

Committee: FINANCE & RESOURCES

Date: 7 December 2021

Report: IMPLEMENTATION OF BLENDED WORKING

Purpose of the report

1. To update Members on the implementation of the Blended Working (BW) arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION

2. Members are asked to note the report.

What is Blended Working

3. For these purposes BW has been defined as; *Authority services being delivered by staff using a combination of office, site and home-working*. By definition, many of the National Park Authority's services are delivered 'on the ground' and are land-based. However, in managing the consequences of the Covid pandemic, a considerable increase in home-working took place during 2020 and 2021.
4. As early as September 2020, it became clear that, post-Covid, there were opportunities to increase the flexibility around where staff were working from when they were carrying out their duties and responsibilities. There were a whole host of positive reasons to support this new approach (which was one being developed across many businesses throughout the Country), albeit that there were also some potentially negative consequences. Nonetheless, Members supported the development of this BW approach where this was possible and desirable.

Direction of Travel

5. Members discussed this issue at a Policy Development Forum in December 2020. At this meeting, a **vision** and a set of principles were established within which any BW arrangements should be developed. This set out the 'direction of travel' for the organisation. Members were told that the National Park Authority would remain a predominantly office-based organisation, at least initially, and supported a vision that the Authority should strive to be:

An organisation that delivers high quality, efficient and welcoming services, and empowers its staff to do that by enabling work to take place wherever and however it will be most effective.

6. Underpinning this vision were a set of principles. These are set out at **Appendix 1**.
7. It is important to note that, although the intention was that initially we would still be predominantly office-based, it was recognised that should our initial approach to BW prove successful then this could result in further flexibilities.
8. In the event the difficulty we have had is that the Authority has not been able to implement BW arrangements because we have still been managing a Covid situation. This has been the situation for nearly two years now and it looks increasingly likely that we may never be in a complete 'post-Covid position'. Consequently, judgements need to be taken about the implementation of BW arrangements so that a thorough assessment can be undertaken as to their success or otherwise.

On-going Covid issues

9. As highlighted above, the fact that Covid restrictions have continued during 2021 has meant that the Authority has been unable to implement all of its new arrangements. Nonetheless, a substantial amount of work has been undertaken in preparation. This work has involved a number of different strands:
 - Researching the contractual implications associated with blended working.
 - Identifying all posts within the organisation that are suitable for BW (about half) and setting out proposed working arrangements for each post.
 - Taking into consideration individual circumstances and any impact they may have on BW, i.e. suitable work space at home, health concerns, caring responsibilities, etc.
 - Identifying, purchasing and developing the IT infrastructure to allow greater flexibility in our working arrangements that also supports the BW approach.
 - Providing the training and support to enable the development of management approaches to facilitate the new ways of working.
 - Carrying out a number of surveys to ascertain views and responses to how the lessons learned from Covid working can be adopted in any new BW arrangements.
10. This development work has taken place throughout 2021. Although some staff have adopted BW, the majority have yet to move fully from working patterns adopted in response to Covid. This situation has gone on for so long that it appears some staff may have formed the impression that this Covid working constitutes BW – it does not. The Authority has still not properly implemented BW arrangements at the time of writing this paper.

Outstanding issues

11. There is evidence that, despite Covid, the Authority has continued to deliver its objectives/actions across the vast majority of the organisation. This performance has been reported to the Members during 2020 and 2021. The Authority's Members, staff and volunteers deserve great credit for this performance, given that these 'Covid years'

have caused everyone great professional and personal difficulties: delivering our objectives hasn't been without severe strain on structures and personnel.

12. A series of staff surveys during 2021 identified a number of issues that had arisen during the period of Covid working that, if not dealt with, could cause difficulties in any new BW arrangements. These were:

- **Availability of staff.** We know staff availability has been a problem in relation to providing some of our external services but it has also caused difficulties for a considerable number of staff internally - simply in getting hold of their colleagues. Pre Covid a lot of internal communication simply meant walking down the office corridor or picking up the phone. It was simple enough to resolve most issues. Covid working has led to a significant difficulty for staff in contacting each other which in turn has led to an over reliance on email. This has tended to drag issues out much longer than should be necessary. As well as increasing day to day pressures on staff it also leads to frustration and irritation in being unable to locate some colleagues or indeed to find out if they are working at all. Although these problems have been exacerbated by Covid they are really management failures associated with inconsistent approaches and they needed to be addressed more rigorously. A start on this has been made with; the introduction of MS 365 and the adoption of Microsoft Teams VC, improved diary management and a refreshed and re-launched intranet. The next step is to ensure these improvements are delivered consistently across the organisation.
- **Communication:** Direct communication between staff and their line managers has proved difficult in some parts of the organisation. Consequently, some staff have identified a lack of support from their manager. There is an overwhelming desire from staff that their line managers should be more visible and easily contactable.
- **Corporateness:** Unsurprisingly, there has been a loss of 'corporateness' during the Covid working arrangements: a sense of 'belonging' to the NPA and being up to speed and contributing to developments. This is unfortunate because staff are very interested in what is going on in this Authority and want more regular updates on topical issues, major projects, staff changes etc. This has been a particular problem for new starters - of which we have had many over the past 18 months. Proposals have been put in place to deal with this.
- **Valuing staff:** Surveys suggests that too little consideration has been given to feeding back to staff on how well they are performing in their role under Covid working and this needs to be addressed as part of any BW arrangements. A simple 'thank you', call, chat or email is all that is required and this does provide helpful feedback on performance as well as helping with some of the contact issues identified above.
- **'Primarily Office based':** Some of the arrangements that have been put in place with staff for post-Covid BW do not meet the direction of travel that the Authority has set: to remain primarily office-based. These arrangements will need to be revisited before BW is fully implemented.
- **Capacity:** The Authority has made a significant capital investment in IT equipment and resource in order to establish and develop the necessary infrastructure for

implementing BW. This has not been without problems and has highlighted some difficulties due to the level of capacity that we have as a small organisation. This problem is likely to worsen in the coming months and we will have to try to find solutions to deal with it.

Conclusion

13. It now seems clear that a 'post-Covid world' is unlikely to come to pass any time soon. We have to learn to live with Covid and manage the organisation accordingly. Consequently, it is our intention to fully implement the BW arrangements as soon as practicable and preferably from the beginning of the new calendar year. As ever this approach will be governed by any changes in Government Covid policy.
14. The Authority needs to fully implement the BW arrangements to give itself the time and space to see if they are capable of providing the levels of service to the public that we should expect. Should these arrangements prove successful it is likely that greater flexibilities would be introduced. Nonetheless, they have to be tried, tested and be seen to be working for the Authority and the general public.

David Butterworth
Chief Executive

22 November 2021

Background documents: none

Principles for determining new ways of working

- The provision of a high quality, good value service to the public, and internally, is paramount and any changes to working arrangements must support this.
- We must be easily accessible to the public and each other, recognising that the nature of our work means the availability and opportunities for face-to-face contact are important.
- We use public money, so cost-effectiveness and value for money are important.
- We will establish and maintain a cohesive and highly motivated workforce, recognising that staff face-to-face contact is an important part of our organisational culture.
- We will find the right balance between consistency and flexibility in our working arrangements, so we are an attractive and fair employer that is able to attract and retain high quality people.
- We will ensure that the governance of the Authority remains timely, inclusive, open, honest, and accountable, taking full account of the role and views of Members.
- Any new arrangements we introduce should lessen our environmental impact and help achieve our carbon reduction objective.
- We will equip our staff to do their job effectively whilst protecting the integrity and security of our data and equipment.