

**HOME WORKING – PILOT SCHEME
(Report by the Head of Policy & Strategic Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Home Working Project was one of several projects arising from the Council's Flexible Working Strategy.
- 1.2 The Strategy recognises the potential benefits of flexible working are broad and range from increasing the number of people who may be willing to work for the Council, improving retention, providing lifestyle improvements for employees, reducing travel and environmental impact and reducing accommodation costs. This report considers these issues as they relate to frequent (full or part time) home working.
- 1.3 This evaluation is taken from a more in depth analysis previously considered by the Chief Officers Management Team.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The pilot scheme comprised a group of 5 employees who volunteered to work full time at home. During the pilot they no longer had access to a desk in the office, but were required to attend meetings with their manager, team meetings or other meetings. They were provided with the necessary office, computer and communications equipment and links. The pilot project also addressed training and management issues arising from working remotely and the impact on other employees.
- 2.2 It was of fundamental importance that an employee working from home would be as effective and efficient as they would be in the office. Therefore an important consideration for home working would be the manager's assessment of the employee's ability to manage their workload from a distance. This assessment included:
 - Unintended shift of work or responsibility to other team members through, for example, a staff member not being there to answer ad hoc queries or telephone calls;
 - The employee's performance when working unsupervised; and
 - The employee's personal circumstances and desire to work from home.
- 2.3 The pilot involved 4 employees from Revenues and Benefits Service and one from Environment Health Service.
- 2.4 The Project also included an evaluation of research of the experience of other councils, particularly good examples of efficiency savings and performance improvement.
- 2.5 A log of issues was maintained throughout the Pilot, most of which were resolved at an early stage, included -

- HR issues, which are being developed into a Home Working Policy and Procedure.
- Technical issues particularly the speed of access which have been improved by the introduction of new broadband access; and
- Health and Safety issues which concentrated on appropriate working arrangements and communications.

3. PERFORMANCE BENEFITS AND COSTS

3.1 The productivity of processing of Benefits applications increased by up to 50% over the duration of the Pilot with no adverse effects on performance, and there was no noticeable tailing-off as time progressed. Productivity was measured in terms of the number of client claims processed.

3.2 Recognising the small sample size, self selection process and the limited period of the pilot, nevertheless sickness levels decreased. In the previous 12 months the five volunteers averaged 5.4 working days lost per person, and during the Pilot, there was a reduction of 20%.

3.3 With regard to staff turnover, none of the volunteers left during the course of the Pilot, but it is not possible to make any assumptions as to whether or not home working would reduce staff turnover, although the comments from the volunteers were encouraging.

3.4 Overall, participants in the pilot found the experience positive. Home working significantly increased staff satisfaction levels and motivation.

3.5 In the short term there were no cost savings from the pilot but it is estimated that it cost £3.5K per employee each year to provide traditional office accommodation. Given that a home-worker generally costs around £1k in one of equipment costs, with a further £0.5k annually. First year saving of around £2K could be made per home worker with ongoing annual savings in the region of £3K.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The evidence shows that the Pilot scheme was successful, to the extent that other staff in the Benefits Section have sought the opportunity to work from home. Currently there remain 5 employees working from home. Other applications have been received but it was determined that it was not appropriate in those cases.

4.2 The Project evaluation concluded that there was scope for full-time home working to be rolled-out further across the Council, both within the Benefits service, but also for other service areas, such as Local Taxation, Building Control, Environmental and Community Health, Planning and Financial Services.

4.3 One of the key benefits for home-based employees was found to be a significantly enhanced work-life balance. Home-based employees reported that they did not feel socially isolated from their work colleagues and were able to play a greater role within their life outside work.

- 4.4 The pilot and subsequent wider adoption of home working will lead to the development of new employment policies within the Council.
- 4.4 Home working can result in fewer work-related car journeys which in turn can help to reduce congestion at peak hours as well as contribute to a reduction in travel-related pollution.
- 4.5 Besides the environmental benefits, there are significant overall savings to be made in terms of office space, which will more than offset the additional set-up and operating costs of home workers. However, for this to be realised, decisions will need to be taken on the numbers of full time home workers and the office space that can be released.

Background Papers

Project Evaluation Report

Contact Details

Ian Leatherbarrow
Head of Policy and Strategic Services
ian.Leatherbarrow@huntsdc.gov.uk
01480 388005