

FLEXIBLE WORKING FOR BOROUGH COUNCIL EMPLOYEES

Submitted by: **Head of Human Resources**

Portfolio: **Finance and Budget Management**

Ward(s) affected: **N/A**

Purpose of the Report

To update the Committee on the current position regarding flexible working/homeworking at the council.

Recommendation

That the report be received.

Reasons

To enable Members to consider the current arrangements for flexible working/homeworking arrangements, their cost effectiveness and the benefits both to the council and employees.

1. Background

1.1 Flexible Working

- 1.1.1 The council has operated a flexible working hours scheme for many years allowing employees to vary the times when they can arrive and leave work within certain time limits and subject to staffing levels being adequate.
- 1.1.2 The scheme is available for most office based staff but certain employees may be excluded from the scheme or may be able to participate but on a restricted basis, depending on the specific duties of their posts.
- 1.1.3 Other approaches to working flexibly are in operation for non-office based staff. For example, the Refuse Collection Service operates over a compressed four day working week, Streetscene operates under a Summer/Winter working arrangement, as does the Pest Control Service. Front of house staff at the Borough Museum and Art Gallery now also work on a seasonal basis.
- 1.1.4 The Flexible Working Hours Scheme was reviewed and enhanced in October 2009 and currently includes three options.

Standard Flexible Working Hours as follows:

Flexi Time	Core Time	Flexi Time	Core Time	Flexi Time
7.00am to 9.30am	9.30 am to 11.45am	11.45am to 2.15pm	2.15pm to 4.00pm	4.00pm to 7.00pm

Enhanced Flexible Working Hours

- 148 hours to be worked per 4 week settlement period
- No required core attendance time

- A minimum of 3 hours must be worked on any working day
- Earliest start time 7.00am, latest finish time 7.00pm
- Employees can work on Saturdays from 8.00am to 1.00pm
- Maximum time to be worked on any one day 11 hours 40 minutes

Compressed Working Hours

- Contractual 37 hour working week can be worked over a 4 day working week or an 8/9 day fortnight

1.1.5 The Scheme aims to give employees and managers flexibility to manage varied and fluctuating workloads. Managers are required to consider the operational viability, volume and type of work available when assessing whether flexible working is appropriate. Employees do not have a contractual right to be admitted to the Scheme.

1.1.6 There are currently 285 employees working within the scheme as follows:

- Standard Scheme - 114
- Enhanced Scheme - 147
- Compressed Working Hours - 11
- Standard Scheme (Restricted) - 13

1.2 Homeworking

1.2.1 Homeworking was identified as a Transformation project in 2010 on the basis that arranging for a significant number of staff to be able to work remotely with home as their base, hot-desking as needed, would be beneficial to both individuals and the council.

1.2.2 It was considered that the project had the potential to contribute to achieving financial savings, increase productivity, reduce accommodation costs, road congestion and the use of fuel, improve home and work-life balance for staff, reduce absenteeism, allow even greater flexible working and assist some people who are disabled to obtain/remain in employment with the council.

1.2.3 The broad project objectives were:-

- To implement a homeworking scheme to improve efficiency/performance;
- To find solutions to enable homeworking wherever practical;
- To reduce accommodation costs;
- To contribute to the carbon reduction initiative;
- To promote homeworking to encourage work-life balance.

1.2.4 A total of 52 employees participated in the Pathfinder Phase which took place from October 2010 to March 2011 and since then the Scheme had continued to be promoted to employees across all services on a voluntary basis via core briefings/team briefings and e-Voice.

1.2.5 There are currently 132 employees who have remote access to the council's information systems. Appropriate equipment has been issued where required and some employees are able to connect to the council's network in a secure GCSx compliant way, using their own equipment.

2. **Issues**

2.1 **Flexible Working**

2.1.1 The Flexible Working Hours Scheme has been in place for a number of years and is used by the majority of employees who occupy those posts where it can be applied.

2.2 **Homeworking**

2.2.1 It has emerged that the vast majority of employees homeworking are doing so on an occasional basis. Other than some initial connectivity issues, no employees have reported any problems in relation to homeworking and there has only been one performance related issue involving a homeworker. Take up is being kept under review and monitored monthly by the TWWW Programme Board and is continuing to be promoted.

2.2.2 The equipment budget allocated for the Homeworking/Blackberry Server Project was £40K and the balance remaining is around £10K. It is not anticipated that significant additional expenditure will be required, on the basis that employee participation is voluntary and all existing requests for homeworking have been accommodated. An analysis is being conducted to establish those employees who have been issued with equipment that they use only rarely, with a view to this being returned where appropriate and re-issued to employees who are more likely to homework on a more frequent basis, or to new homeworkers.

2.2.3 Feedback has indicated that employees generally tend to work from home when completing particular tasks that can be done more effectively away from the office environment and they feel that they are able to perform these more efficiently by being able to work from home.

2.2.4 To date, due to the vast majority of employees working from home on an occasional basis, there has been no opportunity to reduce accommodation costs by the introduction of hot desking. Recent office moves, where teams have had to be allocated reduced office space, have resulted in staff preferring to make more efficient use of the reduced space whilst maintaining the number of desks rather than opting for a hot-desking/homeworking solution.

2.2.5 Homeworking solutions have been particularly successful where they have been when used in conjunction with attendance management/maternity procedures. Where appropriate, homeworking solutions are now put in place to increase flexibility for employees who are either about to commence/return from maternity leave and also for employees returning to work following long-term sickness absences, often enabling an earlier return than would have otherwise have been the case. The sickness absence figures for the last five years are as follows:

Year	Total average no. of days sickness per employee
2007/08	10.12
2008/09	7.91
2009/10	7.86
2010/11	7.33
2011/12	6.73

2.2.6 The average number of days long-term absence has reduced from 6.13 days in 2007/08 to 3.74 days in 2011.12.

2.2.7 Although the implementation of homeworking undoubtedly will have made some contribution to reducing carbon output, to date, this will not have been a significant amount due to the majority of those who homework doing so on an occasional rather than a regular basis. The initial estimated reduction of 14 tonnes of CO₂ per annum was based on an assumption that 40% of office staff would work from home one day a week.

2.2.8 The TWWW Programme Board is continuing to consider ways of encouraging more employees to work from home on a regular basis. Further work is being conducted to identify/remove potential barriers.

3. **Options Considered**

3.1 Under current contractual arrangements, employees cannot unilaterally be required to work from home if they do not wish to do so.

4. **Proposal**

4.1 Homeworking is to continue to be promoted and implemented on a voluntary basis.

5. **Reasons for Preferred Solution**

5.1 See 3.1 (above).

6. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

6.1 Promotion/implementation of flexible working and homeworking contributes to the corporate priority 'transforming our council to achieve excellence'.

6.2 Promotion/implementation of homeworking also contributes to the corporate priority 'creating a cleaner, safer and sustainable Borough by the reduction of carbon output resulting from fewer work travel trips made by employees.

7. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

See 3.1 (above).

8. **Equality Impact Assessment**

8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed and no equality issues have arisen as a result of the introduction of either flexible working or homeworking. Both schemes tend to have a positive impact by enabling employees the scope to adjust their work/life balance and accommodate personal commitments.

9. **Financial and Resource Implications**

9.1 The estimated budget for homeworking for the purposes of the Carbon Reduction Plan was £63K (£54.6K capital and £8.5K operational). This was based on an assumption that 40% of all office staff may be set up to work from home. To date, around £30K has been spent on equipment and licences to facilitate homeworking. The actual Homeworking/Blackberry Server Project budget was £40K and the current balance remaining is around £10k. No significant further additional expenditure is envisaged at this stage. However, there will remain an ongoing annual cost in relation to renewal of licences.

9.2 Although accommodation cost savings have not been made as a result of hot-desking, it is considered that homeworking does enable employees to work more efficiently and has contributed to reduction in carbon output and to reducing sickness absence rates.

10. **Major Risks**

10.1 No major risks identified. Promotion of homeworking has a beneficial impact in relation to business continuity risks and appropriate GCSx compliant information security arrangements are in place. There is a positive risk in that there is evidence of improved morale of employees who are able to incorporate home working as part of a phased return to work following long term illness. In turn, this can shorten the time taken to return to full-time working.

11. **Sustainability and Climate Change Implications**

11.1 Promotion of homeworking has a positive impact on climate change due to the potential to reduce the number of vehicle journeys required for travel to/from work, thereby reducing carbon output and traffic congestion.

12. **Key Decision Information**

Not applicable.

13. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

None.

14. **List of Appendices**

None.

15. **Background Papers**

None.