

GERSHON EFFICIENCY AGENDA : EVALUATION OF REMOTE WORKING PILOT

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Cllr N Williams

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Summary: This reports findings six months after the initial work to introduce a remote working pilot began. It is based on interviews with participants, managers and team members.

Recommendations:

- 1) That Executive notes the findings of the Remote Working Pilot which commenced in April 2006; and
- 2) That the Executive agrees to delegating responsibility for managing the Remote Working pilot to the Chief Executive; and
- 3) That the existing pilot is extended for a further six months, including adding up to five more individuals to the pilot (Option 2 below); and
- 4) That a trial of mobile working in Benefits and Building Control should be supported with effect from 1 April 2007 (Option 1 below); and
- 5) Those already working remotely under the pilot continue to do so.

Impact on delivering corporate objectives

The Council is committed to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of Council activities in its Corporate Plan, to which remote working could contribute if adopted.

Impact on other statutory objectives (eg, Crime and Disorder, LA21 and Equalities)

The contents of this report would not conflict with any of the Council's statutory objectives, and if extended to a full scheme would make greater contributions to sustainability and equal opportunities

Financial and human resource implications

The costs of the Option 2 can be accommodated within the existing budget in 2006/7. Approval of a budget bid for 2007/8 would be necessary to extend the trial to Option 1, mobile working. Revised management arrangements for the employees involved would be a specific requirement for remote working.

Project and Risk Management

This project has been subject to project and risk management

**Key Decision Status
Financial**

No
No

Ward	No
Other ward implications?	No

1. INTRODUCTION

Definition of Remote Working :

Any working arrangement in which an employee is not wholly based in the employer's premises to carry out the contracted duties. It includes

- mobile working -carrying out tasks while working in many other premises or from other locations such as building sites or highways;
- flexible working – carrying out tasks at times or in places indicated by the needs of the service, rather than set hours or location;
- home-working -employees based part-time or full-time in their own homes while carrying out their contracted duties;

Description of the Remote Working Pilot

The Executive agreed that a pilot for the Council to test various forms of remote working should take place with effect from 1 April 2006 for six months. The pilot would include 8 employees and 2 Councillors. £650 per participant was allowed to cover the costs of setting up the pilot, for items such as IT equipment, furniture and installation of broadband lines.

Several different models of remote working were to be trialled:

- part-time home working;
- working from other Copeland offices;
- remote access to Council files;
- increasing members' use of Council networks.

At the same time that individual Copeland employees were to trial remote arrangements, Capita plc was processing benefit claims from their office in Carlisle, on this Council's network using the same technology. No appraisal of those arrangements has been undertaken for this report, as it is subject to evaluation by the service concerned.

The pilot was to test management arrangements, efficiency, productivity, technology, resources required for supporting remote workers, customer service and impact on the rest of the team. Five of the participating employees have external and internal customers, the rest have internal customers including Members.

Where employees were to be working part of their working week at home managers were asked to inspect the office arrangements for suitability of environment and equipment. The Council's insurers were informed about the arrangements.

2. ARGUMENT

In the original report to Executive in February 2006 the following policy and statutory bases for making progress with remote working were given:

- It is an IEG requirement to have a home-working policy in place
- There is a requirement under the statutory Flexible Working Regulations to consider requests from parents of children under 6 or with disabilities to vary working arrangements

- It would enable our organisation to be more responsive to customer needs through mobile working, increased flexibility of location and potential for increasing hours available to customers
- It would improve productivity and efficiency (minimise wasted time through travel and administration) and therefore provide a better overall service to customers
- It would support the diversity agenda by widening the range of people who could work for the Council
- It would contribute to recruitment and retention.
- Increased flexibility would improve morale and could reduce sickness levels
- It will enable us to react and take advantage of modern environment and available technology in the workplace.
- It may be a catalyst in shifting the organisation's focus to output/outcome based performance management
- It will have environmental impacts through a reduction in the need to travel to work.
- It may rationalise office accommodation leading to accommodation cost savings
- It will formalise the trend towards informal home working arrangements
- It will give the organisation options with regard service provision, for example extending hours for customers or if there was a regional or national emergency (such as a fuel shortage)
- It will enable us to take advantage of the learning from the National Project on Mobile Working (Project NOMAD)

Updates since pilot started

The pilot arrangements were disrupted early on due to a number of unforeseen circumstances affecting five of the employees. The impact of these circumstances meant that the employees concerned were unable to proceed with the pilot at the beginning of the trial period. One employee left the Council's employment; another moved home before the broadband connection was made, then was due to work from another office remote from the Copeland Centre which was subsequently not available; a third was unable to have broadband installed at home due to technical problems with an existing telephone line. A remote working arrangement in which the Council's office at Millom was to be used connecting the office to the Council's CRM system was not available in time due to technical problems. More recently two of the participating employees, who were originally prevented due to technical reasons, have been able to proceed with testing the remote working arrangements.

The remote working involved in the pilot was largely part-time home working as the use of a remote office at Millom was unavailable within the timeframe of the pilot. This allowed testing of remote access to the Council's email and other networked systems and telephone extension switching.

A budget of £6,500 was allowed to fund the pilot, of which £2,000 has been spent. It was not possible to realise any savings due to the small scale of the pilot.

Findings of the pilot

Following interviews with the employees concerned, managers and team members where possible, the following findings were reported.

Benefits to the employees :

Efficiency and Productivity : employees working part-time from home reported increased concentration and productivity while at home due to reduced noise and

interruptions in their working environment. For employees working on intense tasks such as research or report writing, this was a particular benefit, as tasks were completed more quickly and with better quality.

Work-life Balance :employees who live remote from Copeland participating in the part-time home working pilot reported reduced stress and fatigue due fewer journeys to work. In addition there was improved work-life balance due to the time gained from not commuting.

Benefits to the Council :

Efficiency : Remote working is specifically included in the Gershon guidance for consideration by authorities in order to help them meet efficiency targets. The efficiencies arise from increased contact time with customers on site, reduced travelling costs and time, and reduced requirement for office space. Copeland BC has included a modest efficiency to be gained from remote working in 2007/8.

In the operation of this pilot there was no-one based full-time out of the Council's offices, so there was no opportunity to make efficiencies through reducing the need for office space. In order for this benefit to be realised it would be necessary to change the work location and practices of one or more service area on a longer term basis.

Managers of employees working at home during the pilot reported increased productivity and indicated that this would be routinely available from remote working, which would improve the Council's efficiency.

Recruitment and Retention : two of the employees in the pilot, who have skills that are hard to recruit, live more than 40 miles from Whitehaven and the home working facility allowed them to reduce the number of journeys they made to work during the weeks of the pilot. Managers of these employees particularly noted that increased remote working would enable the Council to recruit and retain employees like them from a wider radius. Where skills are in particularly short supply, this would be a considerable advantage.

Environment : With a reduction in unnecessary journeys to the Council base it is possible to reduce carbon emissions: the more journeys saved, the smaller the effect of Council activities on the environment.

Customer Contact The employees who participated in the pilot were mainly not people with many external customers, although all have responsibilities for internal customers, including councillors. None of the employees in the pilot phase was able to test mobile working. Implemented with more participants, this model is likely to offer more time with customers and less travelling time.

For pilot participants working at home contact with customers was enabled through the existing telephone system, which allows switching from the extension on the desk to an external telephone number. No managers interviewed reported loss of contact with customers.

Management : a degree of self-organisation is needed for employees to work remotely, as managers are not present to monitor progress. For this reason it is likely that some employees and some roles would not be suitable for remote working. Different arrangements for managing employees' outputs would be necessary, and during the pilot managers arranged various methods for monitoring employees' achievements.

These included weekly tasking meetings, diary of activities, telephone contact and consigning particular activities to the regular day working at home.

Disadvantages to employees :

Isolation : although none of the participants in the pilot reported isolation resulting from working remotely, it is recognised as an issue for employees who regularly spend long periods away from the office. Missing out on informal communication and networking could also have been a problem for the employees, although none reported this during the pilot, nor was it reported by their colleagues. Measures such as regular team meetings, and contact with managers would have to be planned into remote workers' routines to overcome this risk.

Transport and storage : one pilot participant reported that safe storage of Council documents and equipment and transporting them from home to office could be an issue for home-workers, and it would be important to ensure that appropriate furniture was provided.

“Ownership” of deskspace in employers' offices is one of the expectations for employees who have been used to working under standard arrangements. Some models of remote working would remove this facility, with “hot desk” space being available for the short periods to be spent in the office. This can be seen as less desirable, however for employers, reduction in office space required for the organisation is the major source of savings.

Disadvantages to Council :

Technical Problems :. A technical problem which has just been resolved prevented part of the pilot involving Millom office. Had the part of the pilot which was to link Millom office to the Council's contact centre been possible, it would have increased the Council's capacity to deal with customers. [Millom will be on the new fast link in a few days and will then be part of the network in the Copeland Centre. It will then be available to use as a drop in centre for remote working/hot desking.](#)

[The pilot threw up some teething problems with technology which with time and experience were overcome. However throughout the trial period several external partners and support providers used the same access portal, terminal services sessions and access to great effect and with only one or two connection/availability problems.](#)

More complicated communication :If part of the workforce is based out of the Council offices it is slightly more complicated for managers to ensure that the service is covered throughout the working day. Members of the participants' teams may have been less in touch with the work being carried out by the remote worker. This could have caused problems if, for example, it is unclear which team member is to tackle a particular task or when. To overcome this during the pilot, managers reported contact by a variety of means to answer questions while the remote worker was out of the office. In addition regular team meetings ensured that good communication between team members was possible.

Support Services Costs : Supporting a number of remote workers increases the responsibilities of central services, such as procurement and ICT. In effect an employee with two workplaces needs additional support for setting up ICT links, different systems, extra equipment and other ways of communications and

management. When the Council extends remote working to a whole service area, for example for mobile working it will have to take account of:

- Giving remote workers a higher priority than office-based staff who can move to another pc
- Supporting remote workers with different procedural, telephony and application errors
- More training for IT staff to support for remote users

Costs for support services increase slightly and reduce the possible efficiencies to be gained from remote working. However the more remote workers, the greater the economies of scale, due to familiarity with technology, purchasing economies and improved management arrangements. As has been stated above with such a small pilot it was not possible for the Council to achieve any savings through reduced office space requirements.

Conclusions

The small scale of this pilot, combined with technology problems encountered at the beginning, has not given clear evidence of significant savings to be gained through remote working. However there are signs that even this limited trial would bring advantages, such as improved productivity, work-life balance, recruitment and retention and sustainability to individuals and non-cashable efficiencies to the Council. Nevertheless it has provided some valuable learning, which could be used to assess benefits and disadvantages of a more extensive trial. Articles and research from remote working schemes in other authorities provide relevant good practice to overcome most of the issues that have arisen in Copeland's pilot.

In particular the following issues need to be addressed for extending remote working:

- technology solutions and support need to be robust for remote working to be successful;
- some investment of resources is necessary to achieve the efficiencies which can accrue from remote working
- managers need to put different arrangements in place to enable employees to maintain contact with team colleagues, co-ordinate cover arrangements and ensure optimum productivity;
- employees who work remotely need to be able to organise their time without supervision and use different technology;
- in order to realise efficiencies a more substantial remote working exercise would be needed

3. OPTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED

Option 1 : Extended Pilot In order to test out other aspects of remote working, particularly mobile working, an extended pilot could be considered. The technology to allow Building Control and Benefits visiting officers to work mainly away from the Copeland Centre is now available and offers the Council the potential of increased efficiencies through increased time for customer contact, reduced travel, reduced office space and improved productivity. A budget bid to support this has been made for 2007/8, with a non-recurring bid for equipment such as lap-tops, broadband installations and office equipment. A recurring revenue budget bid has also been made for reimbursement of employees' expenses, licences and so on.

Option 2 : Continue present pilot Due to the delayed start of this pilot for various reasons it is proposed that a limited number of individuals are added to it, to run for a further six months. There is existing budget capacity for up to 5 more people to join. It would be preferable for a

range of different remote working models to be tested, rather than merely adding part-time home workers, so that there would be new learning. It is also proposed that those already on the existing pilot remain on it.

Option 3 : Do Nothing –not possible, as decision is needed to close or continue pilot.

Option 4 : Close pilot and take no further action on remote working. This is not recommended as there are statutory requirements on the Council to consider and grant requests from some employees for flexible working arrangements including remote working. In addition the Council would not be able to benefit from technological progress which could allow budget savings through needing reduced office space.

List of Appendices

List of background documents: Report to Executive 21 February 2006.

List of consultees :

- Executive
- Corporate Team
- Sue Borwick
- Marlene Jewell
- Jane Salt
- Martin Stroud
- Chris Lloyd
- Bob Gerry
- Hannah Kozich
- Michael Dean
- Tim Capper
- Jane Murray
- Vic Emmerson
- Duncan Fyfe
- Graham McWilliams
- Marilyn Robinson