

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

20TH SEPTEMBER 2021

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF HUMAN & ORGANISATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT – S.REES**

Matter for Information

WARD(S) AFFECTED: All

Report Title: The Future of Work: Office Based Employee Survey Feedback and Action

Purpose of Report

To update Members on the Future of Work survey of the council's office based workforce as well as an update on current working arrangements.

Executive Summary

The report provides Members with the background to the survey which was issued to office based employees in May 2021. Over 60% of employees in this category responded and a summary of responses is set out in Appendix 1. The feedback led to the development of a number of actions in response to the issues raised by employees. The report also provides Members with an update on the development of Hybrid Working practices and a survey of frontline employees which is currently underway.

Background

On 23rd March 2020 the Welsh Government introduced a series of measures designed to curb the spread of the Covid 19 virus pandemic, and protect the

nation. This became known as 'lockdown'. For a period of time, many businesses and workplaces were closed, and only key workers could attend their place of work. In June 2020, the instruction changed to 'those who can work at home must work at home'.

In accordance with the guidance from Welsh Government, the majority of the council's office based workforce, approximately 2,000 employees, became home workers in March 2020 and this has remained largely unchanged since that time. In September 2020, the council did introduce 'return to workplaces' guidance, with a risk assessment to enable a small number of employees to return to offices where they were unable to perform their duties at home. For the majority of the small number of employees who have returned to offices, this has been for a limited time period to perform 'one-off' tasks or on a part-time basis to undertake duties that cannot be performed at home, then returning home to undertake the remainder of their duties that can be carried out at home.

The council also developed guidance and resources for the home based workforce, including a Display Screen Equipment Online Risk Assessment. The resources can be viewed online: <https://www.npt.gov.uk/24395>.

In May, we launched a survey for office based employees, to find out how home working has affected them over the last 14 months – what the challenges have been and what has worked well.

The Future of Work Survey

The survey launched on 4th May 2021 by Mrs Karen Jones, Chief Executive, and closed on 31st May 2021. It was publicised in the weekly HR Sway, on the council's intranet, and emailed to employees identified as 'office workers'.

The survey aimed to establish the following information:

- Pre-pandemic working arrangements
- Pandemic working arrangements
- How employees have found home working
- How employees feel about returning to the workplace
- How employees feel about the future of work
- How our employees are

1,227 employees responded to the questionnaire, a response rate of approximately 60%, which is considered excellent and means the feedback can be viewed as representative of this workforce (a 30% response rate is considered as acceptable). This response rate indicates that the workforce was driven by high levels of motivation to complete the survey, and in itself shows a strong relationship between the council and its office based employees.

Responses and feedback

Appendix 1 sets out the questions asked in the survey and the collated responses. At the panel meeting a short presentation will provide a summary overview of the survey feedback.

The survey also gave employees the opportunity to provide narrative feedback in their own words. The thousands of statements have been analysed and grouped into key themes, to enable us to respond and take action to address this important feedback.

Actions

The Survey results have been shared and discussed with our recognised trade unions and to inform our joint working in relation to employment strategy, policy and process.

The Survey results were shared with Corporate Directors at a corporate level and also with Directorate Management Teams to consider service specific feedback and support the development of any necessary service specific actions.

The Communications & Marketing Team put in place a Communications Action Plan to ensure that we feedback to our employees what the key survey outcomes were and actions that have been taken in response to the feedback we had from employees. A range of media was used in including web based, intranet, the HR Sway, the development of assets and the use of the two pilot social media platforms.

The feedback from our employees fed into how the council continues to manage the working arrangements of its office based workforce:

- In June Corporate Directors considered an options appraisal and determined that the majority of employees who are homeworking would continue to work from home for a further period to September. However it was confirmed that over the summer employees could attend the workplace where it was necessary to service delivery, or where it was deemed necessary taking into account an employee's personal circumstances, but with building occupancy limited to a guideline of 20%. Any returns to work to be in line with the 'Return to Workplaces Guidance' agreed with recognised trade unions, and arrangements subject to a business case, a written risk assessment shared with the employee and relevant trade union, and regular and on-going line manager check-ins.
- Service Managers were asked to facilitate Let's Talk Check In meetings in workplaces over the summer months – subject to risk assessments, to be carried out in line with the 'Return to Workplaces Guidance' and ensuring no more than 20% building occupancy at any one time.
- To support Digital Well-being we developed and adopted a Virtual Etiquette to improve day-to-day working arrangements for home-based employees, a set of principles to work to, rather than a set of rules. The **Virtual Working Guidance** has been published and can be viewed at [Staff Health and Wellbeing \(npt.gov.uk\)](https://www.npt.gov.uk/staff-health-and-wellbeing).
- **Myth Busting Frequently Asked Questions** were developed and widely publicised to employees. The narrative responses have made it clear that not all of our employees are aware of employment arrangements and / or resources available. For example, many employees complained that they do not have office furniture at home to enable them to work safely or comfortably. We have been able to bring to their attention the resources that are available to them, including the process that is in place to ensure that they do have the right kit and furniture to work safely at home.
- A review and refresh of mental health and well-being resources was undertaken and the website was re-launched over the summer with a publicity campaign to spread awareness.

Recent Developments

Wales is currently at **Alert Level 0**:

- There will be no legal limits on the number of people who can meet others, including in private homes, public places or at events.
- All businesses, employers and other organisations will still be required to take reasonable measures to manage the risk of coronavirus at their premises.
- The reasonable measures to be taken such as physical distancing and other controls, will be for each organisation to consider depending on the nature of the premises and the risks of exposure to coronavirus identified.
- **People should continue to work from home wherever possible.**
- If you are unwell you should self-isolate and get tested.
- Face coverings will remain a legal requirement indoors in public places, such as on public transport, in shops and when accessing healthcare. The use of face coverings in the workplace should also be considered by businesses and employers as part of their coronavirus risk assessment.

Strategic Manager Assessment

All service managers were asked to complete this assessment in June 2021 “to reflect on the changes they made to services during the pandemic and recording any lessons learnt to inform recovery and future service delivery”.

Accountable managers have told us they want to be more empowered to make their own decisions. They don't want prescriptive policies, but rather want to work within a legally compliant framework and to a set of principles, giving them the flexibility to develop working arrangements that suit them and their teams and the services that they deliver.

The feedback from this, along with the feedback from the Future of Work Survey has helped to inform the development of working arrangements.

Extract from Chief Executive statement dated 7th July 2021:

From 1st September 2021:

Subject to Welsh Government regulations, we will move to a hybrid office model. The detail of how this will operate in practice will be developed over the remainder of the summer but the key features are likely to be as follows:

The health, safety and wellbeing of all colleagues and our service users will be a continuing priority;

Accountable managers will determine the working patterns of their teams within a framework of corporate principles. Working arrangements will need to reflect the needs of the service, take account of the needs of the whole team whilst also reflecting the individual preferences and circumstances of each team member;

Employment policies and procedures will be updated to reflect the shift to a hybrid model of working – this will include a review of the Flexi Scheme; consideration of what should constitute the fixed basis for any travel cost arrangements etc;

Technologies and physical working environments will be adapted where required to support a move to hybrid model of working;

Risk assessments will be required to support all working patterns as now.

Actions to deliver the commitments set out above:

- Health and Safety, Facilities Management, Digital Services and trade unions have worked together to carry out a revised buildings **Risk Assessment**, taking account of WG Coronavirus Control Plan: Alert Level Zero.
- **A Hybrid Working Framework** has been developed, taking into account feedback from Accountable Managers, as well as to reflect the WG Coronavirus Control Plan: Alert Level Zero. The trade unions are supporting this piece of work, and we are asking managers, to start developing their hybrid working practices on an informal basis to begin with, from September. The starting point for all managers will be to have a

conversation with each of their team members, and then together as a team, taking into consideration individual preferences, and how this can balance against the needs of the service and ensure that service delivery comes first.

- We are providing ongoing support to managers to embed Hybrid working, with HR Manager drop in sessions, FAQs, and 'Leading and Managing Hybrid Teams' training to be provided in partnership with SOCITM, building on the highly effective and successful, Leading and Managing Digital Change programme delivered with SOCITM in late 2019 / early 2020.
- The **Flexi-Time Scheme** has been reviewed, fit for purpose in a Hybrid environment.
- The HR team reviewed decision making in routine employment matters, and stripped out requirements for Heads of Service to sign off on these, instead empowering accountable managers to make their own decisions - this should speed up and simplify many processes, including recruitment advertising as an example.
- HR Managers will repeat consultation workshops with Accountable Managers towards the Christmas period to obtain feedback on the practical application of the Hybrid Framework and to inform the development of more permanent arrangements.

Future of Work Survey: front line / on site employees

We developed a survey for our front line / on-site workforce, the majority of whom have continued to work in the community or in our workplaces throughout the pandemic. We want to find out from them how working during the pandemic has affected them over the last 14 months – what the challenges have been and what has worked well. This survey was launched in August 2021, and closes on 31st September 2021, to ensure that we could obtain feedback from our schools. Members will receive feedback from this survey at the next meeting of Personnel Committee.

Financial Appraisal

The Surveys have been developed and managed internally by the council's HR and Communications and Marketing teams, at no additional cost to the council.

Integrated Impact Assessment

As this is a matter for information, an Integrated Impact Assessment is not required.

Workforce Impact

Employee voice, and ensuring that employees are able to provide us with feedback on their experience at work and how it can be improved is important for people's wellbeing and motivation.

Legal Impact

There are no legal impacts associated with this report.

Risk Management

The council has adopted a risk assessed approach to workforce arrangements throughout the pandemic, placing the health and safety of our employees as a paramount concern.

Consultation

The trade unions were informally consulted with in relation to the survey and have been presented with the survey outcomes. This information will help inform more formal discussions in relation to workforce planning and strategy development. The trade unions continue to work closely with us as we develop our Hybrid Working practices.

Recommendations

That members note the survey outcomes and associated actions and the update in relation to working practices.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – The Future of Work Questionnaire and Responses

List of Background Papers

<https://gov.wales/covid-19-alert-levels>

Officer Contact

Mrs Sheenagh Rees Head of Human and Organisational Development Tel: 01639 763315 or e-mail: s.rees5@npt.gov.uk