

**Unconfirmed**



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee** held in the Deben Conference Room, East Suffolk House, on **Thursday, 19 May 2022 at 6.30pm**

**Members of the Committee present:**

Councillor Edward Back, Councillor David Beavan, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Andree Gee, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Colin Hedgley, Councillor Geoff Lynch, Councillor Caroline Topping

**Other Members present:**

Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Tony Cooper, Councillor Steve Gallant, Councillor Ed Thompson

**Officers present:** Stephen Baker (Chief Executive), Sarah Davis (Democratic Services Officer), Amie Skeet (HR and Workforce Development Manager), Alli Stone (Democratic Services Officer) and V Johnston (Senior Environmental Health Officer)

**Others present:** Kat Raffill, UNISON Branch Secretary and Winston Dorsett, Regional Organiser

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**1 Apologies for Absence and Substitutions**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gee and Robinson and Councillor Cooper attended as the latter's substitute.

**2 Declarations of Interest**

There were no Declarations of Interest.

**3 Minutes**

**RESOLVED**

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 January 2022, 17 February 2022 and 17 March 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Further to the approval of the minutes of the 17 March 2022 in relation to item 5 - Cabinet Member Scrutiny Session with regard to Suffolk Coastal Port Health Authority, the Chairman explained that the minutes were a true reflection of the situation at that point in time. However, on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2022 a written statement by the Minister of State for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg was

made. (<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2022-04-28/hcws796>) This statement suspended current BREXIT preparations in their current form, and outlines development of a future border model (the target operating model). The impact of this change in HM Government direction, was that some of the information provided and recorded was no longer relevant. The wider impact and ramifications of the written statement was currently being assessed, but it was important to stress that:

- Funding for the period April – July 2022 has been secured, and that further financial impacts assessments are being undertaken for consideration by DEFRA.
- The written statement does not affect 3<sup>rd</sup> Country Trade, and this SCPHA service continues as normal.
- The written statement does not affect ongoing SCPHA projects
- SCPHA remains well placed to engage in the Border Strategy 2025 and the more immediate Target Operating Model discussions.

SCPHA / ESC were currently in the process of completing an impact assessment which would inform current and longer term decisions.

#### **4 The impact of flexible working on the workforce, council resources and productivity**

The Committee received report ES/1154 of the Leader of the Council who reminded the Committee that, in March 2020, East Suffolk Council had followed the Government's directive to work from home (WFH) where possible and, since that time, the Council had evolved, with the majority of its workforce moving away from traditional office-based working to a more flexible approach. This evolution went way beyond the Council, with flexible working opportunities now becoming the norm in terms of employee expectation, engagement and recruitment. He pointed out that the Committee had requested a review of the impact this new way of working had had on the workforce and the Council's performance overall and was seeking reassurance that the Council was meeting its statutory obligations. Councillor Gallant stated that the report was based on advice and guidance from the Health and Safety (H&S) Team and the HR Team and on data and evidence gathered from the workforce over the course of the last two years, including a survey last year asking the workforce their views on how they would like to work. Since then, the Council had introduced an Agile Working Guide, a desk booking system and had run briefing sessions on how we could work in an agile way. A further survey had closed last week seeking updated thoughts on home/office working.

The Committee was informed that in terms of savings, there had been:

- A reduction in the carbon footprint
- Time and costs saved on the commute to work
- Childcare savings – more availability to drop off and pick up from school
- Field worker status – allowed greater flexibility for those officers who were out and about for much of the day and saved them having to return to an office base

- The East Suffolk House Annex had been freed up for use by Port Health whose staff base had increased to accommodate the additional border checks – it was noted that pre-pandemic, new offices were being considered
- Rotterdam Road offices for 50+ office-based housing staff were not fit for purpose and a full accommodation review had been planned pre-pandemic but the office had now closed and the staff relocated to Riverside
- Greater awareness of the importance of good mental health and wellbeing
- Managers were more engaged in that process
- Essential Car User Allowances had been reviewed which identified 30+ staff who no longer qualified – saving circa £30k per annum

Councillor Gallant concluded that there were significant savings but these needed to be balanced against the wishes and aspirations of the staff and that the productivity of the Council was not impacted negatively by this process and the opportunity to WFH.

Stephen Baker, Chief Executive, thanked the Committee for taking the time to look at this particular issue. He complimented staff on their reaction to the need to adopt this style of working and their reaction to the Covid pandemic. He pointed out that people were almost beginning to forget what Covid was like but in March 2020 everyone had been told to WFH and they had responded to that challenge with massive commitment and real vigour, and had maintained services and worked in a very responsible manner which they deserved to be complimented for. He pointed out that it had been considered to be a short term change, because who knew how long it would last and not many people would have thought it would last two years, but it had evolved and was now moving into a long term change and potentially had long term benefits eg helping to meet the Council's net zero carbon ambitions. He stressed that East Suffolk was a very progressive and responsive organisation which had embraced change, faced up to the challenge and recognised the benefits it brought. It had also recognised that the change in work style could not just naturally evolve but needed a managed approach so the HR and H&S Teams had supported this process to identify the benefits and the challenges this very different work style brought.

In response to Councillor Topping's query on paragraph 1.3, the Chief Executive confirmed that no staff had been lost due to issues beyond the Council's control such as internet connection. He added that advice and guidance had been provided on how to improve this where necessary. Councillor Gallant took the opportunity to thank IT staff because within days capacity on the server had been increased, kit obtained and people trained on it etc so the system was up and running within days.

Councillor Lynch referred to p30 relating to Display Screen Equipment (DSE) and queried why similar checks to those made for office working were not made for staff WFH and also if the Council was liable if staff were sitting on a sofa with trailing wires and got injured. The Senior Environmental Health Officer responded that the Council followed HSE guidance on how to ensure staff carried out the correct assessments for DSE, which was a self assessment. She explained that staff were expected to set up exactly the same as if they were working in the office and that sitting on sofa for a 20 minute Teams call would be okay but for the rest of the time they needed to sit in an appropriate position. She clarified that staff sitting at the kitchen table was not necessarily inappropriate but the manager should be checking that it was correctly set up. It was noted that, shortly after staff were WFH, the IT team had supplied screens,

separate keyboards and office chairs, but not a desk. The Senior Environmental Health Officer confirmed that some staff could not WFH because they did not have an appropriate space but, from the very start, the Government had said WFH unless you could not do so, and no one had been forced to WFH in an unsafe position. For those who now enjoyed WFH, it was down to managers to ensure those assessments were completed. She explained that, last year, 592 DSE assessments had been completed, 153 from people working in offices including those in Port Health, and 493 assessments had been completed for WFH during 12 months. She stated that a similar proportion of people had the same problems WFH as they did in the office and that her Team worked with them to get to a point where they could work safely eg some needed an additional screen or a particular type of mouse. She stressed there was no legal requirement for the Council to do any checks at home because staff were not legally WFH (our staff did not fall into the legal definition of “home workers” which were people who were contracted to WFH). She concluded that she had asked some people to take photos of their set up or had asked them to show how they were sitting over a Teams call to advise them on how to sit properly and comfortably.

Councillor Deacon queried if there were any figures for sick leave during lockdown and hybrid working, compared with before the pandemic and if it would continue given the Government wanted all civil servants back in the office. The point was made that staff were not civil servants as they were employed by the local authority.

Councillor Gooch echoed the praise for the IT Team and queried if a lack of stable home circumstances eg temporary accommodation had played a part in the few negative responses received to the survey. The Chief Executive stated that, towards the end of the first year, he had asked HR to arrange an interview with every member of staff to assess their individual circumstances eg their families, concerns, lockdown, Covid etc. Some said they could not WFH, sometimes it was their partner or other factors, so they had come back into the office. He concluded that the Council was trying to be responsive and staff could come into the office or make WFH work for them.

Councillor Hedgley queried what research and empirical evidence had been used to create the report as he felt home working needed a national look and also the effect it had on the Council, employees and residents. Councillor Gallant stressed that when dealing with people this required hearsay eg conversations to listen to them, and that we had to trust managers to manage their team effectively and that they were looking after the wellbeing of individuals and also ensuring that performance was operating in the right way and the quality of the service was not suffering due to any policy put in. He added that the non hearsay side was when looking at performance indicators and seeing if productivity was suffering as a result of that, so that was where the statistical evidence came in.

#### **Councillor Byatt joined the meeting via Zoom as an observer at 7pm.**

The Chief Executive stated that, whilst he understood the concern, his responsibility was to look at the effectiveness of the organisation. He suggested everyone was going through another phase of industrial revolution with the introduction of IT and changes to processes etc. Covid had prompted an enormous amount of change and proved that it could work and people had embraced that change. He acknowledged that it had hit

London, trains, shops etc but suggested the counter to that was it was helping town centres. In relation to the impact on residents, he referred to statistics in the report relating to there being far fewer missed calls now staff were accessed at home. He added that the Council had also made a huge effort to support people get on line etc so that service had also improved.

In response to Councillor Deacon's earlier question, the HR and Workforce Development Manager stated that prior to the pandemic, East Suffolk's sickness absence figures were 6.27 FTE days which was below the national average, and in 2020/21 they were below 4 days (at 3.76) so it had reduced significantly and 2021/22 so far was at 4.53 FTE days. She pointed out that throughout the pandemic, people had also been on long term sick for other reasons which was the bulk of that percentage for those periods, whereas Covid was only 1.48 FTE of those figures, so WFH had actually enabled people to continue working even if they had Covid.

Councillor Back referred to the massive increase of heating bills etc and he queried if this was likely to be a disincentive for staff WFH. Councillor Gallant acknowledged that there were costs associated with WFH but they had to be weighed up against savings, eg commuting costs such as petrol. He stressed that managers needed to have conversations with staff about this. He pointed out that it was now summer but things would get tough in the winter especially due to the price cap in October and heating oil prices given East Suffolk had a lot of rural areas. He acknowledged that there were potentially increased costs but there were also savings, although it depended on an individual's circumstances but this needed to be monitored. The Chief Executive agreed that it depended on individual circumstances but stressed that all staff still had the option to come into the office.

Councillor Green expressed concern about new starters, especially apprentices, and stressed the need for them to be well supported. The Chief Executive agreed, stating that apprentices needed to be managed with all the necessary tools given to them as they were the officers of the future. He added that the number moving from apprenticeships into permanent roles was very high and the Apprenticeship Programme was a key part of the Council's succession planning. He clarified that he did not expect apprentices to WFH all the time because they also needed to work closely with managers and senior staff. He concluded that the key to effective agile working was shaping it round the needs of the individual and the needs of organisation so whilst it was demanding it also made it more rewarding.

Councillor Cooper queried if this was the best system for our Council and communities. The Chief Executive responded that it was the best system for our staff and was based around an individual. He pointed out that for a lot of staff their personal circumstances had changed and they did not want to drive into work just to sit at a desk which saved on carbon emissions and petrol costs, so there were advantages to WFH. He clarified, however, that it was not intended that staff stay at home all the time as they were still expected to come into the office regularly. He explained that one of the key things to manage was people working too hard rather than swinging the leg as people's working day started earlier and finished later so it needed to be managed but had advantages all round. In relation to customers, agile working was not suitable for some roles as their work could not be done at home, eg planning, inspections etc. Councillor Cooper stated that the benefits needed to be explained to

our communities and he pointed out that he had received emails from staff at 11pm at night. Councillor Gallant responded that there were regular meetings on performance and the management of staff and he pointed out that the Chief Executive was also the Head of Paid Service and, as such, he had questioned him about all these things. He added that it was not just East Suffolk that was working in an agile way, but this was the new industrial revolution that was taking over all organisations, so many residents were also working in this way. He concluded that it had good, useful benefits to our staff and residents and, although it needed to be reviewed and remain flexible, he was confident it was delivering for staff and residents.

Councillor Coulam sought reassurance that managers regularly kept in touch with people WFH to ensure there were not any negative impacts on their mental health. The Chief Executive responded affirmatively, agreeing that managers were maintaining contact with those WFH but acknowledged that a deliberate effort was needed to manage this eg those that did not want to come into the office at all would not be allowed as it was expected that staff would regularly come in and work, not just for meetings but to ensure that social interaction was maintained. He added that Senior Managers were making sure that managers knew they were responsible and that staff could tell him direct if they were not having that contact as part of the regular staff meetings he held. It was noted that an item on the Corporate Management Team Session related to agile working in terms of how it was working as well as supporting the community through the cost of living crisis. Councillor Gallant pointed out that managers were learning new skills for interacting with their staff eg noticing if they don't have cameras on etc you know as a manager because they build that relationship.

Councillor Beavan stated that it was encouraging that people had taken to hybrid working but he queried, for those that could not WFH, if it would be possible to pay for outcomes rather than sitting there between 9-5 eg manual workers, and also increase communication so people could have more control over their working lives. The Chief Executive responded that if someone had to go into a Council House they could not WFH but the Council could give them greater control over their work processes eg schedule their work, and that approach had been taken to date, so that principle had been adopted to give them control and job satisfaction but this had to be balanced against organisational demand eg the commitment to get the work done for the tenant. He agreed there was a difference to those that were desk based and those who could not WFH. Councillor Gallant stated that compressed hours etc could be applied and another positive outcome of Covid had been the advancement in technology, eg previously staff would turn up to the depot then go out but now their work sheet was on a tablet so they did not have to go to depot, which was a huge benefit to them and there was more opportunity to look at this. He questioned if it was better to pay a plumber to do two jobs in a day, or employ them for eight hours. He stressed that it was about balance between the member of staff and the needs of the customer and organisation.

The Senior Environmental Health Officer clarified that work stations and working from an office or home were still considered low risk activities whereas other staff eg Building Control, Port Health, Maintenance Operatives, those going in people's homes etc were more risky. She pointed out that there had always been some people that WFH and managers had completed risk assessments for these. She stressed that it was

not new but the Council was now doing more of it. She suggested there would be a gradual return to the office, especially for those managers supporting new starters as it was better to do this face to face. She added that teams were using Teams so they did not have to drive which was a greater risk, so this reduced the amount of driving which was a positive benefit because it lowered the risk and less driving also reduced work related stress. She explained that, in addition to work stations and driving, staff were also exposed to the risk of a detrimental impact on their mental health. The Council had recognised this risk had increased over the last two years since Covid, but she pointed out that the Council already used the HSE guidance on Work Related Stress Toolkit and had in place proactive assessments. Staff completed a DASH form and the answers were then collated into an anonymous team report for the manager to look at the things that might trigger stress eg workloads, speed of work, intensity, control of the hours they work, contact with manager etc. It was noted that these should be carried out annually or more frequently if there were issues. The Senior Environmental Health Officers stressed that these had been done for the last 7/8 years so it was already in place before Covid and managers were monitored to ensure their teams were doing the assessments.

The Senior Environmental Health Officer explained that she now had more frequent team meetings because they could be done over Teams whereas previously she had struggled to get 1:1's done because rooms in the office were scarce but now she could do them over Teams. She explained that this was monitored by doing proactive Team Stress Assessments which linked in with identifying things that could identify stress rather than the process for once stress had been identified which was managed by the HR Team. She explained that the Managers Competency Toolkit was a self assessment looking at their management style eg do they talk to their team regularly, do they have school children, has the dog been ill, was their football team performing, do the managers take sweets and biscuits in to staff and what they should be talking about over coffee. She confirmed that she had looked at the Toolkit again recently and it was still valid, and CMT were monitoring it, so she was confident that it was happening across the organisation. It was noted that she and her four Health & Safety Advisers were available for managers to talk to about how to do things differently and HR colleagues were also available. She concluded that Able Futures and Care First were also available to provide staff with support on a confidential basis.

The HR and Workforce Development Manager stated that the Council had a Health and Wellbeing Annual Calendar which focussed on a different topic each month and during the pandemic mental health had featured several times. She explained that the Council had two different varieties of counselling available, one was a referral to Occupational Health (OH) which could offer specialist counselling and the other was a 24/7 confidential telephone service which staff could ring without managers or HR being aware. If a person needed more specific counselling then HR could provide advice and send them to OH. In relation to staff meetings, she suggested that these seemed to have increased with most meeting once per week on Teams, so communication within teams had increased. With regard to apprenticeships, it was noted that this year there were six corporately funded and two externally funded. She explained that managers had to put a bid forward to get an apprenticeship and they had been asked to focus on what induction they would provide. The apprentices also had a number of apprenticeship days which included hearing from UNISON and H&S representatives to ensure that they were fully included in all activities.

The Chairman asked what the Council was doing to ensure that staff were not working excessive hours and times. The HR and Workforce Development Manager stressed that there was no expectation to work excessive hours and this was made clear, however, some staff chose to work later in the evening because they took time out during the day. Managers were encouraged to monitor and check with staff if they were sending really late emails for example. The Chairman asked if it was possible to monitor this by looking at how long someone had been on online. The Chief Executive responded that it depended on if they left their laptop on or not. He added that the Council did not want people working all the hours but to some extent it was down to the individual because we were saying they could take control over how they managed their working day eg they could pick the kids up then work later in the evening, so there was an advantage and better work-life balance. He stressed that the message was getting out there that there was no requirement to work excess hours and work to the extreme. He added that, if anything, it was frowned upon but if they were finding it necessary then they needed to raise it with their manager. Councillor Gallant stated that there were no “wrong” hours as someone might not want to work at 3pm but might get up at 5.30am to do emails so it was about managing that and that was what agile working was all about as managers needed to look at the output from their staff, what was the productivity of that member of staff eg if it was too low or too high. The Chief Executive added that Covid had led to people putting in the extra effort, the commitment of staff was outstanding but they were able to do that by the people inside the organisation who had provided support to them. The challenge was pulling that back and he referred to the fact that the recent LGA Peer Team had identified there was a high level of discretionary effort but that people would burn out so we needed to be mindful of that.

In response to Councillor Topping’s query, the HR and Workforce Development Manager confirmed that Members could access the Health and Wellbeing service. Councillor Topping referred to paragraph 1.6 and queried what the recruitment challenges were and if they were putting stress on our officers. The HR and Workforce Development Manager confirmed that some areas were experiencing recruitment issues eg attracting building operatives such as carpenters, plumbers etc mainly because of the pay rates, but some elements of work had been put on hold to ensure tenant repairs were done. There were also a number of key professional roles which had been hard to fill pre Covid but we were now attracting people to work at East Suffolk because we had hybrid working as that was attractive to recruits. She explained that the Council was also working with training providers to grow our own eg planning and asset management. She confirmed there were some recruitment issues but they were not too major at the moment. She acknowledged that capacity had been bought in for some areas which had low capacity and also capacity had been increased for some projects but she assured Members that HR were aware of them and worked with staff to support them.

Councillor Gooch queried if a complete record was kept of those staff with caring responsibilities and if managers had found out if Covid had impacted on them. The HR & Workforce Development Manager stated that, whilst there was not a list as such, managers knew their staff even more since Covid and HR were seeing less issues now we were coming out of Covid. She stated that staff were eager to let us know if they had those caring commitments and we worked round them. Councillor Gooch asked

how the Council was dealing with the fact that there was more of a sedentary quality when WFH. The Head of Workforce Development Manager stated that part of the calendar events was about being more physical eg competitions had been held to monitor steps, gym memberships were on offer and dog walking, park runs etc were encouraged. The Senior Environmental Health Officer stated that staff needed to tick on their DSE assessment to say they were aware of the need for breaks and it was suggested they do desk exercises every 20 minutes eg if typing a lot then sit on a sofa to do a call. She clarified that the Council was trying to encourage staff to move and take breaks eg people could put their washing on! Councillor Gooch pointed out that humans were territorial about their work environment and she queried what were the consequences for people having to hot desk. The HR & Workforce Development Manager stated that even before Covid the floorplate had been divided into areas rather than allocated desks, although there were fixed desks for those who had been to OH and they were still bookable through Tribeloo so those that were territorial could still sit in the same place, but the desk booking system allowed people to collaborate with other teams as everyone mixed. Councillor Gooch asked if there was any flexibility for those who were stressed about working back in the office. The HR & Workforce Development Manager confirmed there was still an option to WFH and wipes and hand gel were still available to wipe down at end of day and desks were cleaned daily too so it was possible to be respectful of anyone that had hygiene worries.

Councillor Lynch acknowledged that the Council probably did not need as much office space because a lot of people wanted to WFH but he queried what was to stop the Council from identifying and trying to move certain jobs offshore to save money. Councillor Gallant stated that it was very likely elected members would stop that from happening and he stressed this was not about saving money but was about providing a quality service to our residents and as far as he was aware there was no ambition to do that, especially given the Council was a significant employer which contributed to the local economy. He stressed that if the taxpayers had an ambition to move the call centre to India he would be extremely surprised, so as a representative of the taxpayers he would not want to do that. The Chief Executive pointed out that the Council was part of local government and we required local knowledge and understanding eg the Private Housing Team knows about their patch, and this level of service could not be provided if it was based elsewhere, so he suggested it would be inappropriate to move our jobs offshore. He stressed what we do is local – people ring us about all sorts of questions and it was about having a local presence and local knowledge. He concluded that the Council would try to save money but not by offshoring staff.

The Chairman queried the Council's level of responsibility and liability if an employee had an accident or was injured at home whilst working. The Senior Environmental Health Officer stated that it depended on the situation but under Health & Safety law an employer needed to do what was reasonably practical. She stressed that the Council followed HSE Guidance and this guidance was given direct to Senior Management Team on what we should be doing. She pointed out that it was not possible to be with someone every minute of the day and they could have accidents at home before, during or after work. She clarified that the Council had a responsibility to ask questions and there was a WFH checklist in the DSE assessment to check whether the working environment was safe including asking if they had any trailing flexes, had

they done a visual check of their electrics to make sure it was as reasonably safe as could be expected but there was not a national expectation under Health & Safety law that people would have an “office” at home. She added that, part of the WFH project, was about ensuring that managers knew where their staff were and that someone had had contact with them daily. She pointed out that someone could be fine at 11am and by 3pm they were not well but ultimately WFH was still a very low risk for a working environment although it was not possible to get to a no risk. The Chairman asked if an accident happened due to a direct action of WFH who was liable. The Senior Environmental Health Officer stated that ultimately only a Court would decide but under criminal law, under the Health & Safety at Work Act, they would need to show beyond reasonable doubt that the Council had not done what we needed to do and it came down to that reasonably practical test eg have we advised them what they should be doing and asked if they were doing what they should be, but there was no expectation we go out to see them because it could be fine when inspected but could be changed straight afterwards. In relation to a civil matter, it was about the balance of probabilities, in that we can show in the DSE Assessment that they have to have a safe environment and be informed how they should be working safely. She assured Members that if someone said they could not set up WFH without a trailing flex, her team provided advice eg trail it around the edge of the room, or work from the office. She concluded that the Council had to do what was reasonably practical but WFH would never be 100% safe.

Councillor Deacon referred to page 40 of the Agile Working Guide relating to the right to privacy out of working hours and asked if there was a mechanism to know when staff were working as he had called someone who was on a beach. The Chief Executive stated they should not have taken the call if on leave, however, he would have expected them to perhaps text back to say they were on leave. He acknowledged it was part of the cultural shift we want to achieve but that most officers want to respond and support members.

Councillor Beavan stated that it would be good to know what teams were stressed so Members could ensure it was important before deciding to contact them and he also queried if vacancies were increasing due to recruitment issues. The Chief Executive stated that there were some roles eg The HR & Workforce Development Manager’s previous role was vacant and it was proving a struggle to recruit to, and although he was happy to keep Members informed of the dynamics about vacancies, he would not want Members to make a judgement about not contacting an officer because they were stressed as this was something management would deal with. He added that he appreciated that sometimes Members might need to be patient but stressed that they should make the first initial contact and officers could then say if there were any issues. Councillor Gallant stated that the Cabinet Members had regular meetings with their Heads of Service and they discussed capacity and resources so they were monitoring that and they would know when there were gaps within the organisation.

The Chairman invited the Unison representatives to speak.

Kat Raffill, Unison Branch Secretary, thanked the Committee for inviting Unison to take part in the review and introduced Winston Dorsett, the Eastern Regional Organiser. Ms Raffill explained that she had recently taken on the Branch Secretary role which was enabling her to bring Unison into the spotlight at her current place of work at Port

Health based at Felixstowe and hopefully to a wider audience across East Suffolk. As a result of a lot of challenging work by employees and management, Suffolk Coastal District Council and Waveney District Council had become East Suffolk Council on 1 April 2019. Suffolk Coastal Port Health Authority (SCPHA) had gone through several changes in recent months preparing for the BREXIT transition. Meaning recruiting more staff and undertaking a considerable amount of training to get us ready for the implementation of these changes. Within 12 months of the creation of the new Council, one of the biggest, unexpected pandemics of the modern age hit the world. The Council and SCPHA had to change its working process and figure out how to keep almost 1000 staff operational whilst keeping the Local Authority services working for the public. At the same time maintaining personal safety of employees and the public very swiftly. Strategically, for East Suffolk, laptops had already been rolled out to staff. This head start on flexible working enabled continuous service whilst maintaining Government Legislation and Health and Safety protocols in a working Local Authority. However, this did raise issues within some departments. Some employees were still required to enter the workplace to undertake their role, e.g., Port Health et al. The Council maintained throughout the pandemic a robust and working Risk Assessment for COVID. We thank and congratulate the Health and Safety Team for all the demanding work they have done for East Suffolk over the last 2 and a bit years.

It was reported that Unison had recently surveyed its members at the end of April / beginning of May 2022, due in part because members and staff had indicated that they were having financial difficulties with hybrid working and it was found:

- 124 people completed our survey which accounted for 2/3 of our working members.
- 30.24 % wanted to maintain hybrid working. With only 10.08% preferring office-based working. 5.4% preferred homeworking only.
- Many staff members had already taken the initiative to purchase their own ICT equipment before they were informed that this could be accessed through their own ICT teams.
- 90% of staff believed that they could manage confidentiality. 9% believed that they could not maintain confidentiality. 1% neither agreed nor disagreed with their ability to maintain confidentiality.
- 57% confirmed that waste was disposed of correctly. Whilst 18% had no way of disposing of confidential waste at home. 25% work entirely electronically therefore no requirement to dispose of confidential waste.

Most employees were adequately equipped for home working, having a range of basic equipment such as:

Keyboard	92.3%
Mouse	94.2%
Headset	70.2%
Desk	69.2%
Office chair	80.8%
Printer	23.1%

Shredder	21.2%
Lockable cabinet	6.7%
Foot stool	24.0%
Back support	16.3%
Laptop stand	53.8%
Laptop	89.4%
Monitor	81.7%
Mobile Phone	39.4%
Mitel phone	25.0%
Other - Write In (Required)	6.7%

In regard to DSE (Display Screen Equipment) Assessments, 12.6% of Unison members felt they were not able to address issues.

The survey asked members about the mental health impact of hybrid working and some of the results were:

- 38% found the mental health resources useful, 40% slightly useful and 22% said no.
- Sadly 14% of members did not feel they could contact colleagues for a chat
- 23.5 % did not know where to access the information for Mental Health First aiders. Unison provided a Link from the survey to share point. 23.5% did not know who mental health fist aiders were.

In relation to the financial impact on members, it was found that:

- 61% of members reported they are worse off working from home. Ultimately this could impact their decision to work from the office as opposed to home.
- We were aware that some of our members were accessing food banks and felt this figure would rise. As the cost-of-living increases, this would cause more people to be in need and use food banks. Even one person using a food bank when they were employed was one too many.
- Essentially the 1.75% pay increase in real terms was a pay cut. This had directly impacted
- council workers who had been hit by the cost-of-living crisis in conjunction to the financial cost of working from home.

Unison was in discussion with the Council about what they could do to financially reimburse staff to work in a hybrid way and ensure that staff are not financially worse off due to rising electric, gas, and broadband costs.

It was clear from the survey that it was essential to maintain communication with employees. Hybrid working for many employees had been embraced, enhancing work-life balance. For those that preferred to work solely from home a fair balance needed to be struck between employers and employees for a productive workforce, this would be an ongoing discussion. Unison's wish, as always, was to support its members and

staff to work in a fair and equal workplace and to continue to challenge discrimination in all its forms.

This report highlighted hybrid working as being embraced by most staff. However, the Council needed to acknowledge the cost-of-living crisis and utility increases, and its impact on employees which was set to rise further in October. Ms Raffill concluded by asking, What could the Council do to financially reimburse staff to work in a hybrid way but ensure that staff did not suffer financial detriment.

Mr Dorsett explained that he was the full time officer for Unison and he supported Ms Raffill and other branch officers at ESC. He assured members that they worked effectively with Council Officers. He stated that Ms Raffill had highlighted the main themes that they wanted to raise from the survey and their engagement with staff and their members and he hoped to continue the conversation to provide support to staff who provided a fantastic service for East Suffolk.

Councillor Lynch queried how Unison worked with the Council on mental health issues and if they found out about issues with a specific individual how did they feed that back into the Council. Kat replied that they worked with HR and had regular meetings to share information. She explained that if a member had a specific mental health situation they would work with HR to try to get a solution. Winston stated that one of the things that was provided to all staff not just Unison members at the beginning of pandemic were some online bite size sessions including “Staying Strong and Wellbeing” which had a good take up from staff. He added that Unison engaged with members through newsletters and intranet and stewards were available in the workplace so staff could talk to them if they wanted someone more confidential than their colleagues and managers. He concluded that Unison could be a conduit between officers, unison and management as well.

Councillor Topping requested that a copy of the survey information be provided to the Democratic Services Officer and expressed concern that staff were having to use food banks. She queried if there were any other unions and it was noted that the Council also recognised UNITE and GMB.

Councillor Gooch asked if Unison was learning what was going on from other authorities and Winston responded that he was the Unison officer for all the Suffolk Local Authorities and he and the Branch Officers spoke to each other regularly.

The Chairman asked how the Council was avoiding a scenario where staff were looked upon more favourably by their manager because they were more physically present in the office than those that WFH. Councillor Gallant stated that managers’ managed and knew their teams and were looking at outcomes and commitment levels and opportunities for self development so they had to guard against favouritism but there were checks and balances in place and policies to guard against that. The Chief Executive stated that the Directors and Heads of Service also provided a check and balance. He added that, sometimes, it worked the other way round where someone WFH might be churning more work out. He concluded it was about experience and knowledge and he pointed out that local government had a strong ethos about being objective.

Councillor Coulam asked who managed the managers and Councillor Gallant responded that the Chief Executive managed the Directors, who managed the Heads of Service, who managed the supervisors etc but, ultimately, elected Members that managed the Council. The Chief Executive pointed out that as the Head of Paid Service he had to ensure managers managed and he did not want to get in their way generally because they had a delegation and responsibility but he did have an interest in the efficacy of those managers because he was the one that was held to account.

The Chairman asked for debate or any potential recommendations. Councillor Green suggested providing Councillors and Officers with instructions on how to delay emails. The Chief Executive suggested it might be useful to have a recommendation to suggest that the Council ensures regular reminders on best practice for WFH/agile working were sent to staff, including the delay function on Microsoft, taking regular breaks etc to make sure communication was effective. Councillor Topping suggested this should also be sent to Members.

Councillor Lynch pointed out that whilst the Council was in a good position at the moment this was a moving field and he suggested that the Scrutiny Committee might want to review it next year.

Councillor Gooch referred to the fact that the Agile Working Policy stated that it would be reviewed and given the key issue tonight was the impact of the cost of living crisis, fuel rise etc she queried when the policy was due to be reviewed? The HR & Workforce Development Manager stated that it was under constant review and had already been amended since it was introduced and was a live document.

Councillor Topping referred to the fact that the Unison survey stated that 14% of people had responded that they could not contact help and 60% were worse off because of fuel poverty so she queried what could be done in light of these statistics. Councillor Gallant acknowledged that the statistics were concerning but pointed out that the review was about the implications of agile working and the cost of living was a different thing so if staff felt financially disadvantaged then they could stop WFH. He pointed out that the cost of living crisis was going to hit everyone and we want to do all we can to help our own and residents too and whilst he acknowledged the Committee would want to do as much as it could, he stressed that they were reviewing agile working.

The Chairman thanked everyone that had attended and contributed to the review.

#### **RESOLVED**

1. That Council Officers ensure that staff and Members were sent regular reminders on the best practice for WFH and agile working.
2. That a suggestion be made to the 2023 Scrutiny Committee that they might want to review the position in relation to agile working.

## **5 Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme**

The Committee received their Annual Work Programme for 2022/23 and the Chairman stated that this was the result of a large amount of work by Officers with topics being

timetabled to fit around availability. He pointed out that there were two Cabinet Member sessions scheduled for the meeting on 27 October 2022 and he stated that, although previously having two in one night had not been successful, these sessions were now more disciplined in terms of structure so he was confident it would work and be successful. He also highlighted that a number of gaps had been left in the timetable to enable topics not already identified to be considered and these were in September 2022 and April 2023. He concluded that the Democratic Services Officer would send out the Scoping Document to Members for any further lines of enquiry into the agreed topics.

Councillor Deacon stated that he would like the Committee to consider holding a review of the Sale and Disposal of Council Assets because of the way in which the previous sale of Melton Hill in 2016 had been handled and to ensure that the Policy accorded with good governance and compliance for any sales and disposals now and in the future. Clarification was sought as to whether this would need to be held in exempt session and the Chairman responded that it would not as it was about the approach and policy rather than going into great detail about specific sales. In response to a question from Councillor Gooch, Councillor Deacon confirmed that he had not been approached by other Councillors to ask for this to be looked at.

The Chairman stated that the Committee needed to formally vote on any proposals to include additional topics in the Work Programme and that if it was agreed to review the Sale and Disposal of Council Assets, it would necessitate moving the date of the September meeting from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> to enable the relevant Cabinet Member to attend.

On the proposal of Councillor Deacon, seconded by the Chairman, it was:

**RESOLVED**

That the Committee's Work Programme be approved and updated to include a Review of the Sale and Disposal of Council Assets to be held on 29 September 2022 and that the scheduled meeting on 15 September be cancelled.

The meeting concluded at 8.53pm.

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Chairman