

STRATEGIC DISCUSSION PAPER: September 2021

The challenges and rewards of long-term home working

Background

Prior to March 2020 many employers still viewed homeworking as a perk for employees, and others were resistant to allow it due to concerns around productivity.

As we know, the Covid 19 pandemic was a gamechanger for flexible working and many companies have had to embrace full-time home working for their staff, in order to keep businesses functioning.

NHDC has been a pro-active supporter of home working since 2010, with many job roles deemed suitable for adhoc or partial homeworking. In a small number of cases, full-time homeworking has been permitted. Prior to the pandemic approximately 65% of staff were able to work from home to some degree, with teams such as Careline and Customer Service being wholly office based.

According to new research from the employee benefits company Howden Employee Benefits & Wellbeing as many as 88% of employers expect to facilitate homeworking in their post-pandemic plans. The firm polled more than 200 senior HR professionals from a range of public, private, and third sector companies, and found that almost nine in every ten organisations are now set to introduce homeworking in some form – whether that be full-time, or in a hybrid model. At NHDC, the Future Ways of Working plan will support an increased level of home working (compared to pre-pandemic) where this can be balanced with the service needs of the organisation.

The challenges of long-term home working

IT connectivity: In the two weeks leading up to NHDC going into 'lockdown' in March 2020, the IT team set up approximately 130 Citrix connections (approximately 30% of total NHDC staff) to allow everyone to move to full-time homeworking using either personal equipment or NHDC equipment. IT are also completing the laptop rollout project to allow greater flexibility when returning to the office. The Micollab telephone system was also upgraded in March 2020 to allow for more people using conference calls. Use of Zoom and MS Teams has become widely used to facilitate virtual meetings and video conferencing although the use of Zoom will be phased out when the laptop project is complete.

Suitability of home environment: A small minority of staff do not have a suitable home working environment. For those needing more suitable equipment, chairs and screens have been loaned from the office, and office working has been agreed for those that have been unable to work from home. Staff are able to claim monthly for homeworking expenses up to £16 which is intended to help cover the costs associated with broadband, and additional heating and lighting.

Less face to face working time/disconnected from teams: The introduction of video conferencing, as mentioned above, has allowed teams to work together and virtual contact to take place. Managers have been encouraged to continue to have regular team meetings and teams have shared ideas on their different ways of working as well as reminding everyone to keep in touch and support their colleagues.

Mental health wellbeing and Isolation: During April 2020 the HR team commenced welfare calls for all staff to check on their wellbeing during the lockdown since full time homeworking was difficult for many to adapt to. The calls were well received by staff. This has been followed up with bespoke emails and further support for individuals who have been struggling.

Over the past 18 months we have introduced a number of initiatives to encourage staff to get together in a different way – Virtual kitchen, Mental Health First Aider drop-in sessions, IT drop-

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in sessions, Half Day development sessions, lockdown toolkits, and additional guidance for managers.

The focus for HR during the extended working from home period, has been to ensure people understand where they can access an excellent range of existing support and to provide additional resources and information. The main focus is positively promoting mental health awareness in the home and virtual workplace and supporting that 'it is ok to talk'.

Caring responsibilities: During the periods of lockdown when schools and nurseries have been closed, working parents have had to juggle child-care responsibilities alongside work commitments. Likewise, many of those with other caring responsibilities have also had to provide additional support and balance this with work demands. The council has provided an increased level of flexibility for staff with caring commitments, and where needed the HR team have given advice on individual cases. This is more pandemic related rather than due to home working and would therefore not expect it to be an ongoing concern.

Other challenges include:

- No home/work definition, difficulty switching off, risk of overworking
- Dealing with difficult situations can feel invasive in own home
- Back-to-back meetings when being held virtually creating "Zoom fatigue"
- Decrease in physical activity- although staff survey feedback has provided examples of increased opportunities for physical activity

Rewards of long-term home working

Despite the challenges, many staff at NHDC have embraced the opportunity to work from home and have adapted very well. The most recent staff survey showed there was a clear desire to continue working at home more in the future. Pre-pandemic staff were working in the office for an average of 3.15 days per week and have indicated their hope to reduce this to 1.3 days per week going forward.

The staff survey highlighted a number of employee benefits to increased homeworking:

- No office distractions / interruptions which allows for greater productivity
- No time spent commuting, and no travel costs (with environmental benefits)
- More flexibility for those with caring responsibilities
- Better work / life balance

For NHDC as an employer, we have been appreciated a number of benefits of homeworking for some time which include:

- Lower levels of short-term absence
- Ability to attract new employees from wider geographic talent pool
- Improved employee retention as homeworking is seen a valuable benefit

Getting the right balance

As part of our Future Ways of Working plan we will look at getting the right balance between home and office-based working. Office based working will be designed around teams coming in at the same time to give the opportunity for in-person team meetings and also the informal conversations that can take place from sitting near to each other.

Where an individual would benefit from coming into the office more regularly (e.g., due to home working environment, benefits for them of being around others, better able to do their job) then they would also be able to do so.