

Homeworking and Flexible Working

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1. To provide a discussion paper, setting out the current situation regarding homeworking and flexible working in the Council and proposals for the future.

2. Links to the Corporate Plan

- 2.1. Flexible working and homeworking supports in particular, the priorities of Customer Focus and Equality and Diversity.

3. General Background Information

- 3.1. Homeworking requires the Council to assess the suitability of jobs for people to work at home. Some jobs lend themselves more easily to homeworking than others. Processing jobs, such as housing benefits processing, are viewed nationally as suitable jobs for homeworking.
- 3.2. Nationally, within local government, the move is more towards flexible working in the broader sense (in particular remote working), rather than just homeworking. This is true for this Council too.
- 3.3. A recent SOCITM national survey shows that, on average, Shire District Councils have 8 homeworkers and Shire Counties about 150 homeworkers. North Wiltshire District Council has seven contractual homeworkers at present, four in benefits and three in Community & Environment. There are plans to move to eight benefits processors working from home by 2007/08.
- 3.4. Flexible working (including homeworking and remote working) can:
- Improve customer access to services (providing more convenient times for customer contact)
 - Improve productivity of Council staff (avoiding the need for unnecessary travel and duplication of data entry)
 - Help with staff recruitment and retention (offering choice of working hours to suit personal needs)
- 3.5. A Voluntary Homeworking Policy report including Health, Safety and Security Risk Assessment and Self-assessment Checklist, Variation/Additional Contract and Guidance for Managers and Employees was agreed at Personnel, Licensing and Administration Committee on 7th March 2005 and came into effect on 1 April 2005.
- 3.6. The Council is a member of the South West Flexible Working Group which shares good practice on remote and flexible working between local authorities.

4. Current Situation:**4.1. Contractual Homeworking:**

- 4.1.1. There are currently four benefits processors based at home for four days a week. Productivity figures show that, on average, more documents are processed by homeworkers than office-based workers. This is an oversimplification as it takes no account of the difficulty of the casework, but it is a fair conclusion to say that the productivity of homeworkers (in terms of number of cases) is higher than office-based workers.
- 4.1.2. The set-up costs for contractual homeworkers are approximately £1450 (for equipment), with an ongoing line rental cost of £348 a year. In addition, there are one-off IT support costs to set up a homeworker, estimated at £300 and ongoing IT support costs estimated at £320 a year. This is balanced, in the case of homeworkers by a reduction in office costs (estimated at £6,000) as there is no need for a desk and PC devoted to that individual. However, these office costs include a recharge element that cannot be looked at as a real saving for the Council, as the costs are reapportioned elsewhere, unless sufficient space is freed up for sub-letting.
- 4.1.3. The productivity gain for the Council from each of the current homeworkers is approximately 28%, equivalent to £7,000. The net non-cashable efficiency gain (allowing for set up costs to be amortised over four years) for the four current homeworkers is approximately £49,000 a year.
- 4.1.4. Current plans are to increase the number of homeworking benefits processors to eight by the end of 2007/08.
- 4.1.5. In addition to the above there are three homeworkers linked to the Community Partnerships Team. These are partnership posts where the Council is acting as the employer on behalf of partner organisations. Two are part time posts working with Community Planning Area Partnerships and one is working as a Community Cricket Coach. These posts are ideally suited to homeworking as they are community-based. However, it is more difficult to measure the productivity benefits in these types of role because of the nature of their roles. The major benefits from being home-based would stem from savings on office costs and wasted travel time.

4.2. Ad-hoc Homeworking:

- 4.2.1. The Council supports employees – with their manager’s approval – to carry out ad-hoc homeworking as necessary, on condition that a health and safety self-assessment of their home workspace is carried out. Staff making use of this option are also asked to sign to say they would be prepared for the Council to make a health and safety home visit if required.
- 4.2.2. Ad-hoc homeworking does not require additional equipment costs, although several people who make use of this option are provided with laptops and are able to connect into the Council’s email system from home. Other ad-hoc homeworkers choose to use their own computer equipment. There are productivity benefits from this type of working, where employees are able to focus and deliver without interruptions.

4.3. **Flexible Working Pilot Projects**

- 4.3.1. The Investigations Team in Customer Services are starting to implement a flexible working scheme as part of the Council's ICE (Improving the Customer Experience) Programme. This project will enable staff to enter information directly into the Council's systems whilst out on site, eliminating the need for transcribing notes and entering information at the office and reducing the amount of travelling time. Training is being carried out during June and a phased roll-out of the project is planned from July 2006.
- 4.3.2. Environmental Health have begun to pilot the use of PDAs (Personal Data Assistants) and Building Control have a similar pilot. However, in these cases, the technology is not as far advanced as it needs to be for the Council to get the maximum benefit so these are very much areas for future development.

4.4. **Infrastructure and Equipment:**

- 4.4.1. The bandwidth of the Council's broadband connection and the current licence can support up to 10 people working concurrently. Increasing the number of homeworkers (or flexible workers) will require an investment in the infrastructure to increase the bandwidth. In addition, the Council will need to consider introducing a Virtual Private Network that would allow staff working externally to access the intranet (this would also allow Councillors to access the intranet which would open up the possibilities of e-learning being provided).
- 4.4.2. Different IT solutions are being piloted for flexible working (e.g. docking stations for electronic notepads). However, as outlined above, in many cases, technology has not yet caught up with the demand for flexible working.

4.5. **Information Security:**

- 4.5.1. Under the Council's information management and security policy, all staff and members have responsibilities to keep the Council's information secure. This policy covers homeworking and flexible working.
- 4.5.2. Any move to shared services (e.g. with another authority) would require additional information security arrangements if other organisations were to have access to the Council's IT system.

5. **Way forward:**

- 5.1. Before making any recommendations on the way forward, the Council needs to look at where it wants to be in five years time, in terms of homeworking and flexible working. This needs to be linked in with workforce development planning for the future and links to the Council's draft Human Resources/People Strategy (which is planned to go forward for member approval at the Personnel, Licensing and Administration Committee in July 2006).

- 5.2. The stages that it is suggested will be followed are:
- Survey of each team on flexible working (to include remote working and homeworking). This may be based on the national 'NOMAD' survey produced to assist Councils to assess their future mobile working needs. Decisions need to be made on a team by team basis, as there may be a wide variety of different business needs that could be addressed through forms of flexible working.
 - Business cases to be drawn up as appropriate and phased according to business need and the potential for improved service.
 - Assess future information and access needs of elected members.
 - Infrastructure and equipment costs to be assessed based on the business cases and budgeted for accordingly.
- 5.3. In addition, pilot activities within the Council on remote working (as described in section 4.3.2) will continue to develop as technology advances.
- 6. Financial Implications**
- 6.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.
- 7. Community & Environmental Implications**
- 7.1. Flexible working can offer environmental benefits in terms of reduced travel.
- 8. Equality and Diversity Implications**
- 8.1. Flexible working can assist in meeting an individual employee's needs to maintain a healthy work/life balance. Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken against any policies developed in relation to homeworking.
- 9. Human Resources Implications**
- 9.1. Flexible working brings additional challenges for managers and employees in terms of performance management and communication. It is important to ensure that both manager and employee are supported to maximise the benefits to the Council, the customer and the individuals concerned.
- 10. Legal Implications**
- 10.1. There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

Documentation used in the preparation of this report

Background papers

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC MANAGER - CORPORATE SERVICES TO THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, 22 JUNE 2006.

Report prepared by
Sue Pangbourne, Strategic Manager - Corporate Services
Tel: 01249 706559
email: spangbourne@northwiltshire.gov.uk