THE IMPACT OF AGILE WORKING ON SERVICE DELIVERY

Report by Director People Performance and Change

Executive Committee

3 October 2023

1   PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

1.1 **This report sets out:**

(a)   The Council's approach to agile working and the positive effect on standards of service delivery.

(b)   The background in relation to agile working and the benefits to the adoption of this way of working for the Council, employees and prospective employees. Our agile working approach has been developed over the past 15 years and evolved over that period. Whilst the report discusses some options in relation to our policy and approach to this, with the technology now in place, moving away from agile working is not considered a viable option given the challenges the Council faces in an increasingly competitive employment market.

2   RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 I recommend that the Executive Committee: -

(a)   Notes there is significant interest in more flexible forms of working, and agile working, is now an essential tool in attracting and retaining staff. Organisations who support flexible forms of working experience reduced employee turnover, increased employee engagement and improved rates of talent attraction. Agile working can also provide many other opportunities for the Council including reduced estate and facilities costs, improved employee wellbeing, diversity and inclusion as well as being more environmentally friendly.

(b)   Considers the mainly positive comparison in performance in 2019 and 2022 respectively across those Services utilising agile working arrangements. (Appendix 1)

(c)   Notes the adopted agile working principles and supports that are in place to provide a framework to support the effective operation and management of agile working. Our aim is to continue embedding an agile working model that gives our people greater flexibility in balancing their work and home lives. Whilst simultaneously supporting effective recruitment and retention and the health & wellbeing of our staff.

(d)   Recognise that we want to build a culture where our people are customer focused, feel trusted and empowered, and will have greater

freedom on how, where and when their work is delivered. Focus will be placed on outcomes as opposed solely to attendance at our offices. However, this level of flexibility, due to the nature of some roles, will not be achievable for all our people. Nevertheless, there will remain a commitment within the Future Operating Model to explore how a level of agile working can be built into roles across the organisation.

(e) Teams that can utilise agile working have engaged in co-designing their Team Agreements which describe how they will work. This includes when they are required to hold face to face team meetings, time with new colleagues and how they will collaborate. It is part of the HQ refresh plan to ensure there is the right collaborative and workspaces available for those days, so employees can book desks in the same location or arrange other meetings or collaborative events.

(f) Agrees that supporting agile working in the longer term will require more inclusive approaches to remote working, more training and support to workers on cybersecurity and increasing access to digital technologies and infrastructure as well as improving digital skills.

(g) Endorses the vision to nurture an empowered, resilient, and high performing workforce. A workforce which has the skills and equipment to work flexibly to deliver high quality services in an efficient, sustainable, and environmentally friendly way, now and in the future. Workplaces with modern, flexible spaces not only encourage collaboration across functional activity but also strengthen our corporate culture, increase engagement with our partners and support a better customer experience.

3   BACKGROUND

3.1   Agile working describes a type of flexible working where an employee can split their time between the workplace and remote working, normally in their own home but also other locations. It can consist of a one-off day, an informal or set pattern to work remotely or can be a temporary and adaptable measure to suit the needs of the business and/or the employee.

3.2   An agile working model may be structured in different ways depending on the individual organisation's needs. For example, it may involve:

o   Workplace base preferred, with remote working when appropriate.
o   Remote working with visits to the workplace when face-to-face meetings are needed.
o   A set pattern of days in the workplace, such as 1 or 2 days per week or fortnight.

3.3   Agile working has become an increasingly competitive area for employers seeking to attract talent. The Council's flexible working offer is a key factor in recruitment and retention. Using data and analysis from the 2021 Census the ONS (Office for National Statistics) provided some useful insights - As Local Government struggles in many areas to recruit and retain staff it is worthwhile considering its overall perception as a progressive employer and what other industries, with which it competes

as a sector, offers to its' workforce. The data finds that the proportion of people hybrid working has risen in 2022 based on survey responses collected from the 27 April to 8 May 2022, when guidance to work from home because of the pandemic was no longer in place in the UK, 38% of working adults reported having worked from home at some point over the past seven days. Pre-pandemic this figure was just 12%. Before the pandemic, remote and agile working had been increasing gradually. Between January and December 2019, around 1 in 10 (12%) of the of the UK workforce had worked at least one day from home in the previous week and around 1 in 20 (5%) reported working from home.

3.4 Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) are specialists in local authority frontline services and operate one of the UK's largest research programmes in local government policy. Their survey and results from over 50 local authorities provides a robust assessment of other councils' approaches to and experiences of agile working, from which the Council has tested its agile working, principles, and support in place to provide a framework for the effective operation and management of agile working. https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2022/22-34-local-government-survey-post-covid-return-to-office-working/

3.5 Research indicates that workers perceive both benefits and disadvantages to agile working. Benefits of remote and agile working for staff include increased wellbeing, self-reported productivity gains, work satisfaction, reduced work-life conflict, new ways to collaborate and more inclusive ways of working using technology. Challenges can include increased work intensity, longer working hours, decreased social interactions and an inability to disconnect from work.

3.6 Research indicates that organisations perceive both benefits and disadvantages to flexible working. Benefits of remote and agile working for organisations can include increased staff wellbeing, reduced overhead costs, productivity gains, reduced sickness absence levels and more efficient allocation of resource. Challenges can include reduced mental wellbeing of staff, and difficulties in staff interaction, collaboration, engagement, and connection.

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3.7 Agile working allows the current talent pool to expand as it makes jobs accessible to a higher number of people, irrespective of where they live. This is an essential tool to improve our recruitment and retention challenges in some areas.

3.8 The Council employs 5,100 staff over a wide range of different services. Most of our staff are working in front line customer facing roles such as Adult Social Care, Waste Collection and Education. Around 1200 roles,

traditionally those that were office based, are currently suited to agile working.

3.9 The Council first adopted a flexible working policy in 2007. Whilst the terminology has subsequently changed, it was similar to agile working in recognising that developing technology meant that some jobs could be undertaken at home, at different work locations and much more flexibly. However, before the COVID-19 pandemic, agile working and working from home regularly was still largely the exception in many services. For many staff working from home was often only utilised to respond to e-mails or to undertake work that required some focused time or prolonged concentration. The technology available at that time was better suited for this type of work but not conducive for meetings or collaborative work. The pandemic and lockdown in March 2020 changed all that and the Council introduced Microsoft Teams in 2020 to successfully facilitate effective remote working.

3.10 Like many organisations, the Council had significant numbers of staff working from home in accordance with the lockdown measures in place. Many staff took on different roles to support our communities such as staffing local hubs or working within our Care Homes. Microsoft Teams was used for communication and meetings at all levels. The Council also implemented solutions to make other business critical systems accessible for staff working at home which, previously, had not been possible. Due to people and technology working effectively together, we ensured that we both maintained and supported the delivery of essential services together in response to the pandemic. Backed with the right investment in working practices, technology, behaviours, and workspace this effectively endorsed the concept of agile working. For some staff work is no longer the place we go, work is what we do, what we achieve and the outcomes we deliver. (Appendix 1)

3.11 Across the Council, teams and services have used the learning from working in this way and particularly the positive changes to change how they work post-pandemic. As a result, our agile working principles have evolved, and been co-designed with services and our people. This provides the Council with a level of resilience we did not have before, and we are now able to maintain business continuity in any emergency such as storm Arwen.

3.12 Working through the Covid-19 pandemic was challenging; with many being initially reluctant to working from home however, significant numbers of our workforce have embraced a different way of working. This was out of necessity rather than choice, but it has accelerated the journey we had started already. Whilst delivering better outcomes is our primary focus this way of working also brings benefits and opportunities for individuals, to work more flexibly in a way and at a pace we could not have imagined. It has provided the opportunity to change the way we work forever. This includes the ability for some employees to work remotely or from home and other locations, utilising technology more effectively.

3.13 There has been a clear indication from our staff through surveys and other forums that they welcome the idea of greater flexibility in working locations that technology enables, but we do not want to lose all the social, shared learning and collaboration benefits that working alongside colleagues brings.

3.14 Agile working places new demands on our managers and staff. In response to this, we continually review existing learning and development programmes and activities, and where appropriate create new ones to ensure new ways of working and changes to culture are fully supported. When doing so, consideration is given to the most efficient and sustainable mode of delivery, whether face to face, virtually or by eLearning. We have also continued to invest in the wellbeing of staff ensuring we provide a wide range of healthcare benefits that include a variety of mental health supports.

3.15 Onboarding new team members was challenging during the pandemic and our induction process has been refined to ensure new staff working in an agile model get face to face time with colleagues and in some cases such as MA's a continuous programme of time with colleagues to ensure they are effectively supported.

3.16 The Council has faced many of the same challenges as many other employers in managing the move to agile working post pandemic and we adopted the following principles:

- We want to offer our employees a degree of personal choice about where they work provided business/service needs continue to be met.
- It is recognised most roles within the Council are not suitable for agile working, but we should explore other opportunities for flexible working for front line staff.
- It is our intention to retain regular face-to-face contact and social interaction amongst colleagues. The creation of collaborative spaces in HQ and locality offices and zoned team areas are key to encouraging staff to come into the office environment.
- Employees working as part of an agile working arrangement may be required to work in an office or attend team or service meetings at the request of their manager as and when required to meet business requirements.
- We have chosen not to prescribe a set or average number of days or hours by which employees must work from an office as part of an agile working arrangement. To date we have implemented Team agreements where working arrangements are agreed by managers and team members based on job and collaboration requirements.
- The Council is not imposing agile working (or a requirement to work at home) on employees. Any employee that wishes to work in a Council building or workplace can do so.
- If there are any concerns about efficiency, effectiveness or safety of agile working arrangements, the Council Management Team will

have the final determination on work location and working arrangements.
- The Council's obligations to consider reasonable adjustments continues to apply to staff working in an agile model.
- The Health and Wellbeing of our workforce is paramount. We recognise the benefits that agile working can bring in terms of flexibility and work life balance for employees. However, there can be potential risks arising from sustained periods of homeworking or employees feeling that they should always be available or accessible.

Benefits

3.17 There are huge benefits for both employees and the Council, greater work life balance, reduced travel time, reduced carbon emissions, reduction in travel costs and time, more flexibility within the working day and greater job autonomy. Trusting people to do the right thing and empowering them to choose where and when to work most effectively - focusing more on the outcomes achieved rather than simply the time spent working in the office (presenteeism) adds to improved job satisfaction which in turn has a positive effect on staff retention.

3.18 The draft Scottish Government Scotland's Climate Change Plan due for publication in December 2023 encourages businesses to focus particularly on decarbonising both the commute to work and journeys made for work purposes. There is an objective in the Plan to improve digital alternatives to travel.

3.19 It is now standard for the offer of agile working to be included within job adverts and so it is important that the Council's approach stands up in the marketplace and provides us with the best opportunity to attract and retain talent. It will also mean that we can attract employees from outside of the area who may not have otherwise considered Scottish Borders for employment opportunities and geographically it supports local staff who live in a rural area where there is little transport, to access work in their community.

Support to managers and employees

3.21 As set out above agile Working has brought some challenges and benefits. In addition to the policy framework, we have a wide range of support in place including:

o An extensive e-learning suite to assist and support staff with making the most of technology to wellbeing has been developed.

- o Team sessions facilitated by HR Business Partners to work with managers and employees to work through how agile would work best for their teams.
- o Using Teams to reach a far wider audience for Senior Manager Meetings and meet your director drop-in sessions. Being on Teams enables these events to include a far higher number of participants.
- o Additional wellbeing and healthcare support to staff.

3.22 The approach we have taken to implementing agile and remote working and providing support to staff and managers aligns with the guidance issued by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development which highlights the importance of engagement and some co-design.

RELEVANT RISKS

3.22 One of the risks from agile working may be from a perceived loss of control by the employer or concerns about a reduction in productivity. However, most employers have reported a positive impact from agile working and the mutual benefits it can bring. (Appendix 1)

3.23 Association for Public Service Excellence are (APSE) a specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK's largest research programmes in local government policy. Their survey and results from over 50 local authorities provides a robust assessment of other councils' approaches to and experiences of agile working which evidenced a positive impact on productivity.

3.24 Each service has its own performance indicators down to team and individual level. There is no evidence that performance within services has been negatively impacted by agile working and feedback from managers and staff is positive.

3.25 The Council has been explicit within the principles developed that if there are any concerns about the efficiency, effectiveness, or safety of agile working arrangements, the Council Management Team will have the final determination on work location and working arrangements.

4 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 **Financial**
The use of Teams for online meetings has contributed to a significant reduction in business mileage across the Council.

4.2 **Risk and Mitigations**

4.3 **Integrated Impact Assessment**
(a) An IIA (Integrated Impact Assessment)has been completed – it is not anticipated that the proposals recommended will of themselves eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity between people who share a characteristic (age, disability, gender re-assignment,

trans/transgender identity, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race groups, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation) and those who do not; and foster good relations between people who share a characteristic and those who do not. However, agile working may enhance our ability to recruit and retain those who identify as belonging to an equality group.

4.4 **Sustainable Development Goals**
Agile working assists staff to improve their carbon footprint and may provide opportunities to reduce consumption and costs as well as opportunities to reduce the overall property footprint of the Council's estate.

4.5 **Climate Change**
Agile working reduces the amount of travel time and carbon emissions from business miles.

4.6 **Rural Proofing**
The ability to agile work may enable people living in rural areas that have limited access to public transport to take up employment opportunities that would not have been possible in the past due to the need to travel to a work location.

4.7 **Data Protection Impact Statement**
There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

4.8 **Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**
No changes are required to either the Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation because of the proposals in this report.

8 CONSULTATION

8.1 The Director of Finance and Procurement, the Director of Corporate Governance, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Clerk to the Council and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received have been included in the report.

Approved by

Clair Hepburn
Director People Performance and Change

Author(s)

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Background Papers: https://apse.org.uk/index.cfm/apse/members-area/briefings/2022/22-34-local-government-survey-post-covid-return-to-office-working/

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Previous Minute Reference: Nil

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