



Leeds
CITY COUNCIL

scrutiny



**Strategy and
Resources**

Leeds City Council Future Working Arrangements,
Agile Working and Estate Realisation

Scrutiny Statement



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1. Aims of the Inquiry

Best Council Ambition: An Efficient, Enterprising and Healthy Organisation – Maintaining a clear focus on delivering high quality services to Leeds residents

- To ensure that future working arrangements at Leeds City Council are fit for purpose, balancing service and customer needs, staff working preferences and available corporate resources.
- Quantify benefits from the move to a more flexible working model to capture the expected improvements to be brought to the council's carbon footprint by adopting more home working, financial savings from using a reduced estate, benefits to staff well being and work life balance.
- Examine support for staff welfare during the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure that staff surveys and staff feedback form a key part of the journey towards new working arrangements.
- Develop recommendations to support decision makers particularly around establishing key principles for future working arrangements.
- Ensure that estate realisation and financial considerations around costs associated with more home working are factored in and balanced against each other particularly in respect of the ongoing financial challenge facing the authority.

2. Purpose of this Statement

- 2.1 This inquiry has now featured at five meetings of Scrutiny Board Strategy and Resources including four evidence sessions and one summary of evidence report. This statement also featured at the Board's consultative meeting held in July. The inquiry now bridges two municipal years having started in November 2020 and is now likely to continue well into the 2021/22 municipal year.
- 2.2 In order to ensure that the views of scrutiny are captured and are provided as feedback to decision makers, producing an interim statement that captures the views of scrutiny is both appropriate and timely as this agenda continues to

develop in line with the Government roadmap and the easing of restrictions on 19 July 2021.

- 2.3 One of the best ways that the scrutiny function can add value to policy and decision making is through pre-decision scrutiny on key strategic issues as they develop. This enables more views to be taken on board and creates an environment in which better decisions are taken. Given the evolving nature of this agenda it is important that scrutiny can provide feedback to decision makers as the Government has now eased almost all Covid-19 restrictions which now paves the way for more staff to access Council offices and buildings more regularly.
- 2.4 A key focus of the Board as it has considered the development of future working arrangements has been on staff and the balance between staff preferences and the commitment to deliver high quality services to Leeds residents. As a result the focus of this statement is largely on the HR and staff elements of this work but the Board recognises the need to return to this agenda during municipal year 2021/22 particularly to consider issues related to financial considerations, the Council's estate and the ICT support and systems that will be needed to ensure effective home and hybrid working.

3. Comments and Observations from the Board

- 3.1 The Board has been focussed on how staff are impacted by the proposals to move to more home working. It is clear from staff surveys that approximately 30% of those that responded to the most recent survey were currently unhappy with spending more time in the workplace. This is for a variety of reasons but mainly to do with being happy with their working arrangements at home and being reluctant to return more frequently to work given the ongoing risks posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Members have therefore emphasised the need for a flexible approach and for this 30% cohort to be catered for as part of future workforce planning. Potential difficulties highlighted by Board members include balancing teams where only one person wants to be in the office more regularly and the potential impact on service delivery when staff are not able to collaborate as they did pre-pandemic. The Board would like these issues to form part of the new arrangements as they are developed and implemented.
- 3.2 Members have been mindful of the need to emphasise service delivery as the new working arrangements emerge and that the services delivered to Leeds residents should not be impacted by new working arrangements and preferably that they would be enhanced. To underpin this members believe that service delivery should be a key factor in all decision making around how new working arrangements are delivered.

- 3.3 The recent staff survey carried out in April 2021 has revealed that four out of five staff (79%) are happy with their current working arrangements which is broadly in line with the pulse surveys carried out in 2020. This suggests that many staff can work from home and are not negatively affected by that. Members are keen for staff consultation to continue and to ensure that as new working arrangements develop staff surveys form part of the process to ensure that staff remain content in their roles, supported by management and can carry out their roles effectively.
- 3.4 The Board is keen to ensure that staff mentoring and management support is factored into the new arrangements. 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 the Board clearly believes that 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. Board members therefore emphasised the need for enhanced support to newer and more junior members of staff through training and additional support for those carrying out apprenticeships. The Board believes that one to one support for these staff should be mandatory and that managers and those providing mentoring for staff are available to provide the necessary support.
- 3.5 As this agenda develops and some staff opt for more office working, whilst others spend more time at home there is a concern that a ‘two-track’ workforce might develop. This could mean that one cohort of staff is able to progress more rapidly, access more management support and feel more involved in team working and wider team and service goals, as compared to the other cohort. Members believe this should be addressed and measures put in place to ensure that staff do not become isolated at home and are able to fully participate in team activity and feel supported whilst doing their work and can access career progression in the same way.
- 3.6 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. Board members recognise the clear potential for enhanced work life balance to benefit staff well-being and broader mental health. 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 moves to a recovery phase following the pandemic Board members believe that one of the lasting legacies of the pandemic should be greater regard for mental health challenges and maintenance of staff well-being.

Members believe that decision makers should consider making concrete commitments on future mental health support with the management 'check ins' and general wider awareness of this agenda being developed and to become a permanent feature in the appraisal and staff one to one process.

- 3.7 Members are also wanted to ensure that staff who face added pressures linked to home working are supported back into the workplace. For some staff, particularly women, working at home has added additional burdens and balancing work and family commitments and responsibilities has been challenging for some. In addition, there has been a significant increase in domestic violence reports during the pandemic and the periods of lockdown that have led to people working at home for all or most of their time. The Board believes that staff affected by these issues should be offered clear routes back into office working with appropriate support from managers in line with the step change that has been achieved in terms of monitoring staff well-being and mental health that have developed during the pandemic and noted above at 3.6.
- 3.8 Effective service delivery needs to be supported by the right equipment and technology to continue to deliver services and meet performance targets. The Board recognised the potential for savings from estate realisation and reduced use of council buildings by staff but were mindful that this should be balanced against any additional costs linked to the provision of more equipment as staff realise that working at home will be a permanent feature of the Council's working arrangements. This may lead staff to request better, or more, equipment to ensure their workplace is both suitable and meets any additional health and safety requirements. Similarly, the need for reasonable adjustments to be met could apply to both the home workplace and the office workplace, which again may introduce costs. Members believed that a cost analysis of this would be useful to better define possible savings from estate realisation as clearly the provision of additional equipment for remote working is linked to the sale of assets to meet the financial challenge faced by the Council.
- 3.9 To ensure that the council's estate is fully utilised the Board wanted to see decision makers explore the use of locality working with local hubs utilised to allow staff to work closer to home through touch down spaces in local centres and at community hubs. The need to be flexible was also emphasised as changes in circumstances can affect staff so a flexible approach to how staff access office accommodation will be required as part of the work on re-modelling and rationalising the estate.
- 3.10 One of the consequences of the recent pandemic and the significant increase in home working has been the net benefit in terms of air quality and reduction in carbon when compared to more people travelling to work. During its work the Board received assurances that there was a net benefit in Leeds but also



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requested that the Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board may wish to consider, as part of its remit, looking at the impact of working from home on the Climate Emergency in greater detail.

4. Conclusions and Next Steps

- 4.1 The above summary of comments and suggestions from the Board is designed to capture the views of Scrutiny and to form initial feedback to decision makers as this agenda develops and new working arrangements begin to be implemented. Future work on this will focus on estate realisation, office remodelling, hybrid meeting spaces and the costs associated with that and the provision of additional equipment to staff working remotely.
- 4.2 A future evidence session is planned for later in the municipal year to be followed by a commitment to finalise the inquiry in the New Year. It is hoped that, restrictions permitting, future work will align with deployment of the new working arrangements.