

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-082-2015/16
Date of meeting: 7 April 2016



Portfolio: Technology and Support Services
Subject: Smarter Working Framework - Flexible Working Policy & Flexi Scheme
Responsible Officer: Paula Maginnis (01992 564536).
Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That, as requested by the Joint Consultative Committee, the Smart Working Framework and Flexible Working Policy as attached at appendices A and B respectively be adopted;**
- (2) That Cabinet agree the Flexi Scheme as attached at appendix C; and**
- (3) That the summary of the feedback from the employee Smarter Working Consultation Workshops be noted.**

Executive Summary:

Management Board, the Leadership Team, the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) and a number of employees have been consulted on all or some of the policies included in this report, or have been consulted on the Council's approach to these initiatives.

As a result of this consultation Policies were reviewed and where necessary amended. It is proposed that they sit together under an overarching Framework document so that they are together in one place.

The JCC recommended adoption of the Smart Working Framework and Flexible Working Policy by the Council. There is an outstanding item for Cabinet to consider regarding the Council's Flexi Scheme relating to employees claiming travelling time to and from external training courses/conferences. (See paras 17 – 20 of the report).

In addition, the report contains a summary of the main themes and comments from the consultation sessions which were held with staff in September and October 2015, for information.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The Council is moving towards implementing, home, remote and mobile working options for its employees. The main objectives of the Framework are to establish a more flexible workforce, enhance the service provided to our customers and assist the Council in reviewing its accommodation requirements.

Other Options for Action:

Cabinet could amend the policies further or substitute other processes.

Report:

Background

1. Since June 2015 Management Board and JCC have been considering a number of Policies regarding Home and Flexible Working. In addition, the Leadership Team reviewed the Council's Flexi Scheme in conjunction with employee comments from the 2013 Survey specifically relating to the Flexi Scheme.

2. Four consultation sessions were arranged in September/October 2015 with approximately 60 employees attending. They were consulted on their thoughts and concerns regarding alternative ways of working currently in place and what other options could be considered. Each of the sessions covered the following areas;

- What does Smarter Working mean to you? Is this the right name for the suite of policies? Do you have any alternative suggestions?
- What are the benefits of Smarter Working? What is working well?
- What are your fears/concerns about Smarter Working?
- What else should the Council consider?

Details of the feedback are set out in paragraphs 21 to 40 of this report.

Policies

3. The Policies attached to this report have been amended to take account of the consultation undertaken with the JCC, the Leadership Team and employees. The two Policies for consideration by Cabinet are;

- Flexible Working/Retirement
- Flexi Scheme

A summary of the main amendments to the Policies are set out below.

4. Discussions are still continuing with the JCC regarding the Homeworking Policy which will be subject to a further report following its meeting in April 2016.

Smart Working Framework

5. It is proposed that all Policies relating to flexible working sit under a new overarching framework document, the Smart Working Framework. As with the Employee Management Framework, this approach is intended to assist managers by locating these management processes in one place, also making links with other Council Policies. Following suggestions from employees other policies and guidance developed in the future could sit under this Framework. The Framework is at Appendix A for consideration.

Flexible Working/Retirement Policy

6. The main change to this Policy is that all Smart Working requests, including working from home and flexible retirement, will be made through this process. The intention is that all requests are made in the same way so that both employees and managers will be required to

consider the same issues no matter what the request.

7. There has been a statutory right, since June 2014, for all employees to request flexible working, the right is no longer confined to employees with child care or responsibilities for other dependents. There remains in place eligibility criteria, i.e.:

- the employee has been employed by the Council continuously for 26 weeks or more; and
- they have not previously made a flexible working request in the previous 12 months.

8. By having all the requests in one place using the same application process, there will be consistency across the Council for all requests.

9. Requests for temporary changes to working patterns/arrangements will be considered outside this Policy as this type of request is not covered by the statutory right, only permanent changes are.

10. The Policy is at Appendix B for consideration.

Flexi Scheme

11. Following discussions at the Leadership Team and comments from the consultation sessions, this policy has been reinforced regarding:

- staff start/finish times;
- working additional hours; and
- using the electronic time recording sheet.

12. However, it is proposed that full time employees will be required to work 5 hours core time as agreed by the manager and employee taking account of service delivery, availability of work to be done, access to the workplace being possible and taking into account the requirements of the team. This will allow more flexibility where possible.

13. Core hours will be pro-rata for part-time employees and determined by the manager.

14. In addition it is proposed to extend the lunch time period by 1 hour, from 11.30am to 2.30pm.

15. The Scheme no longer specifies that all employees need to start and finish an accounting period at exactly the same time. It probably now reflects the reality whereby employees start their employment on different dates and their accounting period starts from that date. This also means that not all employees in a team are trying to take flexi-leave at the same time.

16. What remains the same in the policy is:

- the amount of credit and deficit hours;
- the number of days that can be taken as flexi leave in an accounting period;
- the length of the day;
- the length of a lunch break; and
- default start and finish times if no alternative start/finish times have been agreed, i.e. for full time staff, 9.30am/3.30pm.

17. There remains an outstanding issue for Cabinet to consider regarding paragraph 10.3

of the Flexi Scheme Policy. This section currently states;

'10.3. Employees undertaking a day or half day external training should only book 7hrs 12mins or 3hrs 36 mins respectively, regardless of travelling time.'

18. There are several reasons why this is the case:

(i) any training an employee receives is usually to their advantage i.e. it could help them apply for promotion, new roles etc;

(ii) the Council pays for the training which indicates an investment in the employee, the employee, it could be argued, should invest some of their time as a quid pro quo;

(iii) many training courses start later and finish earlier than a standard day, in many cases making it shorter than a normal day; and

(iv) even if the training is specifically job related and to the benefit of the Council, the Council is still investing money and time away from the office for those employees.

19. Some members of the Joint Consultative Committee suggested that the following options are considered:

(a) all employees claim travel time for external training (including conferences); or

(b) all employees claim travel time for external training (including conferences) minus the usual time taken to travel from home to the work place; and

(c) with either option the exact times are recorded by the employee.

20. The Policy is at Appendix C for consideration.

Summary of the Consultation Sessions

21. Employees participating in the consultation sessions were informed that Management Board would receive feedback under themes so that no comments would be attributable to individuals. The main themes from the sessions were:

- Employee Communication;
- Employee Consultation;
- ICT;
- Current/Future Policies; and
- Future Considerations.

22. A summary of the points raised by employees is set out below.

Employee Communication

23. The point made most strongly by employees at the sessions is that they want clarity and understanding of why the Council is embarking on a change programme, what are the drivers for implementing change? What is Epping's story? Unfortunately, the feedback to some employees following a presentation by Colchester have caused concerns in that employees have the perception that we will follow the same path as Colchester which may not be right for Epping. Also, there are many rumours regarding the future of the Civic Offices and accommodation.

24. Employees wish to have open and honest communication across the Council regarding the transformation programme.

25. The Policies must be extensively publicised so that all employees and managers are aware of the opportunities available and how to apply for them.

Future Consultation

26. Employees appreciated and liked the approach taken for these consultation sessions and the employee engagement sessions.

27. Employees expressed a wish to be more involved with corporate projects and policy review.

28. Employees wish to see more consultation undertaken at a team level where appropriate. For example, the introduction of flexible working and ICT equipment.

ICT

29. Employees expressed concerns about the capacity of ICT to deliver a service to those working different arrangements. This is both in terms of staff resources i.e. out of hours, also the skills and abilities.

30. Whilst employees were encouraged to see the new equipment provided to assist them to work alternative ways, there were some gaps in training to ensure the full functionality of the equipment was understood by users

31. Concerns were raised about accessing documents and information. The majority of information is paper based and without full access to electronic records many teams would be unable to consider home, remote or mobile working.

Current/Future Policies

(I.) Flexi Scheme

32. Employees are really appreciative of the Flexi Scheme and the ability to work flexibly. However, some employees are unaware of the current opportunities already available for them to request i.e. flexible retirement.

33. Employees asked that when managers consider flexible working requests they take account of the requirements of the team, that there is fair distribution of work and they acknowledge and manage any extra pressures felt by the team.

34. Managers attending the sessions acknowledged the tensions within the current Flexible Working or Flexi Time Schemes that whilst they are intended to offer flexibility to employees managers still have a responsibility to deliver a service during open hours. In some cases it just is not possible to be as flexible as employees expect.

35. Employees requested that the electronic Time Recording Sheet is reviewed, to see if improvements can be made especially for part-time employees. This review has been undertaken by the Personal Data Working Group and changes have been made for the new release.

(II.) Homeworking

36. A number of employees gave very positive feedback of where homeworking was a positive and helpful arrangement for them. Where it is personal choice, ad hoc or 1 to 2 days a week employees appreciate the ability to request home working. Employees do not want homeworking imposed on them.

37. There are a range of concerns regarding homeworking, but this seemed to come from a perspective that the Council would only consider 5 day per week home working, rather than ad hoc and less number of days. The range of concerns include:

- Isolation of employees;
- Communication issues;
- How to manage staff/lack of trust;
- Loss of team work/ethic/spirit;
- Loss of knowledge; and
- Potential for duplication.

(III.) Hot Desking

38. Currently the Council does not have in place any guidance regarding Hot Desking. Employees had a number of concerns regarding Hot Desking, including:

- Difficulties caused by not having the correct ratio of desks to employee;
- The configuration of the Civic Offices may not be helpful with hot desking;
- Hot Desking could create 'towels on beds' situations with employees getting to the offices early to get 'their'/a desk also for their friends;
- Loss of team work/ethic/spirit; and
- Work time wasted with just finding an available desk.

39. It was suggested that the Council could consider 'Hot Desk Zones' which may assist with some of the above.

Future Considerations

40. Suggestions included:

- Co-locating with other partner organisations either here or elsewhere;
- Introduce unpaid leave for career breaks/sabbaticals;
- Extend working hours to include weekends;
- Hot Desk Policy/Guidance; and
- Greater use of flexible options in bad weather or major transport issues.

Resource Implications:

There are no resourcing issues regarding the implementation of the policies. No budget has been identified for ICT equipment. This will be subject to the annual ICT Capital Report or in some cases from the Invest to Save fund.

Legal and Governance Implications:

None.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

N/A.

Consultation Undertaken:

Consultation has been undertaken with staff, the Joint Consultative Committee, Leadership Team and Management Board.

Background Papers

None.

Risk Management:

N/A.

Due Regard Record

This page shows which groups of people are affected by the subject of this report. It sets out how they are affected and how any discrimination they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how access to the service(s) subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to understand each other better as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.

The Smarter Working Framework and associated Policies provides clear guidance to all managers and employees across the authority on the various options open to them regarding alternative working arrangements.

The Policies may assist employees balance their home/work responsibilities which in turn may assist the Council in retaining experienced and valued employees.