
Notes of an informal meeting of the members of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held virtually at 10.30am on Thursday, 30 September 2021 via Zoom.

Present:

County Councillors:

C Pond (Chairman)
T Cunningham
J Fleming
P Gadd
M Garnett
I Henderson
S Kane
D King (substitute)
D Land
A McQuiggan
C Siddall
M Steptoe (Vice Chairman)
M Vance
A Wiles

Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer, was also present.

The Chairman opened the meeting confirming that the meeting was now to be held virtually via Zoom with members of the public still able to view the meeting live via a YouTube streaming.

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report on Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received and noted. Since the last meeting Councillor Wiles had replaced Councillor Barker as a member of the Committee.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Mackrory (for whom Councillor King substituted).

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 August 2021 were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

3. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public.

4. Ways of Working Programme update

The Committee considered report CPSC/09/2021 comprising an update on the Ways of Working Programme that had been transitioning Essex County Council's (ECC) current working model (primarily office based working) into a Hybrid one (a mixture of flexible working arrangements, based on business and customer need).

The following people from Essex County Council joined the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Councillor Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member - Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs.

Pam Parkes, Executive Director, People and Transformation.

During the introduction to the item and subsequent discussion, the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted.

- (i) The Programme had been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic and seen more efficient use of technology.
- (ii) The intention was to have around 75% of the total workforce (approximately 5,800 staff) to have adopted and be working permanently in a hybrid way, with the support of new workspaces and technology, by Autumn 2022.
- (iii) The move to new ways of working aimed to also build a resilient and diverse workforce facilitated by supportive learning and development programmes. Specific training had been put in place for managers to help their staff determine the right balance between home and in office working.
- (iv) Targeted wellbeing activities for staff had contributed to a reduction in sickness absence. ECC had also seen a higher take up of the Covid vaccination compared to other staff in the sector.
- (v) The Programme had identified four broad work styles each with a different set of needs:
 - Fixed location - e.g library worker, receptionist,
 - Anywhere worker
 - Community based worker – e.g. social worker
 - Field based staff – e.g. Park Ranger
- (vi) Given the size of the organisation, the Programme would transition the workforce in two key stages – the first of which had commenced in September 2021. Tranche 1 was around 1200 employees who had been notified of their workstyles and new ways of working and were currently testing their interim workspaces – the majority of those had been assessed as

Anywhere Workers and were based at County Hall. Tranche Two was planned for November 2021-January 2022.

- (vii) New ways of working could deliver an approximate cost savings of £4 million in office incidentals. Extra allowances to staff to help support working from home had totalled around £350,000.
- (viii) There was also a further separate savings ambition of £4m as a result of the anticipated associated property transformation, although nothing had been committed to date on this yet. It would be further validated once the workplace strategy had been delivered.
- (ix) ECC were trying to reconfigure County Hall and were looking to create meetings hubs, collaborative spaces, work Pods, workstations and blended meeting rooms as the organisation moved towards more flexible workspaces.
- (x) During the pandemic ECC staff had had an allowance to purchase equipment to support working at home.
- (xi) In terms of insurance liability, the coverage and liability would depend on the nature of any incident at home – there was still some ongoing appraisal of the situation. Staff were still expected to observe health and safety safeguards whilst working at home and had been supported in establishing suitable workspaces at home wherever possible.
- (xii) Some staff still did not have suitable work environments at their home and ECC were still looking at that.
- (xiii) A few libraries would be upgraded so as to have suitable capacity and equipment to be a drop-down hub for ECC staff – pilots were currently being run.
- (xiv) Staff surveys had clearly indicated that most staff still wanted to retain some element of flexible working post lockdown and to be able to have the opportunity to work from home.
- (xv) Most of the negative feedback voiced by staff in the staff survey commented on increased utility bills and not feeling connected (both could be partly mitigated by the opportunity now to come into the office).
- (xvi) Staff employment contracts had not been amended to reflect home working. There was a preference to continue to state a work base in contracts as staff would still be expected to come into their formal place of work at various times. ECC had been guided on this by the approach adopted by other local authorities.

- (xvii) Young people benefited from mentoring by more experienced staff and had missed out on this during the pandemic when they had had to work from home. Employers also had a pastoral role. ECC had a young people's network which provided an opportunity to stay connected and young people were being encouraged to come back into the office now as well.
- (xviii) The lockdowns had made it difficult for new starters at ECC and more activities were being developed to help them understand the organisation and feel included.

Conclusion:

It was **agreed** that the following further information should be provided:

1. The cost of converting meeting rooms;
2. The advice provided to staff around home working (and in particular security);
3. A breakdown of numbers of staff in each of the four workstyles identified by ECC. It was highlighted and acknowledged that this would only be available around January 2022 and this timing may be the opportunity for a follow-up discussion to include how Tranche 2 had worked and latest staff feedback.
4. Copy of procedure notes on welfare issued to Heads of Department, and line managers and others.
5. Copy of notes/minutes of discussions with Trade Unions.
6. Further information on the hybrid meeting rooms including confirming
 - (i) The suitability of the microphones for the size of the rooms;
 - (ii) That the quality of a meeting would be no worse than would be experienced in person, particularly for the hard of hearing;
 - (iii) Availability of training for staff to use the new equipment;
 - (iv) The acceptance criteria for the commissioning of a room and the minimum remote equipment required;
 - (v) Arrangements for ensuring the security of the tools permitted in hybrid meetings and the use of end to end encryption.

7. Joint work being done with other local authorities on the experience of hybrid working in the public sector.

Pam Parkes was thanked for her attendance by the Chairman and left the meeting. Councillor Whitbread remained to support the next agenda item.

The meeting then adjourned 11.37am and reconvened at 11.45am.

6. Corporate Systems update

The Committee considered report CPSC/10/21 outlining the work undertaken by the Corporate Systems Programme to implement My Oracle, the new corporate information technology system to be used for managing Human Resources, Payroll and Finance transactions.

The following people from Essex County Council joined the meeting to introduce the item and respond to questions:

Councillor Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member - Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs.

Amanda Moore – Programme Director

During the introduction to the item and subsequent discussion, the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted.

- (i) My Oracle would launch the following week;
- (ii) My Oracle was a licence-based product which provided increased flexibility, effectiveness (such as automated approvals of low value purchase orders), reduced complexity, and simpler user experience (suppliers can now self-serve more);
- (iii) There would be benefits to future ways of working but it should also be more transformative and impact on broader support services.

It was **agreed** that:

- (i) The Committee be kept updated on the roll-out.
- (ii) A summary report be provided to outline the pre-work undertaken before Oracle was selected and to indicate the level of security in place for such a cloud-based system.

6. Organisation Strategy – performance measures

The Committee considered and received report CPSC/11/21 comprising a note of a private workshop held on 23 September 2021 between Committee members and the Leader, Deputy Leader and senior officers which discussed the development of performance measures for the Organisation Strategy.

Further monitoring and scrutiny of the implementation of the strategy would be required. Whilst the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee was likely to take the lead on future scrutiny work, it was noted that the Scrutiny Board would also oversee arrangements for future scrutiny as there would be issues either cutting across different scrutiny committees or within the remit of other committees.

Members highlighted some further issues on which the relevant scrutiny committee would need to be cognisant, including monitoring how the strategy and policies supported sustainable transport growth and what policies may be inhibiting that, monitoring the roll-out of LED replacement street lights, and drilling down into a local area analysis to monitor deprivation and poverty levels.

6. Work Programme

The Committee received report CPSC/12/21 comprising the current work programme of the Committee. Further additions would be made to the Work Programme to reflect agreed actions from the meeting requesting further updates on both the Ways of Working Programme and the Corporate Systems update (and specifically Oracle). In addition, the Chairman and Vice Chairman had agreed with the Cabinet Member - Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs, to bring an item on the Corporate Investment Strategy/Corporate Economic Renewal Strategy to the January 2022 meeting.

7. Date of Next Meeting

It was noted that the next meeting was scheduled to be held on Thursday 21 October 2021.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 11.59am.

Chairman