

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

LOCAL JOINT PANEL – 26 SEPTEMBER 2005

REPORT BY THE SECRETARY TO THE EMPLOYERS SIDE

8 FLEXIBLE WORKING – WORK LIFE BALANCE STRATEGY

RECOMMENDATION – that the progress report on development of a Work Life Balance Strategy be approved and that the indicative timescales for strategy implementation and pilot initiatives on a new flexitime scheme, home working and remote working be approved.

1.0 Background

1.1 The Local Joint Panel has previously agreed that East Herts Council should develop a Work Life Balance Strategy. This strategy should include a range of options for flexible working in order to enhance organisational efficiency and staff well being. Furthermore, the Panel discussed the potential roll out of a revised flexitime scheme, following the pilot exercise conducted in Revenues since late 2004.

1.2 This report updates the panel on progress to develop an overarching strategy, proposes options for wider staff consultation and recommends timescales for the roll out of various flexible working options.

1.3 Work to progress this project has been undertaken by a cross service group including representatives from IT, HR, Property, Homelessness Services, Legal, Regulatory Services and Unison.

2.0 Work Life Balance

2.1 It is recommended that the Work Life Balance Strategy should address a range of issues related to both **where** we work and **when** we work. Underpinning the strategy, will be a set of core principles:

- Service Delivery – whilst the policies should be applicable to all staff, the service needs of customers will drive how the new approaches are managed
- Staff Welfare – our policies must be consistent with Health and Safety regulations and supportive of work/life balance objectives

- Valuing diversity – our policies should recognise diversity in the workforce
- Efficiency – new approaches will be able to demonstrate tangible benefits in terms of enhanced productivity

2.2 In developing the scope of the strategy it is further suggested that the following key benefits and requirements must be acknowledged.

Key Benefits:

- Building trust between the organisation and individual
- Empowers teams and individuals to manage time and workload
- Reduces absenteeism
- Aids recruitment and retention
- Enables cover of peak times
- Improves morale and motivation of colleagues
- Support green travel and environmental sustainability
- Reduces overtime costs
- Develops individuals and the organisation

Key Requirements:

- Effective performance management
- Forward thinking and planning
- Understanding of impact on benefits (leave, pensions etc)
- Appreciation of legal constraints (Working Time regulations, Flexible working regs etc)

3.0 Working Options within the Strategy

3.1 In assessing areas of working arrangements that the strategy should cover, it is proposed that the following range of options for staff should be included

- Flexitime, with proposals for adaptations to the existing scheme to build on the success of the pilot project in Revenues.
- Compressed hours, to enable colleagues to accumulate time beyond the restrictions of the core flexitime scheme, for example, by working on a pattern of a nine day fortnight.
- Annualised hours, to enable accumulation of time over a longer period to address the needs of those who have service requirements that prevent them exploiting either the core flexitime scheme or the compressed hours model.

- Home working, to provide appropriate technological support and HR policy guidance to enable colleagues to work from home in order to maximise productive time and minimise unnecessary travel.
 - Remote Working, to enable staff working on site to be provided with appropriate technological support and HR policy guidance to avoid duplication of effort and increase efficiency.
 - Oasis and Hot Desking, to facilitate more effective use of office space and to minimise unnecessary travel time and increase efficiency.
 - Job Sharing
 - Career Breaks
 - Voluntary Reduced Hours
 - Term Time Working
- all of which will maximise employment opportunities and enhance recruitment and retention within the council.

4.0 Developing the Strategy

- 4.1 In developing the strategy, it is recognised that further work needs to be done to review existing arrangements in respect of each of the options outlined above. In some cases, some policies are in place but in others these are either in need of review or development. Work also needs to be done to determine and procure appropriate technological solutions.
- 4.2 Ultimately, it is proposed that the strategy will require the council to be capable of delivering all of the options above. In terms of how these options will be made available to staff, it is proposed that teams or individuals will be empowered to propose such options. To ensure consistency of approach, it is further proposed that a transparent process for consideration of any applications to work flexibly will need to be developed and managed.
- 4.3 The timetable for developing the Work Life Balance Strategy is anticipated to spread over a number of months and must accommodate comprehensive consultation with staff. However, the working group is keen to ensure that some positive action is taken in advance of the completion of the overall policy.

5.0 Pilot Initiatives

5.1 In initial discussion, the pilot group have discussed the potential to undertake pilot projects on two key aspects of the Work Life Balance Strategy over the next three months.

5.1.1 Flexitime/Compressed Hours

5.1.2 As reported to the last LJP, a pilot project has been in operation within Revenues that has been designed to be more flexible than the conventional flexitime scheme. The restrictions of core hours have been removed so that colleagues can either accumulate or take time out from 7am to 7pm during weekdays and on Saturday mornings. This scheme has many benefits. It has enabled greater flexibility to manage busy periods and clear backlogs. It has resulted in improved staff morale amongst staff who feel trusted and empowered to make sensible decisions about their workloads.

5.1.3 Importantly, the scheme has been predicated on the effective negotiation and agreement of individual working patterns within teams as well as via the Team Managers. Highly effective management and information recording have been critical to success.

5.1.4 Further information on customer service impacts of the scheme is being researched. Information on the accumulation of annual leave is also being sought as there are no restrictions on the amount of flexi leave that can be taken under the pilot scheme.

5.1.5 What is already evident, however, is that the Revenues pilot is much more closely managed than the corporate scheme. Recording is consistent and universally available via an electronic system. Conversely, the corporate scheme is not centrally recorded on monitored. It is also the case that some teams do not feel able to use the current scheme because a combination of the size of team and the nature of service requirements make it difficult to do so.

5.1.6 It is proposed that, pending research mentioned above, a revised model for flexitime and a new model for managing compressed hours are developed. These will build on the strengths of the revenues pilot and enable wider application across the council.

5.1.7 Such models will be scoped during October and piloted in a limited number of teams for a three month period during November/December/January.

6.0 Home Working

6.1 There are a number of IT (and service) implications that will make home working difficult for staff needing to access our core back office systems such as Radius or Academy. However, it is possible for the council to develop systems to enable colleagues to work from home and to access our Outlook system with relative ease. It is therefore proposed that IT colleagues introduce this provision on a limited and pilot basis. HR policies will also need to be developed to support home working. This work will be conducted in October and it is proposed that a sample of colleagues will be invited to take part in a pilot for a three month period during November/December/January.

7.0 Staff Consultation

7.1 To inform the development of the strategy, a survey of Heads of Service is currently underway. This will be designed to provide information on what the potential demand for different aspects of remote and home working might be.

7.2 More comprehensively, it is proposed that the overall Work/Life Balance Strategy should form part of the Staff Briefing sessions that are scheduled to take place in November. These briefings will give colleagues a chance to understand the options available under the strategy and to comment on the draft proposals. A staff survey will also be conducted to assess reaction to the scheme.

8.0 Conclusion

8.1 The development of a Work/Life Balance Strategy at East Herts is an significant project for the Council. It will require further research work to ensure that policies and procedures are adequate. It will require significant IT developments and fulsome staff consultation and engagement.

8.2 The proposals in this report indicate the scope of the work to be done and to suggest practical actions to ensure that options for inclusion in the final strategy have been subjected to pilot testing with staff.

8.3 Panel views are sought on:

- the overall approach
- the proposed pilots
- the staff consultation

8.4 Subject to the approval of the panel, work will progress to enable the strategy to be finalised for approval by March 2006.

8.5 It is further proposed that an interim report, including an update on the pilots and feedback from the consultation will be reported to the December meeting of the LJP.

Contact Officer: Georgina Stanton Ext. 2120