as offices, Children's Centres, Adult Day Centres, Leisure Centres, Museums, Libraries, Community Hubs, Community Centres and Homes for Older People.
- The impact of Covid secure requirements on office building capacities.
- Outline information on plans to introduce more collaboration spaces in the estate including the trial collaboration space established at Merrion House.

2.3 The following key areas were covered during this session:

- The impact of ELI on staff numbers and the knock on impact on the size of the Council's estate
- Recognition that not all staff will want to work more at home and the wider impacts on well-being that working in isolation can create
- The costs and volume of equipment that was handed out to support the rapid transition to home working last March
- How the working day might look in a more flexible working environment for example will core hours ultimately need to be revised?
- The need to support staff with training and equipment in the new working environment
- The benefits of less travel on the environment and wider climate emergency agenda
- The possible impact closing offices in local district and town centres might have on local economies through reduced footfall
- Possible co-location with other public sector organisations to save costs but retain a presence in localities across the city

2.5 Session two – Scrutiny Board Meeting – 11 January 2021

2.6 The following information was reported to the Board:

- A summary of results from the three staff well-being pulse surveys
- A summary of well-being support rolled out to staff since March 2020 and the start of the pandemic

- Information on the amount of equipment distributed to support home working and the associated costs
- Further information on future plans for developing new ways of working including the need to find an optimum balance between home and office working

2.7 The following key areas were covered during this session:

- Further emphasis on having a flexible approach to working and a firm view that home working is not suitable for all and that all staff will need face to face contact to some degree as the Council moves into recovery post Covid-19
- Acknowledgement of the declining staff satisfaction rates over the three pulse surveys, supporting the need for a mixed economy in terms of home and office working
- A suggestion that equipment should be refurbished and redistributed as far as possible to reduce costs and ensure equipment in closed buildings is put to use

2.8 *Session three – Scrutiny Board Meeting – 15 February 2021*

2.9 The following information was reported to the Board:

- The phased remodelling of the Council's estate, including outline dates and where collaborative spaces are to be established
- Proposed retained core workspaces including desk capacities both Covid secure and without Covid restrictions
- Eight core components of the Council's future working approach
- Planned technology upgrades that will support remote working in the future such as the rollout of Microsoft 365
- Further information on the planned collaborative spaces in terms of what they will look like and how they will be set up
- Flexibility and utilisation of the Council's estate and the need for the Council to reverse under utilisation of the estate that has been the case historically
- Further detail on estate rationalisation and office spaces that have been released or could be released in the future

2.10 The following key areas were covered during this session:

- Recognition that Covid secure restrictions could still be in place for the majority of the 2021 calendar year and will therefore impact on the amount of staff accessing office spaces for some time to come
- Further discussion of the optimum balance between home and office working and concern that the initial staff pulse survey findings could have been a 'honeymoon period' with potentially more staff wanting more regular face to face contact with colleagues than initially appeared to be the case
- Encouragement and support for more staff engagement in the coming months to help define future working arrangements and the offer to staff

- Concern about the resiliency of proposals and the need for them to be robust given how quickly things could change post Covid-19
- How the Council might balance enhanced home working with the need to return footfall to both the city centre and local centres
- Reduced staff travel and the wider benefit it brings to air quality and the city's carbon footprint

3.0 Summary of key issues raised during the inquiry sessions

- 3.1 *Balance between home and office working.* Members have been keen to emphasise the need for balance between office and home working and to ensure that all staff are catered for as far as is possible. There is no one size fits all approach and the Council will need to be mindful of staff who want to operate in a more conventional office based setting for the majority of their time as well as those who prefer a remote first approach and to balance this with service delivery requirements.
- 3.2 *Effective service delivery.* Whilst staff well-being and encouraging enhanced flexibility in the workplace are key drivers of the future workforce set up, members were also mindful of the need to ensure effective service delivery and to develop appropriate metrics to monitor staff productivity and ensure that service delivery is not impacted by more remote working.
- 3.3 *Support for apprentices and junior staff.* Linked to effective service delivery and wider staff well-being, the board is also mindful of the impact the pandemic has had on apprentices and staff in less senior positions in the authority. Working remotely can have varying impacts on staff but for those with less experience it can be more challenging, with the potential for losing or having reduced mentor and wider colleague and team support. As working trends move towards more home working it is important that additional support can be provided to these staff to ensure that mentoring roles are not lost and that staff development and progression is not adversely impacted by a more remote working environment.
- 3.4 *Staff well-being and mental health.* The pandemic has highlighted the need for the Council to be active in ensuring staff well-being and to deal with any mental health issues that arise out of new working arrangements. A lot of positive work has been done in this area including regular management check ins and a major focus on ensuring well-being is maintained in the challenging and unique circumstances brought about by the pandemic. As society potentially moves to a recovery phase following the pandemic a lasting legacy of the pandemic will be greater regard for mental health challenges and maintenance of staff well-being.
- 3.5 *Staff engagement and consultation.* The Council has consulted widely on home working and staff well-being during the pandemic and board members wanted this to continue and to be a key driver in reaching final decisions on how the workforce will be aligned in the future. It is clear from the evidence provided that staff engagement has been significant and members were supportive of the plans for more of the same in the coming months.

- 3.6 *Office buildings in local centres.* A key theme in the three evidence sessions has been the desire for local town and district centres to be supported by continued operation of local Council offices whether that is community hubs or housing offices or both combined. Members believed that maintaining satellite offices that can be used as bases for staff and also serve as frontline offices was a possible model that would enhance footfall for local businesses from both service users and council staff.
- 3.7 *Estate rationalisation.* The Board has focussed on the sale of buildings that have not recently been subject to refurbishment or investment and that as far as possible these buildings are not identified for release to avoid the potential for wasting past investment in the estate. Members were broadly supportive of the moves to rationalise the estate, deliver savings and make the Council's estate both better used and more fit for purpose in terms of investment in refurbishment of buildings.
- 3.8 *DIS infrastructure.* Members expressed a clear desire to ensure that the suite of ICT tools is fit for purpose and capable of fully supporting remote working. The deployment of Microsoft Teams is one example of how remote collaboration can be enhanced but members were keen to hear more about future plans to support staff with the ICT network they need as new ways of working develop. As part of a separate work stream DIS will be asked to attend the June meeting of the Board to pick up this item and more broadly the vision for DIS in the short and medium term.
- 3.9 *Travel to and from work.* It has been recognised that supporting and promoting more remote working will bring significant benefits in terms of the Council's plans to tackle the climate emergency. Less staff travel will mean a reduced carbon footprint as a city and organisation, potentially healthier lifestyles as well as making the daily commute less busy and congested for those that continue to do it more regularly.
- 3.10 *Equipment.* It is clear from the work to date that a significant effort has been made to ensure that staff can work at home effectively and efficiently. Members, whilst being mindful of cost, have been supportive of this work and are keen to ensure it continues as remote working continues to develop and to become more of a permanent 'norm'. The roll out of equipment has had a cost and these will need to be factored in, along with investment in refurbishing buildings, when balancing the costs of asset realisation and the move to more remote methods of working.

4. **Conclusions and further work**

- 4.1 As noted elsewhere in this paper this work will continue into 2021/22 with a commitment to finalise the inquiry in the next municipal year. It is also hoped that this additional time will allow the agenda to develop more and for the Council to begin to develop concrete principles as to how the workforce will be aligned in the future and have more certainty on that important balance between home and office working.

- 4.2 It is therefore planned to consider further results from staff consultation and engagement at the June meeting and then begin to look at making initial inquiry recommendations based on those findings and a closer look at the principles the Council has established in terms of how new ways of working will develop through 2021/22.
- 4.3 There will be further opportunity later in municipal year 2021/22 to look at and review progress on this work stream and to check in on the recommendations made by the Board.