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**To: Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board 1**

**Date: 30 March 2022**

**Subject: Agile and Flexible Working Update**

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## **1 Purpose of the Note**

The purpose of this update is to provide Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board 1 on the changing working practices agile and flexible working has created during the pandemic and subsequently in relation to the workforce post Covid.

## **2 Recommendations**

Finance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Board 1 are being asked to provide feedback on the proposed changes to the flexible working arrangements and note the other impacts on casework and sickness based on the supporting evidence gathered over the last 24 months.

## **3 Background and context**

3.1 Prior to the pandemic, the City Council operated a flexible working policy which enabled employees in line with legislation to be able to apply to work on a flexible basis after 12 months in service. There were a number of recognised options including part time hours, compressed working week, job share, term time working, flexitime which were subject to line management approval based on service need.

3.2 Over the last two years over half the workforce has worked from home due to the pandemic and subsequent restrictions. This change occurred overnight, underpinned by the technology available ;laptops, Teams access and Sharepoint. It is accepted this was a steep learning curve for all but despite this productivity did not decrease and 'work rounds' were found for tasks that could not be undertaken as they were previously in the light of the various restrictions.

Keeping the workforce as safe and as well as possible regardless of the environment or location they were working in has been key over the last two years. So, for the those who remained in the workplace this meant appropriate PPE, risk assessments and following the latest public health advice.

This was no different for those staff working from home, risk assessments to determine equipment needs were undertaken, display screen and workstation set up advice provided and a system for the supply of necessary kit was established. Regular updates were also provided as reminders, plus the creation of the 'Flexible Toolkit' to provide advice to manager and employees on the options and potential solutions. A good example being converting annual leave into hours, which is being retained going forward.

#### 4. Support.

Based on the three 'pulse' surveys undertaken during the pandemic helped

The wish to retain and/or extend flexible working has been consistent during the last 2 years and this is supported by the pulse survey feedback.

The feedback from the pulse surveys and focus groups of frontline managers and supervisors indicated the need to review and revise the Flexible Working Policy. A first draft was shared with trade union colleagues, after further consultation it was agreed the toolkit that had been developed during COVID would be better suited for the aims and objectives of our overall aims and this is now being further enhanced to meet the organisational needs going forward.

For example , we have developed and included the following definitions of types of workers we can now recognise and identify within our workforce moving forward:

Work style	Description
Fixed	Workplace based employees who operate from an office or shared work setting i.e. Care Homes. A fixed worker will typically remain at one place of work for the majority of their time.
Internally Mobile	The role is not tied down to one particular location and supports the internal functions of the council. Internally mobile employees can successfully and regularly carry out their activities from a mixture of appropriate facilities. For example, to attend meetings, work from home, council buildings or on the move according to the needs of the job that day.
Externally Mobile	The role directly supports the external services provided by the council and the majority of time is spent visiting people, attending meetings or carrying out work across various external sites e.g. Social Workers. Depending on the needs of the service, externally mobile employees can carry out work from a variety of locations including Council buildings, the premises of service users, community based locations or from home.
Home Based	Home based employees carry out the majority of their work at home. However, they are still required to attend meetings, supervisions etc in Council premises. For these employees their home becomes the contractual place of work.

##### 4.1 The additional changes to the toolkit include the following:

- The ability for all employees to request flexible working from day one
- Different working patterns and styles
- Retaining the ability to book annual leave in hours
- A basic equipment offer of £100 per employee if they require equipment to enable them to work on an agile basis
- An informal and formal application process

4.2 We are working with managers and trade union colleagues to support employees to return safely back to the office. The removal of the restrictions does mean amending and revising risk assessments accordingly but also recognising some of the experiences from the last two years and learning from it, so the approach that is taken is a pragmatic and sensible one.

Work is taking place to amend policies and procedures to continue support agile working moving forward. We recognise that besides the workforce wish for this to remain, agile working forms part of recruitment and retention as offering an agile working package is an expectation of employers.

Estates and Facilities have kept desks which are at a socially distant space, far more collaborative working spaces available are now available. 17 of our larger meeting rooms across Friargate, Broadgate House, Council House and Whitley Depot have been equipped with full agile/hybrid meeting capability. There is a plan to equip 9 further rooms in this way over the coming months. Technology such as USB speakers are available to request for staff to be able to run informal hybrid meetings in smaller meeting spaces such this be required.

Included below are some Case Studies on how the organisation and teams have adapted over the last two years

## Working Flexibly: Working Patterns

	<i>Economic Growth Contact: Stephen Weir</i>	<i>Urban Traffic Management and Control Contact: Greg Payne</i>	<i>Housing &amp; Homelessness Contact: Mandeep Chouhan</i>
The Challenge	Having to home school and/or care for a child during lock down.	Staff had other demands on their time during the working day – for example; childcare or schooling	Working at home with dependent children during lockdown with no other carer available to provide childcare.
What we did	The Manager discussed the challenges which each team member and explored potential options which would support the team member whilst maintaining service delivery. With mutual agreement, team members have worked in 2 hrs shifts so that they can share child care with their partner.	We considered the needs of service delivery and where possible, we were able to be flexible to adjust the staffs working hours to accommodate demands. To support this additional contact and monitoring was introduced to limit impact on service delivery.	The Manager discussed with the team member where was the issue. What could they work? What were the alternatives/options? Team member stated they could work 24hrs per week and would take Annual Leave in hours to make up the difference.
Outcome	By discussing with the team member an agreed way forward has meant that they are able to still care for their child and continue to work, therefore, no impact on service delivery.	Staff have liked the flexibility of adjusting their working hours and also working at home; its reduced travel costs and whilst improving work life balance.	Team member could still continue to work for 24hrs pw and also care for their dependent children.

# Working Flexibly: Digital Enablement



	Commercial Property <i>Contact: Adam Hunt</i>	Library Service <i>Contact: Peter Barnett</i>	Urban Traffic Management and Control <i>Contact: Greg Payne</i>
The Challenge	Working in a more digital way to reduce paperwork and to enable all team members to have access to service specific software from home.	To explore alternative ways in which people could access their Library service during lockdown.	Some staff reported difficulty in using service specific software (AutoCAD) from home.
What we did	By maximising the use of IT enabled certain aspects of work to be carried out online to include: Inspection forms, Delegated Authorities and Valuations etc.	Used new tools given to us by IT and develop new skills which enabled the service to reach out and engage with service users. Created a Libraries enquiry line to explain how to register on line for books for new users. Introduced on-line storytimes, reading groups and other resource reviews.	We discussed this with ICT and we agreed to give these staff would be able to have access to and remove their higher specification workstations from Friargate and set them up at home.
Outcome	More teams in the service area are now able to access the specific software remotely. The software has been developed further which has enabled to the service area to now be fully digital enabled.	Being able to engage with our service users on online has expanded and improved our customer communications. There has been a significant increase in users accessing and borrowing of digital resources. Positive feedback from schools regarding new SLS online offer.	ICT equipment has been re-purposed and is being used efficiently and effectively to enable all within the team to continue with their work.

# Working Flexibly: Communication

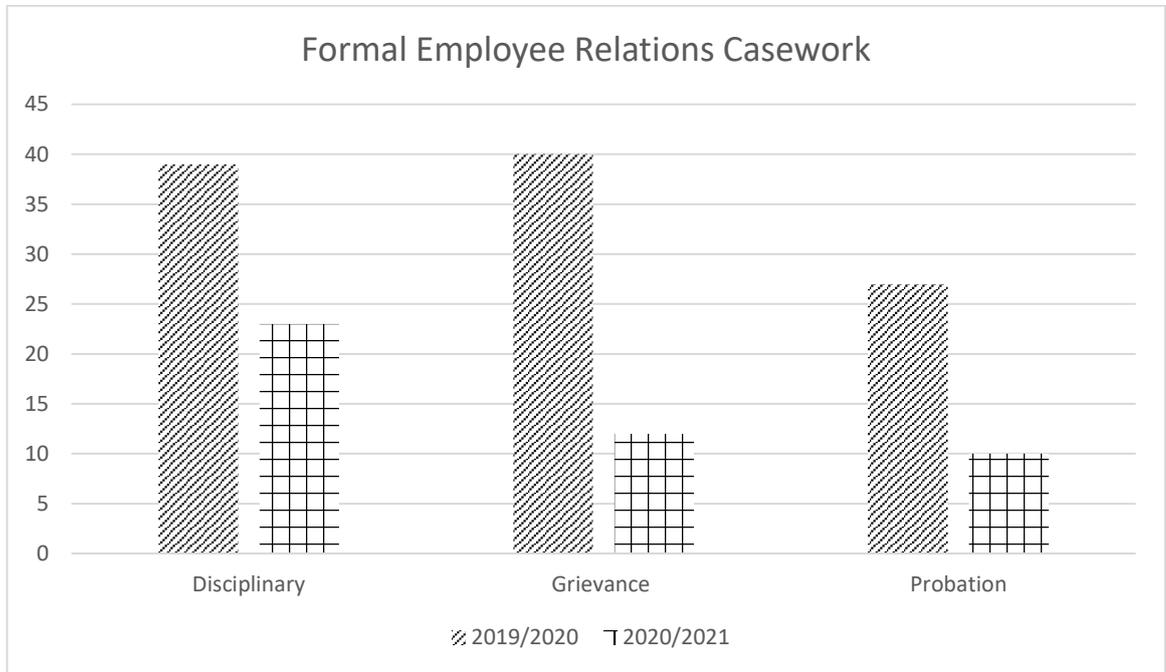


	Urban Traffic Management and Control <i>Contact: Greg Payne</i>	Economic Growth <i>Contact: Stephen Weir</i>	Library Service <i>Contact: Peter Barnett</i>
The Challenge	Ensuring that the team feel that their mental well-being is supported and they feel supported in general.	Ensuring that the correct and most up to date messages surrounding COVID grant funding for businesses is widely communicated to a varied audience of businesses	Ensuring that those that are hard to reach have access to the services offered by Libraries.
What we did	This has been addressed by extra monitoring, contact and support. Regular telephone calls from their manager and team meetings or catch ups. We have also adopted independent pastoral care telephone calls to get a general feeling of the feelings of the team	We used LinkedIn, websites and YouTube. We linked in with community associations, community radio stations who provided information in languages other than English. We used YouTube videos and other networks like the chamber of commerce.	Using newly acquired digital skills we used social media to promote the work of the library and offered services a range of services which could be access on-line.
Outcome	We have been able to support the team and individuals who are feeling they are in need of support.	By using a wide range of resources to get the grant funding messages out meant that the smaller businesses and/or business who are not digitally enabled were able to receive the message about funding available.	We were able to meet the needs of those who were struggling to access the service. Whilst an on-line service cannot fully replicate the benefit of libraries, it does offer value for money as an alternative option. Something we need to continue to expand the offer on-line service moving forward.

## Wider Impact of Changed Working Practices

### 1. Employee Relations Casework

It should also be noted that during this time formal employee relations casework has decreased significantly in the last two-year period as outlined in the analysis below:



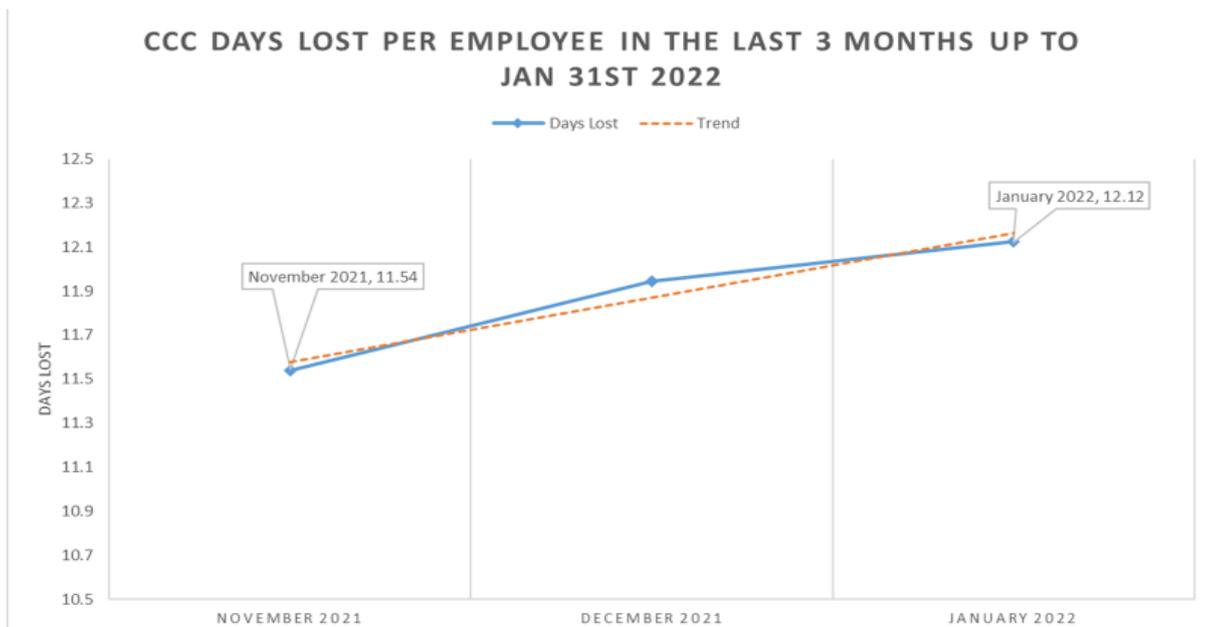
We are continuing to develop our reporting and monitoring casework using Selenity, the casework management system. The reporting functions within Selenity afford us the opportunity to easily gather data and identify any areas of concern. The newly formed Employee Relations team are continuing to work closely with trade union colleagues to resolve casework (where appropriate) informally and coaching managers to take a more “just culture” approach.

The “Just Culture” approach is a mechanism to deal with concerns regarding employees that promotes fairness, openness and learning culture which gives employees confidence to speak up when errors occur, rather than a blame culture.

We will be developing this further over the next 12 months.

### Sickness Absence

Absence dropped during the pandemic which we hoped to sustain; however it has been noted over the last 3 months there has been a continuous rise in absence levels, with the top reason over the last three months being stress, anxiety, depression.



### Occupational Health

Occupational health figures below the volume of activity they are undertaking to support the management of health and well-being in the workplace.

<u>Health assessments – pre-employment</u>	<u>2052</u>
Health assessments – sickness absence	1762
GP reports assessment and response	105
Health Surveillance	116
Vaccination programme (including DNAs)	Hep B/Flu 851
Counselling sessions	3504
Workplace assessments	14
Case conferences	18

In November 2021 we launched the new Enabling Attendance process that replaces the previous 'Promoting Health at Work Policy'. This is a joint policy that has been drafted by Officers and Trade Union colleagues. The policy focuses more on employees as individuals and enables managers more autonomy to support employees and manage their employees health based on their circumstances and offer a flexible approach to managing absence. Over 375 Managers have received training and the HR Team continue to offer targeted training and support to managers to embed the policy and this different way of working.

Occupational Health continue to offer musculoskeletal clinics, podiatry and wider health and wellbeing initiatives. There is a 12-month wellbeing plan which is regularly reviewed

through the internal health and well-being group which is made up of HR , Trade Union colleagues and Public Health.

The plan has overseen and supported the following ;

- 42 wellbeing events were created , including , Cycling in the Park, Macmillan craft auction, suicide prevention awareness, eye care, craft clubs, and Yoga
- Wellbeing Screening Clinics starting in March- Wellbeing Wednesdays
- 188 managers have been trained in Menopause Awareness – 70% of the workforce are female, with 50 % of staff being over aged 50 so this is very relevant.
- Wellbeing Champions and Mental Health First Aid Responder programmes continued
- The 'Be Safe, Be Healthy, Be Well' Newsletter delivered current wellbeing advice on a monthly basis and also now includes a 'green' item.

Mental Health first aid training is still being offered to managers with 327 being trained in the last year. This has recently been extended wider so there is adequate knowledge to support employees/colleagues as well as gain confidence in supporting and managing those with mental health conditions in the workplace. Internal counselling services and external Employee Assistance Programme remain available with referrals for counselling services continuing to rise.

However , there are concerns that despite all the work to date stress anxiety and depression we do not seem to make any significant in-roads into the absence levels. The health and well-being group are having a single subject meeting in March to see what more can be done to improve our support and reduce related absence.

## **5. Next Steps**

5.1 In creating a flexible working toolkit it enables the organisation to recognise that as an employer we continue to support employees work life balance, health and wellbeing and enable Coventry to be an employer of choice. Maintaining flexibility will be essential to attract talent and young people as that is their expectation of an employer now.

The flexible working toolkit and application form has been formally consulted on with trade union colleagues and will be formally signed off in JCNC in April. Over the next four weeks Transformation, Web Editors and HR will work to create the content pages for the intranet to launch the toolkit along with training and guidance for managers in April once it has been formally ratified.

5.2 We will continue to monitor employee relations casework and work collaboratively with trade union colleagues to resolve casework informally where appropriate. The Disciplinary, Grievance and Dignity at work policies are scheduled to be reviewed during March and April with trade union colleagues which will further support the work in embedding a "just culture" approach continuing to reduce formal casework further.

5.3 The HR Business Partners will continue to support and coach managers to enable them to manage absence more effectively in the workplace and embed the new policy further. Occupational Health, Safety and Well-Being with the support of the health and well-being group will continue to work creatively to support the wider well-being agenda with an emphasis on mental health in particular.

**Susana Newing**  
**Director of HR**  
**March 2022**