



MAKING OFFICES COVID SAFE

Joint Report by the Executive Director Corporate Improvement & Economy and the Service Director HR & Communications

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

25 September 2020

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This paper advises members on plans to:

- Support home-working as the safest way of working for office staff for the foreseeable future and long-term for those who want to formalise the option.
- Create COVID-safe office spaces and associated arrangements to provide an alternative for staff who are unable to sustain homeworking on an ongoing basis and enable staff to use offices as touch-down spaces where this is helpful in undertaking their work.

2. SUMMARY

2.1 Since the start of lockdown in March this year, the vast majority of former office-based staff have worked effectively and productively from home and maintained the provision of services. The support from staff in adapting, readily and suddenly to this way of working has been invaluable and deserves great credit.

2.2 These informal arrangements have been in place, gradually evolving, for a period of 6 months. With the pandemic continuing and the prospect of a second wave developing, it is expected that these arrangements will remain in place for some considerable time.

2.3 In recognising that staff safety is paramount, that sustaining council services is critical, the absence of a vaccine and that staff are keen to know what their working arrangements will be in the medium to long term, the following arrangements are being put in place:

- Home working, wherever possible, will remain be the predominant way of working for all office-based staff for the foreseeable future and so long as COVID-19 is still present. This applies to officers and elected members and

recognises the need for continuing use of offices by some staff e.g. social care using COVID-safe arrangements.

- COVID-safe flexible office space will be made available through the phased reconfiguration of office accommodation at Council Headquarters, Galashiels Paton St. and Hawick Town Hall. Consideration will be given to developing similar touch-down office space in all localities.
- The intention is to provide a blended approach, providing staff with the ability to access flexible office space when there is a requirement be in offices. This blended approach will also apply where the domestic arrangements of staff do not permit effective home working, where internet connectivity or other circumstances mean that it is not always possible to work from home, or where systems and the need to deal with hard copy documentation require staff to access offices.

In making offices COVID-safe the Corporate Management Team's priority remains keeping staff and the wider public safe whilst being able to sustain the Council's services. At the same time the arrangements build on the lessons learned from the Council's experience since March this year and align with Council's Fit for 2024 longer term strategic aims for the office estate.

3. RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 Members are asked to note the arrangements for accommodating home working and creating flexible COVID-safe offices.**
- 3.2 Members agree that a further report on the Council estate will be brought to the November Council.**

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Since the start of lockdown in March this year, the vast majority of the Council staff who previously predominantly worked in offices, have worked effectively and productively from home and maintained the provision of the Council's services. The support from staff in adapting, readily and suddenly to this way of working has been invaluable and deserves great credit.
- 3.2 These informal arrangements have been in place, supported by enhanced IT functionality, for a period of 6 months. With the pandemic continuing and the prospect of a second wave developing, it is expected that these arrangements will remain in place for the foreseeable future.
- 3.3 Given this, the longer-term arrangements for home working and use of office space is now a particular focus for the Council's Corporate Management Team with staff understandably keen to know how their working arrangements will operate in the medium to long term.

Four themes have been central to the development of these arrangements:

- First and foremost, the safety of staff, members and the public
- Secondly, the lessons learned from the lockdown experience, in particular feedback from staff surveys
- Thirdly the priority that Council services must be sustained
- Fourthly, the long-term strategic aims for office accommodation developed as part of the Fit for 2024 Programme.

Staff Safety

- 3.4 Our priority remains the safety of our staff, elected members and the public. Coronavirus is still present and resurgent and, with no effective vaccine yet available, it is likely to be a threat society will need to live with for a considerable time.
- 3.5 This means that working from home – wherever possible – will, predominantly, be the default position for office-based staff for the foreseeable future. This is consistent with Scottish Government advice as the country remains in Phase 3 of the COVID recovery plan. This approach both protects staff and minimises the risk of larger numbers of staff being absent due to contracting COVID-19 which would inevitably result in the Council facing difficulty in maintaining the services it delivers across the Scottish Borders.
- 3.6 It is recognised however that, for some staff, it will be challenging to sustain home working on a longer-term basis for a number of reasons, including domestic space, internet connectivity, the functionality of IT systems or other circumstances. On this basis, arrangements for a blended approach (homeworking and flexible COVID-safe offices) are being made by reconfiguring Headquarters, Galashiels Paton Street and Hawick Town Hall offices to provide flexible, COVID-safe office space.
- 3.7 This reconfiguring involves reducing the number of desks, increasing circulation space and altering kitchens, toilets and meeting space to allow social distancing,

cleaning and disinfecting. Systems and protocols are also being put in place to enable track-and-trace.

Lessons Learned From Lockdown and Staff Surveys

- 3.8 Lockdown has had a profound and far-reaching impact on our lives, affecting how we work and how we access goods and services. The experience from lockdown shows that office-based staff can work – and *are* working – effectively and productively from home. Regular soundings of service managers show that no service is unable to operate as a result of staff not being able to work from an office. New multi-disciplinary/inter-agency teams (Community Assistance Hubs) have been established on a virtual basis to co-ordinate support for people who were shielding or self-isolating.
- 3.9 Two staff surveys, one in April and another in July, showed that the majority of staff (71%) recognised the positive benefits of home working and that they had adapted well (84%) to changed ways of working. Future arrangements need to build on these positive experiences as well as address the concerns of those staff (34%) who have indicated the need for additional support with their home working arrangements. Feedback indicates the need for assistance setting-up more permanent home working arrangements through the provision of appropriate equipment and those who may still need to access a COVID-safe desk in an office.
- 3.10 It is recognised that, in the case of Social Work some staff have been operating in a COVID-safe way with a blended approach to both home working and office use on limited hours over this period. Consideration will be given to continuation of these arrangements as office space is reconfigured.
- 3.11 For those working at home, policies are being redefined which will aim to offer practical support and address issues raised by staff in the surveys such as furniture, IT, insurance, HMRC relief, training and support and Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments.

Fit for 2024

- 3.12 One of the themes of fit for 2024 is *making best use of our properties – including reducing the Council estate*. The arrangements in this paper are consistent with our long-term objectives for increased remote working and flexible office accommodation which is consolidated on three core sites (HQ, Paton St. Galashiels and Hawick Town Hall) and supported by flexible touch-down offices in each locality. There are wider implications in respect of the Council's estate and it is recommended that Members agree that a further report on the Council estate will be brought to the November meeting of Council.

4 HOME WORKING & OFFICE ARRANGEMENTS

Recognising the above, the following arrangements will now be offered to staff when COVID-safe office is available – and on a long-term basis following the end of the pandemic:

- While COVID-19 remains active and restrictions are in place, home-working, wherever possible, will be the predominant way of working for all office-based staff, recognising the need for continuing use of offices by some staff using COVID-safe arrangements. Associated policies have been revised and will be put in place over the coming weeks to provide practical support including Display Screen Equipment (DSE), furniture and equipment, technology, insurance, HMRC relief and training and support.
- Covid-safe flexible office space will be made available through the reconfiguration of office accommodation at HQ, Galashiels Paton St. and Hawick Town Hall. Consideration is being given to similar touch-down office space in localities. This will provide a mixed approach with flexible office space when staff need to be in offices or where staff's domestic space, internet connectivity or other circumstances mean that it is not possible to work from home.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial

The cost of the above arrangements will be met from existing budget provisions.

5.2 Risk and Mitigations

- 5.2.1 Informal home working arrangements have been in place since March this year and have been evolving over the last 6 months. There is a risk that, without formalising these arrangements and providing flexible alternative COVID-safe office space, staff will not have the support needed to sustain productive home working in the longer term.
- 5.2.2 Ongoing engagement will be undertaken through line managers and through surveys of staff to ensure that home working arrangements remain effective and to ensure staff wellbeing.
- 5.2.3 Without these arrangements there is a danger of "drift" back to the offices with associated risks of virus transmission.
- 5.2.4 The Council has a duty of care to its employees to ensure that appropriate Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments are completed and any associated risks mitigated.
- 5.2.5 This approach both protects staff and minimises the risk of larger numbers of staff being absent due to contracting COVID-19 which would inevitably result in the Council facing difficulty in maintaining the services it delivers across the Scottish Borders.

5.3 Equalities

Policies to support working arrangements and reconfigure office space are designed to ensure they comply fully with the Council equalities duties.

5.4 Acting Sustainably

The arrangement seeks to ensure that offices provision, in future, is on a more sustainable footing.

5.5 **Carbon Management**

It is anticipated that reducing the need for travel to and from work and the closure/mothballing of offices which are dormant will, at the very least, offset any domestic impact on our overall carbon footprint.

5.6 **Rural Proofing**

With our office population dispersed across the borders there may be an attendant benefit for shops and businesses in the localities.

5.7 **Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

There are no changes to be made to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation as a result of the proposals contained in this report.

6. CONSULTATION

6.1 The Executive Director Finance and Regulatory Services, the Chief Legal Officer and Monitoring officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, Service Director HR & Communications, the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and their comments have been incorporated into this report.

Approved by
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Signature

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Signature.....

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