

22 March 2021**Agenda Item: 5**

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE

A NEW SMARTER WORKING VISION FOR THE COUNTY COUNCIL

Purpose of the Report

1. To update the Sub-Committee on the Council's future approach to Smarter Working

Information

2. As defined by the UK Government, Smarter Working empowers us all to make the right decisions about where, when and how we work; optimising the use of workplaces and technology, and realising savings for the taxpayer. It improves productivity through a focus on outputs and enables a better work life balance for all.
3. There are many benefits to be gained through working in smart ways including;
 - enabling staff to work productively through better use of technologies;
 - savings in travel time and cost by using conferencing software and holding online meetings;
 - staff feeling trusted to work flexibly, enjoying improved wellbeing and reduced absenteeism;
 - protecting the critical services that we manage through reinvesting cost savings into services from the reduced requirement for Council properties;
 - protecting the environment by reducing employee travel to and from work, and working day travel, thereby reducing vehicle emissions and the use of carbon based fuels.
4. Closure of the former Smarter Working Programme was agreed at the Improvement and Change Sub-Committee on 25th November 2019, with residual activities passed to either property services or other cross-council programmes of work, notably the Investing in Nottinghamshire programme. This approach has enabled the Council to continue enabling its workforce to work flexibly, where and when it best suits whilst ensuring the Council's customers and service users still receive an excellent service, whilst additionally beginning to deliver financial savings associated with a reduced office estate.

COVID-19 impact

5. The Council has a successful reputation for delivering smarter working across all departments by engaging and delivering positive changes alongside staff. The progress made over recent

years with smarter working, alongside investment in new technologies, has meant that the County Council has had high levels of business continuity despite the COVID-19 restrictions that came into force during 2020.

6. As reported to both Policy Committee and the Covid-19 Recovery, Resilience and Renewal Committee, new efficient operating models and smarter ways of working have developed across the Council over the past year as those staff who would traditionally work from within the countywide office estate have worked from home since Mid-March 2020. A significant cultural shift has occurred for many workers in adopting enhanced smarter working principles.
7. Technology, particularly the rollout of Microsoft Teams, has supported a switch to virtual online meetings and has been embraced by staff and Members, ensuring Council business and decision making continues. The Council will continue to embrace new technology as our recovery continues.
8. To capture the lessons learned from this period of time, engagement with managers and employees across the Council to review the impact of COVID-19 and new ways of working has occurred and will continue.
9. Additionally, the Council has also taken the opportunity to learn from emerging practice in the private sector as the UK recovers and adapts to the post-COVID-19 world that is emerging.
10. Key themes emerging through the engagement work can be summarised as follows: -
 - i. There is a changing emphasis to a greater level of working from home than pre-COVID for many employees and Members. This has changed the demand for and future use of the Council's offices; Workspaces will need to adapt, with the modern office no longer being a place for banks of desks, with officers working on PCs alone but for collaborative and support activities for teams.
 - ii. New virtual ways of working for many services need to be reflected within office spaces and processes to support and enable a virtual and physical 'blended' approach to working with some employees in the physical space, with others joining online :
 - iii. Desk areas, for those who require them, will be significantly reduced with a substantial increase in the proportion of flexible meeting/working spaces to facilitate collaborative and cross team working. This will include the further digitalisation of meeting spaces, records, mail and service processes.
 - iv. It is also key to recognise that working from home is not the optimum environment for everyone, including those with disabilities or those who live in homes unsuitable for home working.
 - v. Those that can work from home will require a safe working environment to do so.
 - vi. The Council's future office environment will need to support the wellbeing needs of employees, to help maintain effective working relationships and sustain a Council 'culture'.

A new Smarter Working Vision

11. The learning from COVID-19 and the engagement undertaken has brought forward an evolution in the Council's Smarter Working vision. This vision provides a new framework for how many Council staff will work in the future and is an integral part to the planning that is underway for a post-pandemic world. This vision will be implemented alongside the future re-occupation of retained and new offices.

12. This future vision takes account of both changed working practices and the engagement set out above. It is a step change for the Council and acknowledge that Smarter Working will continue to evolve. Through implementing this new vision Nottinghamshire County Council will:
 - Be a forward-thinking organisation with an agile, supported and flexible workforce.
 - Be a council that maximises the spacial and financial efficiencies of Smarter Working, with a reduced Countywide office estate.
 - Implement a blended working solution enabling staff to work safely from both home and office.
 - Provide hybrid workspaces which merge the physical and virtual office.
 - Implement office space with an increased emphasis on team and social interaction through an increase in alternative meeting and collaboration spaces and less reliance on desks. Implement an average 4:10 seat ratio across all work spaces..
 - Work with partners to enhance service delivery wherever possible through office design.
13. Digital technology will play a pivotal role within the Council's future offices, enabling the hybrid physical and virtual office. Work is currently being undertaken alongside ICT Services to determine the Council's future approach to supporting this new vision with focus on;
 - Hybrid meeting rooms allowing staff to connect from their closest workplace and home
 - Electronic booking systems supporting self-service outside of traditional office hours
 - Digitalisation of records management for better compliance, and secure collaboration speeding up the sharing of information.
14. Council employees will benefit from implementation of this new vision through:
 - having access to an inclusive flexible working environment which recognises the differing needs of colleagues whilst respecting service requirements.
 - the development of ongoing employee support and training associated with the increased use of digital technology
 - the provision of attractive, flexible working conditions which has a focus on staff wellbeing and work-life balance which in turn will improve recruitment and retention across services.
15. This new vision forms a key part of the Workforce Resilience and Recovery Strategy and associated action plan which were approved at Personnel Committee in November 2020.
16. A short presentation accompanies this report which outlines this vision further.

Other Options Considered

17. It was considered to make no changes to the Councils current vision for Smarter Working, but this would have resulted in many benefits gained over the past year not being formalised and taken forward to the benefit of the Council.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

18. The vision outlined has been created on the basis of engagement from within and from outside of the County Council. It will provide the County Council with an attractive working environment and support a reduced office estate across the County. The vision will continue to evolve as working practices change.
19. COVID-19 has changed the way the Council and its employees work. The vision takes account of improved and efficient virtual working practices, whilst acknowledging the requirement for physical workspace

Statutory and Policy Implications

20. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Data Protection and Information Governance

21. The programme and outcomes will be designed to comply with current data protection requirements.

Financial Implications

22. A significant proportion of the outlined future vision is already funded within the County Council's Capital Programme. However, some additional funding, particularly for the technology requirements outlined, may be required as rollout progresses. Work continues to model the financial requirements.

Human Resources Implications

23. Engagement with Trade Unions on the new vision has occurred and will continue as work progresses and the vision evolves.

Public Sector Equality Duty implications

24. An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken. It has considered all protected characteristics from the Equality Act 2010 and all relevant staff mitigations will be put in place.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the Improvement and Change Sub-Committee consider whether there are any actions arising from the report
- 2) That the Improvement and Change Sub-Committee agree to receive an update report within the next 6 months and that this be included in the work programme

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Constitutional Comments (SSR 08/03/2021)

25. The recommendations set out in the report fall within the scope of decisions that may be approved by Improvement & Change Sub-Committee.

Financial Comments (GB 09/03/2021)

26. As set out in paragraph 22, a significant proportion of the outlined smarter working vision is already funded from within the Policy Committee capital programme. Any requirements for additional funding will be subject to the usual Council approval processes.

HR Comments (GME 05/03/2021)

27. The engagement and consultation with the workforce and their representatives will continue to ensure what is being developed meets service imperatives and individual needs in terms of accessibility and reflects the Council's ongoing aspiration to be an employer of choice. Whilst the Covid pandemic has required some colleagues to work differently, it should also be recognised that many have continued to deliver services relatively unchanged. The overall success of the programme will require further joining up of the "people" elements such as well-being and employee and leadership development, currently being addressed in the Workforce Resilience and Recovery Group, chaired by the Service Director, Customers, Governance and Employees, with those of the changing physical environment. The underpinning strategy and action plan, approved by Personnel Committee, will shape how people are supported and enabled to work in future, including how buildings are configured and utilised

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Policy Committee Report – Investing in Nottinghamshire: Utilising the Council's Property Estate to deliver environmental, economic and financial benefits in a post-COVID world (9th December 2020)

Policy Committee Report - Investing in Nottinghamshire: Making the Best Use of Council Premises (12th February 2020)

Improvement and Change Sub-Committee Report – Smarter Working Programme (25th November 2019)

Policy Committee Report - Investing in Nottinghamshire: Delivering the Council Plan through a second Phase of the Smarter Working Programme (20th March 2019)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All