EAST SUFFOLK COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Thursday, 19 May 2022

Subject	The impact of flexible working on the workforce, council resources and productivity
Report by	Councillor Steve Gallant Leader of the Council
Supporting Officers	Stephen Baker, Chief Executive stephen.baker@eastsuffolk.gov.uk Amie Skeet, HR and Workforce Development Manager amie.skeet@eastsuffolk.gov.uk

Is the report Open or Exempt?	OPEN

Category of Exempt Information and reason why it is **NOT** in the public interest to disclose the exempt information.	Not applicable
Wards Affected:	All Wards

Purpose and high-level overview

Purpose of Report:

The purpose of this report is to examine the impact of the move away from traditional office based working arrangements to a more flexible, hybrid approach and that, in doing so, the Council is meeting its statutory obligations, maintaining service delivery and having due regard for the health and wellbeing of its workforce.

Options:

There is an option to return to pre pandemic office based working arrangements, subject to the advice of the Council's Health and Safety Team, but the World Health Organization has yet to downgrade the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak and infection rates remain fairly high in the local area. For the period 23 to 29 April 2022, there were 428 positive test results recorded in the district. In terms of the Council's workforce, 34 employees tested positive in April and 0.8% of the workforce did not feel well enough to work as a result of contracting the virus. In view of this, whilst in some ways we must learn to live and adapt to a world where COVID-19 is endemic, the Council must ensure that it takes all appropriate steps to protect its workforce and reduce the levels of transmission wherever possible. In addition, the significant interest in more flexible forms of working have created new employee expectations and research suggests that organisations that do not support flexible forms of working may be at risk of increased employee turnover, reduced employee engagement and limitations on the ability to attract talent in the future.

Recommendation:

That the Scrutiny Committee, having considered the report, makes any recommendations as required.

Corporate Impact Assessment

Governance:

The Scrutiny Committee has a role to scrutinise and review actions taken by the Council and has requested a review of the impact of hybrid working on the Council, its workforce, service delivery and the use of Council owned buildings. The Committee is also seeking reassurance that the Council is meeting its statutory and contractual obligations.

ESC policies and strategies that directly apply to the proposal:

People Strategy, Workforce Development Plan, Guide to Agile Working, Digital Strategy, ICT Security Policy, ICT Acceptable Use Policy, Data Protection Policy, Health and Safety Policy and Flexible Working Guidance and Options

Environmental:

The move to hybrid working has had a positive effect on the Council's carbon emissions which contributes to the Council's stated aim to become a carbon neutral council by 2030. It also has a positive effect on the personal carbon footprint of our workforce - when going into lockdown at the height of the pandemic, working from home reduced

emissions caused by the commute to work by 66% (offset against any additional emissions from people's homes as a result of heating etc).

Equalities and Diversity:

Flexible working has been approached on a team by team basis to ensure that the needs of the customer and the service are being met. Whilst the hybrid approach may be suitable for many service areas, it is recognised that it is not appropriate for all service areas and in some cases, a return to pre pandemic ways of working has been the most appropriate way forward. However, our response to the national lockdown has accelerated the process of change in some areas and services have been adapted to meet the changing needs of customers, including implementation of a Digital Reception.

Financial:

The new flexible approach to work is generating quantifiable savings in several areas including mileage claims. However, savings have also been made in terms of efficiencies with the opportunity taken to review and refine processes. Hybrid working is one way in which we can answer the Government's call for local authorities to be lean and efficient.

Human Resources:

The Council's Human Resources team has been on a sharp learning curve over the course of the last two years in terms of rolling out appropriate training, guidance and support for managers and the workforce generally with remote, flexible working and the importance of promoting good mental health and wellbeing.

ICT:

Technology plays a critical role in hybrid working and employees need to be able to work seamlessly between the workplace and home. This is intrinsic to the ICT Team's transformation work, both from a support and planned work perspective. The Team ensures that systems are available remotely, that the performance of the network is reliable and secure and that new technology is delivered. As a result of the pandemic, we have all had to grasp new technology and it is recognised that levels of confidence vary and that training is key. The Council was generally well set up pre pandemic (in terms of its ICT provision) and was able to adapt quickly to homeworking. This was through fore-thought and design and not by chance. The scenario placed on us by the pandemic has enabled changes in mindset to take place in months that would historically have taken years to achieve, and we have been able to realise the benefits of working in an agile way.

Legal:

No specific implications arising.

Risk:

Risks were managed throughout the pandemic and will continue to be managed through the corporate Risk Register and the Corporate Governance Group. In addition, the Chief Executive is also the Head of Paid Service which is a statutory role required by Section 4 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The Head of Paid Service is responsible for ensuring that the Council's functions are properly co-ordinated as well as overseeing the workforce and ensuring appropriate staffing arrangements are in place. The Council's HR and Workforce Development Manager reports direct to the Chief Executive and together they ensure that the Council has appropriate arrangements in place and is meeting its obligations.

External Consultees:	None

Strategic Plan Priorities

Select the priorities of the **Strategic Plan** which are supported by this proposal: *(Select only one primary and as many secondary as appropriate)*		Primary priority	Secondary priorities
T01	**Growing our Economy**		
P01	Build the right environment for East Suffolk	☐	☐
P02	Attract and stimulate inward investment	☐	☐
P03	Maximise and grow the unique selling points of East Suffolk	☐	☐
P04	Business partnerships	☐	☐
P05	Support and deliver infrastructure	☐	☐
T02	**Enabling our Communities**		
P06	Community Partnerships	☐	☐
P07	Taking positive action on what matters most	☐	☐
P08	Maximising health, well-being and safety in our District	☐	☐
P09	Community Pride	☐	☐
T03	**Maintaining Financial Sustainability**		
P10	Organisational design and streamlining services	☐	☒
P11	Making best use of and investing in our assets	☐	☒
P12	Being commercially astute	☐	☒
P13	Optimising our financial investments and grant opportunities	☐	☐
P14	Review service delivery with partners	☐	☐
T04	**Delivering Digital Transformation**		
P15	Digital by default	☐	☒
P16	Lean and efficient streamlined services	☐	☒
P17	Effective use of data	☐	☐
P18	Skills and training	☐	☒
P19	District-wide digital infrastructure	☐	☐
T05	**Caring for our Environment**		
P20	Lead by example	☐	☒
P21	Minimise waste, reuse materials, increase recycling	☐	☐
P22	Renewable energy	☐	☐
P23	Protection, education and influence	☐	☐
XXX	**Governance**		
XXX	How ESC governs itself as an authority	☒	☐

How does this proposal support the priorities selected?

The Council needs to remain agile to changing demands to ensure it is fit for purpose and continues to deliver excellent services. The constant process of service review and redesign ensures that we continue to meet the needs of our customers and delivers against several Strategic Plan priorities in terms of organisational design, financial savings, digital transformation and caring for our environment.

Background and Justification for Recommendation

1	Background facts
1.1	In March 2020 the Government imposed a national lockdown and instructed people to work from home wherever possible. As a result, the Council responded immediately to this direction and arrangements were put in place to support the workforce working from home. The Council has continued to respond appropriately to the Government's roadmap out of lockdown and continues to heed the advice of Suffolk Public Health and its own Health and Safety Team to help protect the workforce from the virus.
1.2	There is a wide range of research available indicating that the majority of workers want to continue to work from home at least some of the time, presenting new opportunities for organisations to establish new ways of working. According to data from the Office of National Statistics, prior to COVID-19 only around 5% of the workforce worked mainly from home and research carried out by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development showed that 65% of employers did not offer regular homeworking. This figure is expected to fall dramatically to 37%.
1.3	In May/June 2020 the Council carried out an IT Homeworking survey of its workforce (including Members) which generated 495 responses. The purpose of the survey was to create a picture of how the organisation was functioning so that the ICT Team could adapt its approach accordingly. Overall satisfaction levels were high with just 19 people stating that they were dissatisfied with the IT homeworking provision. These 19 people were contacted to follow up their concerns and solutions were put in place where possible. However, some of these issues were beyond the Council's control including local internet connection capacity and speed.
1.4	Although it was clear from the results of the above survey that the majority of the workforce had been able to adapt reasonably well, it was also recognised that homeworking was not straightforward for some for a variety of reasons. In addition, it was recognised that situations and opinions would change as we moved through 2020 and the impact of the pandemic endured. In response, during September 2020, managers were asked to have individual conversations with their team members to review their current work pattern and establish what their preferred workstyle would be moving forward and whether this fitted with the needs of the service. These meetings were designed to give staff a degree of stability at a time when we were going through a period of considerable unease. These meetings included an HR representative and were captured on prescribed forms to ensure consistency of approach.
1.5	In May 2021 the Council carried out further consultation with its workforce in terms of future accommodation requirements. 565 people responded (74% of the workforce). The results showed that 76.11% of the workforce had been able to carry out all elements of their role at home although obviously some roles are less suited to homeworking. However, the overwhelming response (92%) was that employees would prefer a balance where they are in the office for some of the week and working from home for the remainder. This has led to the use of relatively new terms: hybrid working/agile working.
1.6	The significant interest in more flexible forms of working, and hybrid working in particular, has created new employee expectations and desires. Organisations

	who do not support flexible forms of working are very likely to experience increased employee turnover, reduced employee engagement and limitations on the ability to attract talent in the future. This is at a time when the Council is experiencing recruitment challenges in a number of areas.
1.7	In order to ensure the successful implementation of hybrid working, a number of steps are necessary including:
	• The importance of agreeing an overall strategic position on hybrid working and developing a policy and supporting guidance reflecting this. This has been done through the Accommodation Working Group (further details below) who are looking at future accommodation needs and a Guide to Agile Working that has been approved by the Corporate Management Team following consultation with Unison (Appendix A).
	• Defining hybrid working within the context of the Council as an organisation.
	• Providing managers with the necessary tools and training.
	• Providing an opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns.
	• A communication plan to share plans for future hybrid working.
	• Planning for and responding to the organisational implications of hybrid working on matters such as technology, employee wellbeing, inclusion and facilities.
	• Supporting effective team building and cohesion in hybrid teams.
1.8	The success of hybrid working is based on effective communication. When communication is not well managed it can result in poor information flow, knowledge gaps, barriers to effective team working and exclusion of team members. Communication within hybrid teams needs to be more intentional as casual or ad-hoc conversations may be reduced. Effective communication needs to be seen as the responsibility of everyone in the team and how a hybrid team needs to communicate will vary depending on its size and the nature of the roles within the team. With this in mind, a template to capture team protocol for agile working has been devised to help managers capture and agree their approach. A copy of this template is included at Appendix B. This has been rolled out as part of ongoing workshops for managers and the feedback has been positive. However, the value of regular social and human connection to support employee engagement and team building should not be lost.
1.9	Hybrid working has made new demands of managers and whilst the majority have developed new skills in terms of managing a remote workforce, hybrid working brings unique challenges that are different from predominantly office-based working. In response the Council has put in place learning and development to ensure effective people management including support with managing individuals and teams remotely, developing effective communication skills, performance management, team and relationship building. Support has also been provided in terms of an enhanced induction process for new starters and employee engagement.
1.10	Technology plays a critical role in hybrid working and employees need to be able to work seamlessly between the workplace and home and there needs to be ease of connectivity between people in the office and those working remotely. It is recognised that the effective use of technology can help to support health and wellbeing. It was acknowledged early on that user education was key and in response a series of highlights were posted on the intranet to help users understand how laptops and VPN connections work and the impact of internet and upload speed and latency. The IT Homeworking survey results have been used to

help the ICT Team manage and shape its service and to look for opportunities to improve speed/access to business systems where possible.

Microsoft Teams was implemented and rolled out in 2020 during the pandemic to facilitate better team working and remote working capability, with briefing sessions scheduled and offered to all staff and Members to ensure a successful rollout and understanding of how to use the Teams environment. Zoom was also implemented, but predominantly used for public facing meetings.

The rollout of MS Teams has brought another level of remote working and collaboration to the organisation with teams keeping in touch and collaborating using this technology all day every day, both informally and formally. By way of example, please see below the statistics for the 2021/22 financial year:

Number of internal calls using MS Teams	124,361
Number of internal channel messages using MS Teams	37,136
Number of internal chat messages sent using MS Teams	1,580,943
Number of meeting participants using MS Teams	46,642
For context:	
Number of emails sent by the organisation	1,787,302

A number of Surface Hubs have been ordered for trial purposes which should allow for more inclusive conversations when some participants are in the room together with others joining remotely. When co-located employees have a face to face meeting, those joining remotely can experience 'presence disparity', where people experience the meeting differently and communication can be disrupted. Surface Hubs are large touch screens which inclusively engage everyone's voices, faces, and ideas. However, delivery has been delayed due to global supply chain issues.

| 1.11 | The employee wellbeing implications of COVID-19 will require focus for some time. This may include supporting employees experiencing poor mental health, addressing specific concerns and anxieties about the return to the workplace and the impact of Long COVID. In the longer term, hybrid working may support improved wellbeing through reducing commuting time, providing employees with more autonomy around their schedules and extra time for health and wellbeing activities. Hybrid working may however bring with it specific challenges around work-life balance and managing the boundaries between work and home. The Council has been acutely aware of the impact of not only the pandemic but remote working on its workforce and put in place a number of measures to address this:

- Providing training and support to employees on managing work-life balance whilst working in a hybrid way / working from home.
- Offering training on digital wellbeing and having healthy habits in relation to the use of technology, including helping employees to mindfully disconnect.
- Helping managers to understand the potential wellbeing implications of hybrid working and equipping them to have appropriate wellbeing conversations.
- Ongoing mental health support and information for all employees including access to Care First, Able Futures and our own, internal, Mental Health First Aiders. |

	- 'My Possible Self' mental health app that offers advice and tools to improve wellbeing.
	- Ensuring managers are aware of potential signs and symptoms of poor wellbeing or mental health.
	- Encouraging and reinforcing the positive benefits of exercise and healthy living.

2	**Current position**
2.1	Employment Contracts There have been no changes made to employment contracts in terms of work base. However, the Guide to Agile Working recognises that the workforce does not need to be located in set buildings to provide effective services and that in many areas, staff will be able to choose when, where and how they work as long as it suits the needs of the service they are providing. The Guide is very clear that staff must accept that it is a reasonable request for a manager to require them to work in the office for performance, operational and/or team needs. This is regularly emphasised to staff and managers and covered in workshops that have been delivered by HR.
2.2	Health and Safety Health and safety is a shared responsibility between the employer and employee and if there is any doubt, the Council's Health and Safety Team is available to advise. Employees have a responsibility for their own health and safety and the health and safety of others while they are carrying out work activities (regardless of the work location) in accordance with the Council's Health and Safety Policy. The same duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 continue to apply at home as they do in the office. Employees must be able to carry out their work in a safe manner and equipment and information must be safely and securely stored according to the Council's policies and procedures. When working from home the employee has a responsibility to ensure they have an appropriate workspace with adequate security, storage and screening from activities and noise in the rest of the home. There must also be adequate ventilation and lighting. Employees must not carry out work meetings in their home with customers or officers from other agencies. If homeworkers need to attend site meetings direct from home, they must follow the Council's Lone Working Policy. Risk Assessments The Council has a generic risk assessment template that covers working from home that managers can adopt or amend as appropriate. Managers should ensure that any of their team who routinely work from home can implement the controls in the Team's risk assessment. Managers should seek advice from the Health and Safety Team for any risks for which they cannot determine an appropriate control. Employees must confirm that they will notify the Council if any changes occur following the assessment. All reasonable steps to ensure that working conditions continue to comply with Health and Safety requirements must be undertaken. All accidents and injuries which occur in the course of the employee's homeworking should be reported in the usual way. Managing Work Related Stress/Mental Health

	Managers need to actively manage work related stress/mental health and protect workers from stress by undertaking a risk assessment and acting on it. In addition, there are a number of practical things that can be done to help manage the risks of stress and mental health problems for homeworkers including: • Talking openly with team members about the possibility of them becoming stressed or mentally unwell. • Involve them in completing stress risk assessments so they can help identify potential problems and solutions. • Keep them updated on what is happening so they feel involved and reassured. • Have regular keep-in-touch meetings or calls so they can share any concerns. • Make homeworkers aware of any occupational support available to them • Take account the needs of the individual. • Review how work is carried out to reduce any potential causes of stress. Display Screen Equipment (DSE) The Council has not issued any contracts of employment which specifically state the employee's place of work as 'home'. In view of this, there is no legal requirement for the Council to carry out physical inspections of people's homes or their DSE set-up. Our current policy of requiring self-assessment meets the requirements of current health and safety legislation so long as managers seek assistance from the Health and Safety Team or HR if they cannot resolve any issues that the employee identifies. If the employee cannot use a workstation that complies with DSE Regulations, that member of staff may need to work from the office. In 2021/22, 439 DSE assessments were submitted from those working from home and 153 from those working in the office. 14% of the working from home assessments required action compared to 13% for those working in the office. 90% of all actions have been resolved but the remainder have been left open to allow managers to monitor the success of the action taken. As part of the DSE process, staff are reminded of the need to take regular breaks. In addition, managers have a responsibility to ensure that staff are taking adequate breaks and are not working excessive hours. However, the employee is also responsible for managing their work in an appropriate and safe manner. East Suffolk Lifestyle is a benefits scheme open to all employees and includes discounts on gym membership and a cycling to work scheme. In addition, in partnership with Care First (a free employees assistance service) the workforce has access to a range of webinars and initiatives including Walk to Work Day, Move More Month, Wellbeing Walking Competition etc. The Council is currently considering a process for PAT testing electrical equipment being used at home. This should be done every 5 years and so there is time for this process to be agreed and implemented. In addition, the Health and Safety Team is currently putting together a checklist for people who work from home to use.
2.3	Impact on productivity There are widespread studies available that demonstrate that working from home increases productivity and promotes wellbeing, innovation and inclusion.

Anecdotal evidence based on feedback received from staff and managers and collected during workshops and meetings suggest that productivity in many teams has increased due mainly to less travelling between sites and commuting. Other contributory factors include quieter working conditions at home and less interruptions. However, quantitative information is available in the form of the Council's performance reports which confirm that productivity has increased over the last two years. By way of example:

- For 2019/20 the year end performance result for determining minor planning applications within 8 weeks was 75.3%. For 2020/21 it was 80%.
- For 2019/20 the year end performance result for determining new Housing Benefit claims was 11.36 days. For 2020/21 it was 8 days.
- For 2019/20 the year end performance result for abandoned calls to our Customer Services number was 26%. For 2020/21 it was 2.73%.

Whilst overall performance for 2021/22 is currently being analysed, it is important to note that the process for reviewing and managing service plans and related performance has been more robustly monitored over the last two years and this will continue to be the case.

The Council has not experienced an increase in the number of poor performance/capability cases since 2020 and there have been no disciplinary proceedings relating to problems associated with homeworking. In addition, we can report that the Anglia Revenues Partnership (a results driven service) has found that productivity has improved since most of their staff have been working from home and business delivery (operating a mainly transactional and telephony service), has not been impacted. In addition, employee engagement has not suffered (gauged through staff surveys) and the ARP recently secured Thriving Places accreditation.

Members will be aware that the Council underwent a Corporate Peer Challenge in February 2022 which focussed on five core areas:

1. Local Priorities and Outcomes
2. Organisational and Place Leadership
3. Governance and Culture
4. Financial Planning and Management
5. Capacity for Improvement

The report (still in draft form) was extremely complimentary about the Council's overall performance, approach and culture including the following specific references:

"*The systems are in place to track performance with the framework built around the Strategic Plan, providing KPI's that inform the Council if outcomes are being met.*"

"*Senior managers demonstrate a high degree of passion for their work areas and are dedicated to ensuring the Strategic Plan outcomes are delivered to communities. Peers could see and feel the organisation's values in the way staff behaved and spoke about*

	their work, teams and culture. There is a strong sense of 'one council' which galvanises the organisation and energises the workforce to do whatever it takes to deliver on the plans." "*There is a strong 'one team' ethos that runs through the organisation across both Members and staff and there is a clear sense of pride in all they do. Everyone wants to deliver the best outcomes for their communities. The commitment is an impressive component to organisational culture and a sound foundation for building upon.*" Although the evidence confirms that a drop in productivity is not an issue at the current time, the Council recognises that only robust and consistent performance management will ensure that it remains the case. Trust is a key success factor; when employees are working remotely or more flexibly, their performance may be harder to observe. It is also recognised that the inaccessibility of colleagues can be an issue for those very quick questions needed to move something forward. However, staff consultation shows that in many cases it is now easier to get instant answers to questions through the use of, for example, MS Teams and the pace of work being undertaken (coupled with immediacy of responses) has become quicker than before.
2.4	<u>Impact on staff development/new starters</u> Outside of the periods of national lockdown, our offices have remained open to staff to access and work from as necessary, albeit in a more restricted capacity in terms of the availability of desks. This has allowed us to meet new staff and induct them into teams and managers have worked hard to ensure that new starters have more contact than usual with their managers and with their colleagues. Even during the periods of greatest restriction, some people worked from the office because they could not do their job from home or had other needs. This was permitted under the legislation in place at the time and was monitored to ensure compliance. The corporate induction process asks new starters to describe their first impression of the Council and this feedback has always (and continues to be) positive. In terms of development, we have worked hard with our training providers to switch to virtual training where possible and now deliver a significant amount of training that way. We do appreciate that there is an element of "osmosis learning" being lost – the learning we soak up as we go about our jobs in an office environment. However, it does mean we have to think more creatively about how new starters gain the knowledge they require and that, in turn, ensure it becomes more structured and effective. It remains the case that advice to managers is that new starters will benefit from working in the office to receive training and to build relationships with the team and more broadly.
2.5	<u>What are the key benefits of hybrid working?</u> Despite the many complexities and challenges of living and working through the global pandemic, employees have identified many benefits from working from home for both them and the Council. These benefits include a better work–life balance, greater ability to focus with fewer distractions, more time for family and

friends, saved commuting time and costs, IT upskilling and higher levels of motivation.

Other benefits of flexible working include savings on office space, higher levels of employee job satisfaction and reduced absence rates.

In line with the Flexible Working Regulations 2014 and the Children and Families Act 2014, employees have a statutory right to request flexible working and managers are encouraged to consider requests sympathetically, although service needs are the priority. The Council recognises the benefits to be gained by encouraging flexible working practices and we support our employees to find practical solutions to balance/combine their working life with other responsibilities. Flexible working is recognised as a business imperative for attracting and retaining staff. However, flexible working arrangements are not an entitlement and are not suitable for all jobs, all individuals and all teams. Different types of work and workplaces present different challenges and the ways of giving flexibility are likely to vary. The Council has produced Flexible Working Guidance and Options which seeks to shift the organisation's emphasis from presence at work to performance. The intended focus is on what and how things get done in the most efficient way, rather than where and when. This requires a culture shift where people are trusted to work with less monitoring and supervision with a focus on delivery of agreed outcomes. A range of flexible working options are available as following:

- Flexi time
- 9-Day fortnights
- Term-time working
- Annualised hours
- Job sharing
- Part time working
- Negotiated hours
- Compressed hours
- Regular homeworking
- Occasional homeworking

In the May 2021 staff accommodation survey referenced above, staff were asked to state the benefits of working flexibly and the survey captured the following responses:

- Greater flexibility in working hours and better work-life balance.
- Improved employee wellbeing, reduced stress and better sense of control.
- Greater job satisfaction, motivation and productivity.
- An opportunity to manage the working day more efficiently with increased engagement because of autonomy and trust.
- Working in a comfortable environment with the ability to concentrate and focus.
- Saving on commuting time and cost.
- Reduction in carbon footprint.
- Positive impact on mental health/improved health and wellbeing for some.
- Being able to protect vulnerable relatives and the young from COVID.

	• Staff are thankful for the opportunity to work from home. • The ability to be at home with family members when childcare and/or respite facilities are closed.
2.6	**What are the potential negatives of hybrid working?** It was apparent from the responses to the survey that some people experience difficulties working from home. The main disadvantages identified were as follows: • Lack of social interaction with colleagues. • Missing ad hoc conversations. • Access to equipment (such as printers). • Feeling less engaged with the organisation as a whole. • Heating costs.. • Opportunity to offload with colleagues if staff have difficult conversations or interactions with rude and challenging customers. • Negative impact on mental health. • Unreliable/poor broadband. • Lack of appropriate space to work. • Family members may be unaware of boundaries and cause interruptions during the working day (although staff often have flexibility around working hours and frequency of breaks to counter this). • No switch off from home life/loss of work life balance - workshops have been provided to staff on working from home including strategies for planning the day, sticking to working hours etc. • Greater amount of pressure/emotional stress – regular announcements on Sharepoint on various health and wellbeing initiatives being run, coffee morning virtual sessions, counselling, mental health first aiders, increased contact from managers, team meetings etc. It should be noted that the above responses scored much lower than the positive responses cited in paragraph 2.5 above, but it should not be underestimated the impact that any one of the above may have on an individual. It is also recognised that we are currently living through a cost of living crisis and that escalating utility costs will have an impact where staff choose to work from home, particularly during the winter. Whilst there are no plans to contribute towards these additional costs, in most cases the savings being made on the commute to work will offset these. The offices are open for use by any officer who feels they would rather work from there, as they did prior to the pandemic, in order to help mitigate additional utility costs. It should be noted that capacity at East Suffolk House may be an issue given that the Annex is currently being used by Port Health staff for which Port Health is paying a market rent.
2.7	**ICT Security and Data Protection** The Council provides employees with access to the personal and confidential information they need to do their job. This information must not be disclosed to others who are not authorised to see it and the security of council information and equipment is of utmost importance.

	When working from home or in any mobile way, members of staff who hold or collect personal data are responsible for their own compliance with data protection law and must ensure that personal and/or sensitive information is kept and processed in accordance with UK General Data Protection Regulation, the Data Protection Act 2018 and the Council's Data Protection Policy. Working from home may result in information being held outside the office environment for a longer period and the security of documents is of high importance. The key thing to remember when working at home, or anywhere away from the office, is that the same data protection and security principles apply as they would in an office environment. In the main, teams are working electronically and do not have 'paper' documents laying around in their homes, so 'document security' needs to be taken in context - the security of IT systems is of utmost importance in terms of data protection. The Council has a number of policies in place to govern the use of information including the ICT Security Policy, ICT Acceptable Use Policy and the Data Protection Policy. The IT network is robustly managed with scheduled patches applied to systems, security updates and regular penetration testing, along with the relevant web filtering, phishing prevention, two-factor authentication and other security measures in place such as ensuring we comply to PCIDSS regulations in terms of taking payments, for example.
2.8	<u>What is the impact on Council building space/capacity?</u> A number of key principles have been developed which capture the Council's approach to future working styles: • **We want to capitalise on our new agile working culture to provide an environment where staff and members can thrive**. Instead of regimented office-working, we want to allow our people to be as flexible as possible, while still connecting easily with colleagues and utilising office space as and when required. • **We will re-design our physical workplace to help drive the organisation forward with a shared sense of purpose and a culture of collaboration**. Our future office space will not support full working weeks for everyone but will feature a range of differing environments to inspire creative thinking, provide quiet working areas and unite the organisation for meetings. • **Naturally, we want the organisation to operate efficiently and to make the most appropriate use of our resources**. We will therefore ensure that sensible and progressive decisions are made about the future of our workplaces which match our progressive ambitions, but which will also help us achieve financial sustainability. An Accommodation Working Group has been in place for some time now and works to the above key principles. Meetings have been held with all Heads of Service to discuss the future requirements of their teams and options are currently being pulled together regarding the potential use of the offices going forward which includes reconfiguration. However, at the current time, there are no plans to reduce the Council's estate.

	The number of desks available for use in our buildings is based on the advice of the Council's Health and Safety Team and on the data released by Suffolk Public Health. Fewer desks are available than were before the pandemic and these must be booked in advance of working in the offices. Desk usage is regularly monitored and at no point have capacity levels been reached. All desks are hot desks (unless the work requires specialist equipment) and teams are encouraged to book meeting rooms for face to face meetings and to collaborate on projects. The staff accommodation survey carried out in May 2021 asked staff about how they would like to see the offices reconfigured for future use which returned a range of options including: • Relaxed break out space for collaborative working • Traditional hot desks set in quiet areas • More meeting rooms • Work pods • Quiet spaces • Creative spaces • Desks with shared monitors for collaborative working Staff were also asked for their views in relation to the likely use of touchdown points outside of the offices which also generated a range of responses including: • Any communal office space • Libraries • Anywhere midway between the two headquarters
2.9	**What are the environmental benefits of homeworking?** A key principle underpinning the Council's approach to hybrid working is that our new working culture will be designed with the environment at its heart which reflects one of the key themes within the Strategic Plan. The blending of virtual and physical workspaces should help reduce the Council's carbon footprint which includes reductions in emissions from travel and reducing waste, particularly from plastic and paper. There was a 66.6% reduction in tCO2e emissions when offset against any additional emissions from people's homes as a result of heating etc in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20.
2.10	**What are the financial and asset benefits of agile working?** Annual travel costs going forward are currently forecast to be £450k per annum compared to £700k as at March 2020. Cost savings in relation to printing and stationery are forecast to be £30k per annum. Increased homeworking has allowed the Annex at East Suffolk House to be used to accommodate Port Health staff who would otherwise have required additional space at additional cost. Port Health pay the Council market rent for use of this space at the rate of £130k per annum. It has also allowed the Rotterdam Road office in Lowestoft (used by around 50+ office-based housing staff) to be closed down with the 'stores' element remaining as the only functional part of that building complex thereby allowing for a review of future building needs. Prior to the pandemic, this was going to be a large new build office project but has allowed us to re-think requirements.

3	**How to address current situation**
3.1	The evidence collected over the last two years is overwhelmingly in support of the move to a more hybrid approach to working. The Council continues to be a highly functioning organisation and the needs of the workforce are being met. The Council is taking a well-considered approach in terms of health and safety and wellbeing and productivity/performance is being managed effectively.

4	**Reason/s for recommendation**
4.1	This report is intended to provide an overview of the Council's approach to hybrid working and seeks to reassure Members that all necessary steps are being taken to support staff, ensure that the Council is meeting its statutory obligations and that the Council continues to deliver effective services to all its communities to the same high standards it always has.

Appendices

Appendices:	
Appendix A	Guide to Agile Working
Appendix B	Team Protocol for Agile Working

Background reference papers:
None.