



# Report to Finance and Resources Select Committee

<b>Date:</b>	9 December 2021
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Work Smart – a new model of working for Buckinghamshire Council</b>
<b>Cabinet Member(s):</b>	John Chilver Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets
<b>Contact officer:</b>	Kim Parfitt
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	N/A
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<b>Members are asked to note the progress in developing the Work Smart programme</b>

## 1. Executive summary

Buckinghamshire Council was established with an ambitious vision to modernise local government in Buckinghamshire. The programme to transform the council included the need to design a future working model that meets the needs of the Council going forward, as well as reducing the costs in line with the unitary business case. This included establishing new terms and conditions for our workforce and the rationalisation of the accommodation of the legacy councils to drive savings, release sites for redevelopment, alongside a need to create the conditions to attract and retain a skilled workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic required us to rapidly move into a new way of working with the majority of staff setting up workstations at home and finding a new normal. Overnight, office-based staff began to work from home and in the last financial year, over 75% of our staff continued to do so for most if not all of their working week. Some face-to-face working has and will continue on a full-time basis where this is essential for service delivery. Examples include customer access points, libraries, registrars etc.

Our hybrid model provides the best of both worlds. Staff can continue to access the benefits they have identified from working at home – including better work-life balance and less commuting – whilst also benefiting from the opportunity to work in the office and collaborate with colleagues in person. It allows the organisation to attract and retain staff within a competitive labour market whilst also driving efficiencies by reducing the size of the estate and the operational running costs.

From 22 November, all 'any desk' workers have been expected adopt a 40/60 split for a five-day working week: at least 2 days in the office and up to 3 days at home (pro rata for part-time colleagues). Over the coming weeks, we are reviewing how this is working through staff, trade union and employee representative groups as well as all staff briefing. This is particularly important in the context of the competitive job market in the south east and the flexibility offered by other employers – we need to ensure that our approach does not start to impact negatively on retention

In light of the identification of the new variant, Omicron, we will be monitoring the situation and as we have done throughout the pandemic, will follow any new government guidance.

## **2. Benefits Analysis**

### **2.1 Impact on productivity**

Performance data has been continuously reviewed over the last year where staff have been working from home to understand the impacts on productivity and performance and any detrimental impacts on our employees, clients and customers. Evidence has demonstrated that there has been little impact, in fact in some areas there have been improvements in performance. In addition, there have been savings seen – for example we have reduced printing by 8 million sheets and reduced the number of miles we travelled for work by 1.4 million.

### **2.2 Impact on customers**

Providing good customer service to our customers and our residents is a Council priority and it is critical that hybrid working is not detrimental.

In the same way that staff working arrangements transformed during the pandemic, there has been a significant shift in the way in which our customers communicate with the council. Restrictions in visiting council offices, combined with improvements in our online offer has led to a considerable increase in the use of webchat and online channels. Interactions with services via Teams has been welcomed by some customers who appreciate the convenience of not having to travel to attend the office.

The use of MS Teams for our telephony supports staff being able to take calls irrespective of their work location. Employee's working hours can be flexible, but we recognise that they must meet the needs of the business and our customer - Consistently monitoring data through cloud-based technology we can ensure there is no impact on productivity.

The Customer First Strategy is an interdependence of Work Smart as we recognise the importance of ensuring a good customer experience, irrespective of where staff are working.

CAPs and CAPs+ are open to customers with staff on hand to assist customers face-to-face. This embeds the Work Smart ethos that there is no wrong front door for our residents. These will also provide digital support and will have prioritised phone lines to the customer service team for fast resolution and service.

### 3. Content of report

#### 3.1 Work Smart

Work Smart is our programme for delivering hybrid working and providing a new model for the future. It has been developed with extensive employee engagement over the past 9 months (see **Appendix 1**). The Work Smart vision is:

We will provide our staff with the right spaces, tools and skills so they can work in the best location for their role, be collaborative and achieve a good work life balance, making Buckinghamshire Council successful in delivering its services and a great place to work.

##### 3.1.1 The objectives of the programme are to deliver:

- Modern, efficient and technology enabled ways of working
- Improved end to end customer service
- Improved work/life balance of employees
- Improved recruitment and retention of employees
- Fit for purpose arrangements for elected members
- Reduced carbon emissions from travel and buildings
- Reduced revenue cost of the office estate and increased revenue generation
- Release land and assets for development as market, affordable and key worker housing or commercial/community/stakeholder or partner use

There are three work streams within Work Smart and within each, key deliverables have been identified that are critical to the success of delivering Work Smart.

**Workstyles** Focussing on our staff, looking at how we work from employee wellbeing, training and development, digital skills and capabilities, employment policies and contractual changes, induction, health and safety and communication and collaboration mechanisms.

**Workspaces** Creating the right spaces for us including the estates strategy, workspace designs, storage and car parking.

**Worktools** Solutions to help us work effectively, designed around the needs of services and our staff. This includes ensuring we have the right technology for our roles, in our meeting and collaboration spaces, printing, receiving, and sending post, information governance and our carbon footprint.

#### 3.2 Workstyles – Our Staff

##### 3.2.1 The workstyle principles are:

- An employee's workstyle is shaped around the needs of their job role and their circumstances
- Staff will work flexibly across several locations, dependent on their role
- Staff in community facing roles are located close to the residents they support
- Staff who need to be in an office environment for their role, personal circumstances and/or their wellbeing can do so

- All staff can attend team meetings and 1:1s face to face and where requested to do so, staff are expected to attend face to face meetings with line managers
- Staff attendance at the office is managed through desk booking systems to manage capacity
- Face to face collaboration can be done in any suitable space – including a Council office, a partner’s premise, or another location appropriate to the confidentiality of the discussion
- Support is available for all staff, in terms of learning and development and health and wellbeing services, to work effectively in dispersed teams and to make best use of the technology provided
- All staff to be encouraged and supported in line with volunteering guidance, to undertake voluntary work within their own communities, enabling us in part to mitigate risks around self-isolation and create the conditions to enable staff to ‘give back’ to their own communities

**3.2.2** To facilitate hybrid working, we have identified the different categories of roles to understand the future demand on space within our offices. These categories are:

<b>Mobile</b>	Need to be near community and clients. They need to be able to access files and folders wherever they are working and will come back into the office from time to time across the week.  27% of workforce – examples include Social Workers, Community Board Co-ordinators, Planners
<b>Any desk</b>	Their role is desk based but they do not require a particular location so they can work effectively from home. Our anticipation is they would work at home on average 3 times a week but come in for meetings and to collaborate.  57% of workforce - examples include staff from Finance, HR, Business Support, Communications.
<b>Fixed</b>	They spend the majority of their time at a fixed base or building.  14% of workforce - examples include staff at Libraries, Household Waste Centres, Day Centres, CAPs, Reception.
<b>On-the-go</b>	They start and finish their day from a base but during the day move between locations and places. Typically, their work is outside, and they do not require a desk.  2% of workforce - examples include Refuse collectors, Parking staff, Street Wardens, Highways Operatives, Country Park Rangers.

There are a number of activities in the Workstyles theme of the programme focused on refining our training, development and induction arrangements to reflect the skills needed to work in a hybrid way, together with the health and safety implications of home working.

We have also focused on the distinct needs of two particular groups in the workforce.



### 3.2.3 Impact on staff new to work/early careers/entry level workers

We recognise that it is essential we consider our approach to supporting those at the start of their careers as a key element of Work Smart. This needs to be a whole-team approach to equip them with both the skills for their role but also the softer skills needed. This has also been identified as a critical area of focus by Cabinet Members and the Corporate Management team.

Recruiting young people into the Council is critical to help us build a talent pipeline for the future, and we need to ensure that we provide proper support, training and career development, through comprehensive induction and onboarding programmes including:

- The right combination of work and home-based working days to ensure a balance of social learning and interaction with work colleagues
- Ensuring managers and other workers are in the office and able to provide the right level of support and knowledge transfer when a new employee is in the office
- Regular face to face meetings with colleagues and the entire team
- Allocating a buddy or mentor to help answer questions and provide informal support
- Ensure there is regular coaching for performance conversations with line manager to check in on health and wellbeing and to provide one-to-one support
- That other more formal and informal training opportunities are made available for new staff to help them meet people and develop friendships outside the immediate team
- For those who started with us during lockdown, encourage a team building day
- Support the development of social activities/networks/clubs

Recognising the specific challenges for our entry level workers/less experienced workers, we are putting in place a coordinator to support them.

By keeping these employees as aligned as possible with their co-workers and giving them face to face time with experienced members of staff, they will be able to grow their skills and knowledge quicker and integrate into the team more easily. It doesn't just help them, it helps the team as a whole and as a result, the organisation.

To date, our Kickstarters have given very positive feedback about their inductions, with some specifying that hybrid working helped to alleviate their anxiety about coming into a new working environment and helped them to feel more at ease and less overwhelmed. Two have commented:

*"My team is a welcoming, friendly and energetic group that made me feel valued and part of the family from day one. The passion and drive from my colleagues has been contagious and has solidified in my mind that this is a department I would love to progress through even after this Kickstart programme."*

*"My experience with a Kickstart placement through Buckinghamshire Council has been nothing but positive. From the start of the first email, through to the interview and into the start of the placement, everyone involved has been very welcoming, friendly, and encouraging."*

### **3.2.4 Impact on managers**

Our managers are critical to ensuring that flexible working arrangements are successful, both for the employee and for the delivery of the service. Managers have had to develop new skills to engage with their staff both individually and in groups.

Our managers have done a fantastic job in rising to this challenge over the past year. It is important to recognise the different pressures that this will place on them and the long-term shift in what it will mean to be a manager of hybrid workers, providing them with the right support including toolkits, webinars, training, manager forums and briefings with feedback mechanisms.

### **3.3.5 Impact on recruitment and retention**

Hybrid working is now a benefit that people will actively seek in a job role. 83% of workers are now more likely to apply for a position if it offered a flexible way of working. The hybrid approach also opens up new options for recruiting to posts that have been traditionally hard to fill in Buckinghamshire.

Working from home also provides us with wider talent pools, either from outside the local area or those that might have been unable to access offices for personal or physical reasons.

A survey by Reed identified that organisations could find themselves part of “The Great Resignation” if they do not look at their working model. Of the employees surveyed who weren’t currently hybrid working, 45% would consider changing jobs to be able to work on a hybrid basis.

As we face a candidate driven market and job vacancies reaching an all-time high, hybrid working is a vital tool to attract and retain new talent.

## **3.3 Worktools – including Technology**

Ensuring our staff have the right tools to do their job when working in a different way or place will be essential to its success. It also provides an opportunity to streamline some of our processes whilst making savings. The specific areas we are reviewing through the programme are:

- The technology and equipment to support Work Smart, including requirements by workstyle category
- Providing the best quality video conferencing systems in meeting rooms and collaboration spaces will be vital
- Digitising our mailroom to provide increased document control and efficient delivery
- An effective space booking system to ensure staff have confidence they have access to the right kind of space when they attend the office
- Review of the printing contract to consider the requirements as a unitary council as well as maintaining the reduction in printing

- To provide a single, easily accessible, mobile, self-serve Intranet that provides employment information and front-line advice to all employees
- Developing a new records management approach for the council to build on existing good practice with the need to modernise how we retain information with the ambition to avoid creating new paper records wherever possible
- A tool to provide carbon emission data for staff commuting and their working at home patterns to allow us to quantify the impact working from home has on emissions, as well as supporting staff to reduce their emissions at home.

### **3.4 Workspaces – Our Estates Strategy**

Providing the right workspaces for our staff and customers is integral to the success of Work Smart. Our focus is on rationalising our estate in a way that will deliver our long-term workspace requirements and achieve minimum income savings of £2.4m in line with the MTFP targets.

The Council owns 407,736 square feet of office space across the County. We are currently using 287,655 sq ft for our own staffing requirements, with net running costs of £4.476m. Historically, we know that there was some spare capacity within legacy council buildings.

A key challenge is our ability to forecast the future workspace needs, whilst our post COVID work practices are still relatively untested. An initial assessment suggests that the council's future requirements could be met within 100,000 square feet, enabling a significant reduction in capacity, although there is more assurance required to confirm this.

The development of an Estates Strategy will set the direction for future office space and provide options for the different buildings, taking into consideration requirements from services, office usage and other factors such as the Workspace principles. The future strategy will be informed by:

- Our space needs
- Operational costs (current and future)
- The impact on our carbon footprint
- The contribution to the local economy – the revival of the high streets
- The opportunity to generate income from surplus space, re-purpose or redevelop the asset for commercial or regeneration benefit
- Reviewing office usage over time

Our savings will be met by a combination of:

- Rationalising the existing operational space to reduce costs
- Generating income from letting or repurposing surplus space
- Releasing current operational sites for redevelopment.

## **4. Next steps and review**

Work Smart encompasses a number of phases, incorporating our planned return to the office post-pandemic. Throughout our planning, our underpinning principle was to be led by the government guidance.

Following the 22 November return to the office, there will be a review of the hybrid working model in February.

The next phase of the programme will focus on the development of the Estates Strategy, designing and delivering our workspaces, alongside the identified deliverables outline in this report.

In outline terms, the next steps will include:

- Monitoring usage data to establish the needs of the organisation for meeting room technology and building capacity
- Identify buildings for our future needs through the development of the Estates Strategy
- Plan layouts for agreed buildings to facilitate greater collaboration
- Redevelop buildings for collaboration and desk ratio
- Dispose or lease buildings no longer required

The aim is to complete the Estates Strategy by July 2022, with implementation from October 2022.



## Appendix 1 – Staff Engagement

Buckinghamshire Council staff, through staff surveys and focus groups have corroborated with our approach.

In the [Work Smart employee survey](#) carried out between 20 May and 7 June:

- Employees were asked to select up to three reasons that they have liked most about working from home. Out of 1479 respondents, 73% (1078) stated no commute, 58% (858) better work-life balance and 54% (795) improved focus/productivity. The main reason for disliking working from home was social isolation (858 – 40%) followed by lack of team cohesiveness (471 – 32%).
- When asked if there was anything further they would like to mention about the workplace of the 625 valid responses, 416 stated that a hybrid model would suit them.

Overall, positive comments relating to peoples experience of working from home (balanced, productive, efficient, liberating, improved work life balance) outweighed the negative comments (isolated, lonely, challenging).

Staff feel productivity is strong whilst working from home and they feel staff are easier to contact although some felt that to be fully effective an online availability protocol would be advantageous, identifying what are appropriate channels for contacting staff, when and how. This will be developed as part of an etiquette protocol.