

BOROUGH OF REIGATE AND BANSTEAD

HYBRID WORKING SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of a meeting of the Hybrid Working Scrutiny Panel held at the Remote - Virtual Meeting on 19 August 2021 at 6.00 pm.

Present: Councillors G. Adamson, M. Elbourne, N. Moses, S. Parnall, S. Walsh

Other Councillors: Councillor V. Lewanski (Executive Member and Lead on Hybrid Working)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Buttironi and Councillor Essex.

2. ELECTION OF PANEL CHAIR

Councillor Walsh was elected Chair of the Panel (nominated by Councillor Parnall and seconded by Councillor Moses).

3. INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF THE HYBRID WORKING GROUP

Officers updated Members on progress and discussions to date on hybrid working. Strategic Head of Corporate Resources, Ann Slavin, programme manager leading on the hybrid working stream gave an overview of work as the organisation moved out of the emergency pandemic response to the post-pandemic world of work. The programme's ongoing work included analysing new models of hybrid and remote working for staff, whether office-based or home-based or continuing to operate on the frontline, a focus on Members and the democratic process. The aim was to ensure there were excellent services delivered for residents wherever Members and officers worked.

It was noted that the organisation needed:

- a safe and secure workspace
- a booking system for desks
- office space that could be used for collaborative working on projects.

Focus for the first phase had been on the physical building; an architect had been engaged to advise on the current office space. The next phase was to focus on HR considerations, such as the culture of the organisation, as well as enhancing the IT infrastructure.

Further government guidance was expected on the pandemic response as the organisation prepared for the coming winter months and any likely contingency plans.

Purpose of Panel

Members noted the terms of reference and the scope of the Panel to discuss and develop the democratic process and make the working environment as inclusive as possible so that the greatest number of people were able to participate with Members or the public, attending remotely or physically in the Council's Chamber.

Remote Committee meetings

Joyce Hamilton, Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal and Governance, gave an overview of preparations required for the next stage of Committee meetings. Following Government guidance, Members had returned to meeting physically for formal Committees in the New Council Chamber from May (with a quorum for Council meetings). Officers attended meetings remotely but there was limited officer attendance in the Chamber. Members of the public watched meetings on the live webcast remotely. This was part of a phased approach with social distancing restrictions, following risk-based assessments at each stage. However, although Members have been able to attend the meetings virtually since May and take part in debates, under current legislation, Committee Members have to be physically present in the Chamber to be able to vote in meetings.

Under consideration was what Member meetings should look like and an options paper was being produced. Under consideration were the following issues:

- How the Town Hall could accommodate more members of the public and additional officers to meetings in a safe and practical way.
- Whether members of the public view could view meetings from the Old Council Chamber
- Could an alternative external site accommodate all Members, officers, and the public for Full Council.

With the changing landscape and lifting restrictions, post COVID-19, it was becoming more difficult to justify the current phased approach without definitive legislation in place.

4. PANEL DISCUSSION AND OBSERVATIONS

Panel Members asked questions and made the following observations:

Constitution and remote working – Members asked whether the recent High Court judgement on hosting remote Council meetings necessitated any changes to the Council's Constitution. Monitoring Officer, Joyce Hamilton, confirmed that the Constitution set out the framework for how meetings were conducted. Current government guidance meant that Members needed to physically be in the Chamber to vote in formal Committee meetings (although they could take part in Committee discussions remotely); legislation was needed to facilitate voting in remote meetings, post pandemic.

Member participation in remote meetings – It was noted that some Members reported that they felt disenfranchised from the democratic process as they could participate in meetings from home but could not vote (when this had been possible throughout the pandemic under emergency legislation). Informal interactions before

and after meetings between Members was harder to do remotely rather than face to face in the Council Chamber. This was the same for officers.

Organisational culture – the pandemic had led to a fundamental change to the culture of office work. Also, Committee meetings such as Full Council held in the Chamber had a much more formal atmosphere, whereas it felt less formal for Members dialling in to remote meetings from home. These different cultural aspects could be explored further as part of the work on the changing organisational culture of the Council.

Inclusivity for Members and Officers with family or caring responsibilities – Members with young families and caring responsibilities reported that they had been able to attend more formal and informal meetings when meeting virtually. Members could attend if self-isolating. The Panel reported that hybrid working was one of the few positive things to come out of Covid and had led to improvements for some people in their personal and family lives with a better work/life balance.

Environmental sustainability – with fewer journeys to the Town Hall, there were considerable benefits both for the environment, with fewer cars on the roads, and in considerable accumulated time (and money) saved from not travelling to Town Hall.

Overall objectives for hybrid working – Members requested more details on the overall business objectives on hybrid working and statistics such as numbers of staff working from home, resourcing, and programme timelines. Councillor Lewanski, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Policy and Resources, and Executive lead on the Hybrid Working Group, undertook to respond to these questions from Panel Chair, Councillor Walsh.

Effective working – working Members reported they could switch between their working lives and Council work within minutes and as a result felt they were more effective councillors for residents in their wards. It was noted that productivity had not dropped among former office-based staff who now worked remotely. Team meetings continued online, and teams could meet in a socially distanced way if this was needed.

Staff who requested to work in the Town Hall offices for personal physical or mental health reasons or homeworking environment issues (such as no suitable office space, those who had large/young families at home or were moving to a new house and had no broadband temporarily). They had the option of a Covid secure, risk-assessed and socially-distanced office space at the Town Hall. IT had worked hard to support staff and Members working remotely.

External businesses – it was noted that companies had moved forward in change management terms by about 10 years. The norm for travelling to the office for work was becoming one to three days a week in offices. It was noted that young people who did not have a spare bedroom had different experiences from older people and it suited some organisations rather than others. Members of Surrey County Council Full Council was meeting in person at its new headquarters in Woodhatch Place where there was a larger chamber.

Staff recruitment – new staff had been recruited and inducted online in the last 18 months and all interactions with the Council Members and employees had been

virtual which had become the norm and was manageable. People had adjusted to virtual working and in some cases employees saw hybrid and flexible working as a benefit.

Councillor Lewanski, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Policy and Resources, and Executive lead on the Hybrid Working Group, said it was a challenging programme of work as some Members preferred being in the Chamber for face-to-face meetings and others preferred attending meetings remotely. There were still COVID-19 health and safety considerations as well as support for Members who for health reasons, or those who had close family members with health issues, could not attend the Council offices currently and felt excluded if they joined meetings remotely. The Hybrid Working Group had acknowledged the feedback that it was problematic for Members who attended remotely and so could not vote.

Representations to central government – In response to Panel Members' questions on the Council's representations to central government on bringing forward legislative changes to host remote meetings, officers confirmed that this issue had been escalated through Surrey CEOs and District Council networks. It had also been raised by the Local Government Association, the Association of Democratic Services Officers and local authority Heads of Legal, including the Council's Head of Legal and Governance. However, there were no indications currently that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government was minded to review this imminently.

Members agreed that representing residents to ensure delivery of excellent services to the public was a fundamental part of the democratic process.

Post-pandemic position – It was noted that what was being proposed was a return to accommodating all 45 Members of the Council in the Chamber until there was definitive legislative change. There had always been cases when individual Members could not attend meetings if they or family members were unwell, or they were away due to work commitments or on holiday.

The Monitoring Officer advised that Members still needed to observe minimum meeting attendance and, as before the pandemic, whether they attended each meeting depended on individual circumstances. The difference would be that there still needed to have certain Covid-safety measures in place but without the emergency legislation. There also needed to be space for the public to attend and to facilitate a return to physical attendance.

Summary

Panel Members thanked officers for their update on the programme's work to date and responding to Members' questions.

The Panel **AGREED** that:

- Minutes from the O&S Hybrid Working Scrutiny Panel meeting on 19 August 2021 to be published with the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting agenda pack for 9 September 2021 setting out Member observations. Panel

Chair (Councillor Walsh) to give an overview on the Panel's initial findings to the Committee as set out in the Minutes.

- The Terms of Reference and scope for the Scrutiny Panel's work were noted.
- Maintaining the positive elements of hybrid working in a post-pandemic world was an opportunity to improve delivery of Council services for the benefit of residents.
- There were benefits and disadvantages to different models of hybrid working that Members and officers had experienced during the pandemic. Further work was needed to understand these changes.
- A fundamental shift in working practices for Members and officers had taken place as a result of the pandemic and the resulting cultural changes for the organisation needed to be analysed.
- The current legislative position on hosting remote Council meetings was hampering those Members who wanted to participate fully in the democratic process but could not vote if they attended meetings virtually.
- Councillor Lewanski, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Policy and Resources, and Executive lead on the Hybrid Working Group, undertook to respond to written questions from Panel Chair, Councillor Walsh, on overall business and programme objectives for developing hybrid working and resourcing and programme timelines.
- The Panel to reconvene for a second meeting.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

The Meeting closed at 7.20 pm