

## Staff Roadshow – 15 September 2020

### Your Questions Answered

We had 471 employees join us for the first virtual staff roadshow and this generated lots of feedback and questions. We were unable to respond to all of the questions during the session therefore we have published the answers to the questions asked prior and during the event below. Where there were reoccurring questions, we have summarised the points and provided one answer to cover the queries raised.

If your question is not published or you require further clarification please get in touch – [staffinfo@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:staffinfo@wirral.gov.uk).

### Covid- 19

#### 1. There were two questions about at-risk groups:

- **Is there any current advice for people in at risk groups who are being told to work ~~out~~ in council buildings/ schools etc when they would prefer to stay ~~safe~~ working from home?**
- **Should people in at risk groups still be taking extra care and staying home if possible?**

A: The Government guidance for ‘at risk’ groups ceased in August 2020. However, given the rapid rise in cases we are keeping this guidance under close review.

As a member of staff, you should talk to your manager and review your risk assessment to ensure this is up to date. In your personal life, consider your protective factors and adhere to them. Those in vulnerable groups need to take all other protective measures for their health, for example getting the flu vaccine.

#### 2. **Trying to get a test is very difficult at present. For those of us with children, the difficulty comes when they have symptoms and they cannot go back to school until they have a test. While I totally understand this and agree, it would seem testing is not up to the speed of what is required and children are missing school. It is the season for colds etc so access to tests is vital for us to keep things. Are we going to provide more testing sites?**

A - We currently have three local testing sites in Wirral and with plans to implement a fourth.

We are keeping the Bidston Satellite Testing Centre, coordinated by the Council and partners, for at least a further three months to provide testing capacity in Wirral that we can control, prioritising bookings for key workers and symptomatic individuals. We are also accommodating additional mobile testing units where possible. Our dedicated testing coordination team is working to build the capacity for testing locally by implementing more local testing sites across the borough.

Testing delays are currently a national issue that has been escalated at the highest levels. The COVID-19 testing programme (both locally and nationally) is experiencing very high levels of demand, which is leading to unhelpful delays in getting the right people tested. This is due to several factors, including the need for more laboratory capacity to process the testing swabs.

Another issue is that some people are seeking a test when they do not have any symptoms. Only people with symptoms (cough, fever, loss or change to sense of taste/smell) should book a test and this can be done at one our sites via [www.wirral.gov.uk/test](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/test) or by calling 119.

**3. Will schools be provided test kits to hand out to suspected cases? Currently parents are being directed to sites quite some distance away?**

A - Schools have been provided with a small stock of home-testing kits. However, these need to be used sparingly in situations where an individual (pupil or staff member) becomes symptomatic and the school believes that they may have barriers to accessing testing elsewhere. The school kits will not be given directly to children - only to adults over the age of 18 or a child's parent or carer. Parents and carers will be required to administer the test to those under 11.

**4. Is there someone we can talk to if we feel we are not being given the Covid related support we require from our management?**

A - If you feel you have not been given the support you require to undertake your role, we encourage you, in the first instance, to talk to your manager and explain the issues you are experiencing and what support you require. A 'Check In' guide has been developed to aid and help facilitate these discussions. More information can be found [here](#).

### **Working arrangements**

**5. We had a number of questions from staff asking for the rationale of working from home until next year and, whether staff working at home would receive any payment towards extra expenses incurred whilst working from home e.g. electricity, gas etc.**

A - The Council position on working from home has been taken with staff safety and wellbeing as the priority in light of the current rise in cases in Wirral.

We do not have any plans to introduce an allowance at this stage.

We are keen to provide employees with some choice about where they work as far as possible, as long as that meets the business need, so we are not imposing homeworking on staff who don't want to or can't for other reasons.

For all employees currently working at home, there are different costs and savings associated with commuting, parking, petrol, electricity, gas etc as well as the non-financial considerations.

Everyone's circumstances will be different. However, if any employees are concerned about the financial cost of continued homeworking over the coming months, they can ask to work from Cheshire Lines Building.

**6. During these Covid crisis times if you can work from home and you live outside of the borough, should this distance and excess travel be considered within the team when being assigned jobs that require physical travel to the Wirral that other members of the team could do instead?**

A - This is a discussion that is best placed for a team/service meeting. Whilst we appreciate and recognise the need to reduce travel for spread of the virus and the impact on the environment, the workload and demands should be distributed fairly or by agreement within a team.

**7. We've been working from home for 6 months now and given that holding virtual meetings is working well are there plans to adopt virtual meetings as the way forward even when/if there's a return to normality? It saves times and money not having to travel; it's better for the**

**environment; better use of resources. Some meetings could/would still need to be face-to-face of course**

A - Yes. As a Council it has been our intention for some time to move to more agile ways of working for the benefits you have outlined. In March this year the workforce became remote overnight and as a consequence accelerated the use of virtual meetings as the 'new normal'.

Overall, this way of working has worked well, and virtual meetings are something that will continue and become normal working practice to continue to reap the benefits it has brought to staff and the environment.

As indicated, there will be a need for some meetings to become face to face again either where it is beneficial for service delivery or where individuals / teams require face to face support.

**8. There are regular mentions of staff who are parents, flexible working etc. When are you going to give equal consideration to staff who have other care commitments?**

A - The Council is committed to supporting employees who have caring responsibilities for a family member, relative or friend and providing a working environment with as much flexibility as possible to enable them to combine work with caring commitments.

Throughout the pandemic we have referred to childcare and other caring responsibilities in our advice and guidance to staff.

We have a Working Carers policy in place and Wirral was one the first local authorities in the Merseyside region to invest in the Digital Resource for Carers, which offers free access to a Carers app for coordinating care, e-learning and information. You can find out more information [here](#).

We also have a Working Carers Staff Network Group where staff can access support and advice from other working carers in the organisation. Information about the staff network groups can be found [here](#).

**9. Will our normal flexi system be reinstated soon?**

A - The flexi scheme was not changed during Covid-19. It is still in place.

It should be emphasised that there is no entitlement to work flexi-time as the policy is clear that the scheme is subject to the requirements of the service, employees must have agreement from their manager to work outside of normal office hours and employees should not work longer hours to accrue flexi if there is no business reason for them to work outside of office hours.

If the demands of your job mean you are required you to work over and above your normal working hours and with the agreement of your manager you are still entitled to claim flexi in the normal way.

**10. As a designated key worker who was not given the option of working from home at any point during the lockdown, will there be any discussion regarding some of the difficulties that arose from this situation. I have had to use a large chunk of annual leave as a result of having no other childcare options during the lockdown. Most of the briefings and guidelines we received were very focused on staff working from home. I can fully empathise with the issues home workers have had to deal with, but it feels a bit like the rest of us were a little forgotten**

A - Firstly, we want to assure you that our keyworkers are not forgotten, and we recognise that yourself, and your colleagues, keep our critical services running during very difficult times.

The Chief Executive, in ExecView did acknowledge this work but we appreciate the focus of our communication was initially directed at employees who were, overnight, asked to work from home. In more recent months the communication has changed.

The reality is that the nature of our jobs vary considerably. For example, some jobs can be done at home and some cannot. Some services closed but others did not. Some staff were key workers whereas others were not. The age of children is a factor. We have tried to be as fair as possible, but we have not been able to treat all staff in the same way.

We understand that many of our employees faced challenges balancing childcare and work - the results from our survey in May and July told us that this was a key issue. We have encouraged managers to be as flexible as possible to allow staff who were working to combine work and childcare commitments as best they could.

If staff have any specific issues arising from taking leave to cover childcare and so now are struggling we will be as flexible as possible in exploring options to ensure they can continue to take time off if they need it. This could include working at different times or using some of future leave allowance.

We would encourage you to discuss any issues you may have with your manager. Managers can seek advice from HR.

**11. There were two questions relating to office accommodation:**

- **Where is the evidence that there is still a demand for office space since the outbreak?**
- **Any views to change from a Commercial Office District to residential given the Covid situation across the country? It is a high risk strategy considering we are seeing a large reduction in the need for offices.**

A - As a Council it has been our intention for some time to move to more agile ways of working and rationalise the number of office buildings we occupy. This was part of a longer-term plan. In March this year the workforce became remote overnight and as a consequence accelerated the move to more agile ways of working.

Overall, this way of working has worked well, and is something which has brought benefits to staff and the environment and allowed us to rationalise buildings. However, there is still a case for us to have office accommodation and space. This may be for individuals who are not able to work from home and/or require support from their team and to allow teams to collaborate and/or where a face to face service provision is required.

We have issued two staff surveys that asked specific questions about staff willing and able to work from home and the result was that for a majority, it was a positive solution across the medium to long term.

**12. In the most recent ExecView we were told that staff who work with schools were to continue their remobilisations. Does this apply to ALL staff who work with schools or is it only specific teams?**

A - The original guidance we put out about pausing mobilisation needed some clarification. The expectation is that staff/teams who work with schools are required to return to work now that schools have resumed.

There may be some teams that provide services to schools which could still have different arrangements in place. If you are unsure how this applies to you, we would encourage you to talk to your manager.

**13. Can you offer any flexibility around attending school meetings in the current climate? Our private sector competitors are meeting in schools and this could impact detrimentally on our service if we cannot offer this face to face support?**

A - The Council position on holding face to face meetings has been taken with staff safety and wellbeing as the priority in light of the current rise in cases in Wirral.

Our guidance is that you are still allowed to meet colleagues or other people in very small groups or on a 1:1 basis - if the meeting is urgent or cannot be done virtually. In all cases social distancing protocols must be observed.

It will be for managers to make the call whether the meeting can only take place effectively face to face and could have a detrimental impact not to meet clients/customer in person or cannot be done virtually for other reason.

**14. Can we please have some clarification on mileage claims when calling out to sites as a home-based worker? Do we claim from home to site as that is the actual mileage we travel?**

A – We are currently looking into guidance from HMRC in relation to this question. Please check back for an update.

**Regeneration and Place**

**15. Comment - In order to support the Regeneration across the Borough we as a collective group (The Organisation) all need to ensure each service area embraces, supports and be responsive to the Programmes needs to make it successful.**

A - We are committed to ensuring that we communicate clearly with colleagues about the regeneration opportunities, but also that we work across service areas to engage colleagues so that they can contribute to the programmes.

**16. The satellite view of Wirral shows how little green space is left, how on earth are 12,000 new homes going to fit?**

A - The Council's preferred option is to make provision for the housing needed on previously developed land mainly in and around Birkenhead including Wirral Waters, as set out in the Local Plan Issues & Options Consultation Documents which can be viewed at: <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/wirral-new-local-plan/new-local-plan>

It is the Council's intention to progress the preferred option, which was consulted on. The Council intends to avoid releasing green belt and deliver our development needs on brownfield land in urban areas. We are currently looking at the following actions to help deliver this option:

- Higher-density development
- Turning employment sites to residential sites where this is appropriate
- Using suitable council-owned land

- Working with development partners and government agencies to ‘pump prime’ and achieve development on brownfield land supported by grant funding

As part of the Local Plan process, the Council has to consider and compare all options that we could use to accommodate future housing and employment requirements. If it can’t be demonstrated that the preferred urban option can fully close the gap between our local housing need and the shortfall of housing land, then there is no realistic alternative but to review the potential of land in the green belt to accommodate future development.

In reviewing all land in the green belt the Council has also demonstrated that all available alternatives have been properly identified and assessed.

**17. Will this open up job opportunities for current staff to join this exciting venture and be a part of building tomorrow’s future?**

A - We are delivering a large regeneration programme, and this may create future job opportunities. Any vacancies will be advertised and we would welcome internal applications.

**18. With all the new building and regeneration work, what is being done to prevent a massive increase in traffic down residential roads?**

A - We need to actively manage patterns of growth to reflect our existing transport infrastructure – with significant new developments being focussed around locations which are (or can) be made sustainable, limiting the need to travel in the first place whilst also ensuring there are options for public and active transport to give people a choice. This can help to reduce congestion and emissions and improve air quality and public health.

**19. What progress has been made in relation to downsizing our property portfolio?**

A - The Council’s Asset Management section regularly reviews our property holdings to identify surplus assets and has disposed of a number of properties over the years. There is also a programme being developed, alongside a revision of the Council’s Asset Strategy, to identify assets that could be disposed of in the future.

In addition, the Council has entered a joint venture partnership with Muse called the Wirral Growth Company which is aimed at bringing forward a number of the Council’s assets for redevelopment or disposal.

**20. A few years ago, I vaguely remember Government relaxed Planning rules to allow for empty/unoccupied office buildings to be converted into residential dwellings. Will this form part of the local development plan, as demand for new quality housing increases and demand for office space declines post-Covid?**

A - Yes, these are already included in our figures as set out in the Local Plan Issues & Options Consultation Documents.

Offices (Use Class B1a) are permitted to change to residential (Use Class C3) and therefore an appropriate scheme could contribute to Wirral’s housing targets. Suitable policy will be included in the Local Plan to enable appropriate schemes to come forward for development.

Any proposal for such a change of use is a subject to limitations and conditions, including the need to apply for Prior Approval based on the:

- Transport and highways impacts
- Contamination and flooding risks
- Impacts of noise from commercial premises on the intended occupiers of the development

**21. Business Commercial District (BCD) and new office space was referenced by Alan Evans. Is there an update on the asset consolidation and staff relocation process to get us from today to the BCD by 2023?**

The latest update was given by Assistant Director: HR/OD in Exec View on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020 on this. We will continue to keep you updated on progress and plans.

**22. Will apprenticeships and employment opportunities for young people be aligned with our aims around regeneration projects? Especially around construction etc?**

A - Yes, any large scale recruitment or construction opportunities that come through our regeneration plans will be linked up through our existing Council Employment Support Contacts and also through our Wirral Apprentice Programme. Both services have excellent partnership links with DWP and Wirral Chamber of Commerce, who can both provide recruitment and business support and for prospective inward investors in the borough to ensure any opportunities are maximised and targeted at young people.

**Other**

**23. Will all staff be entitled to a free flu vaccine this year?**

A - Yes. All Council staff are entitled to claim money back for a flu vaccine. Staff must go to a participating retailer to get the vaccine and claim the money back through Self-Serve. More information on the retailers taking part can be found on the intranet.

**24. For home visiting teams, how can you ensure our safety in returning to these settings if residents do not know if they are infected when asked as part of the risk assessment process. They may be asymptomatic or not able to be tested. Can we not keep more focus on safe home working as part of a modern, environmentally friendly and cost effective approach?**

A - At the start of the pandemic, some teams introduced a protocol based on which home visits were essential and which could be facilitated by phone, or postponed. Teams have also been asked to complete a service remobilisation risk assessment using a template that contained all the relevant guidance from Government, Public Health England and the council's Public Health team. Risk assessments have been shared with Trade Unions and reviewed by Health & Safety and Public Health.

Prior to making home visits there should be a procedure in place to call and ask questions about anyone at that home who is waiting for a covid test result, anyone who has symptoms or anyone who has been confirmed as having covid and is isolating.

If you are visiting someone at home, the recommended risk controls include 2 m social distancing, or 1 m with mitigation (eg masks, PPE if required etc) and avoid directly facing someone. It's important that everyone follows good hygiene practice, avoids touching any surfaces in the home, doesn't touch their face and sanitises their hands.

Services that are conducting home visits should share these risk controls with all staff returning to work and ensure they have required PPE and hand sanitiser.

If you have any concerns you should discuss these with your manager.

**25. It would be good to have some free online workout classes for staff during the day if possible, to help us stay fit as a workforce with not getting out as much.**

A - We recognise that staff working from home may not be as active during the working day as they were working from an office. Physical health was a key focus of our weekly (now monthly) workplace wellbeing newsletters. Within each of these newsletters were tips and links to online classes to keep you moving

Our Leisure Services staff provided a range of online exercises classes throughout the day free of charge which were well received. As the service has started to remobilise there is now a programme of Outdoor exercises classes. These are free of charge for Invigor8 members. As a Council employee you are entitled to a corporate discount for your monthly gym membership.

Merseyside Sports have also developed a series of resources to help employees across Merseyside move more. This includes 3 to 10-minute exercises and tips on how you can build movement into your working day and some suggested Team Challenges to get you and your team moving!

**26. Merseyside Pension Fund** - there were a series of questions from staff who work at Merseyside Pension Fund seeking clarification on some of their working arrangements. We will provide further advice and guidance to MPF colleagues separately.

**27. Is information on the Staff Facebook Group posted elsewhere- as I am not on Facebook?**

A - The Staff Facebook page was created to keep colleagues from all parts of the organisation, many of whom did not have Council email and/or were not office based, connected to the organisation.

Any information posted from the Council is posted elsewhere, either on the intranet, in ExecView or in our wellbeing or learning and development newsletters. However, the Facebook page is a two-way engagement hub which means there will be content shared for colleagues by colleagues that may not appear elsewhere.

**28. Given the previous budget situation and the loss of income from council services will we see redundancies?**

A - The Council, like many local authorities faces budget challenges each year. This year is no exception and coupled with the temporary closure of many Council services this has undoubtedly had a significant financial impact. However, there is some support available for Councils and businesses affected by the pandemic.

The Senior Leadership team are currently reviewing our financial position and options for managing the challenges ahead.

Our response to these challenges will be shared, discussed and staff will be involved in developing solutions to meet these challenges. It is too early to determine what the responses and solutions may entail.

**29. In the wake of the international protests in support of Black Lives; the ongoing prominence of the #metoo movement and the call for 'allyship' across this year's LGBT+ Pride events, what**

**further consideration is being given to the Council's workplace Diversity & Inclusion approach (beyond implementing statutory requirements, such as awareness training)?**

A - The Council is currently developing a Diversity and Inclusion strategy and approach and is also working in partnership with colleagues across the City Region to achieve a shared vision of race equality across multiple sectors. We are keen to involve staff in the development of our approach and have recently asked employees to form new staff network groups for LGBT+ and race. Staff network groups are a great way for employees to share experiences, insight, knowledge and good practice as well as identify gaps that could be improved to enhance employee experience. If you would like get involved please find further information [here](#).

**30. With "one stop shops" still being closed, what is being done to help older residents, in particular blue badge holders trying to navigate the complicated renewal process?**

A - Although we have been working on proposals for an appointment based face to face offer, as mentioned in ExecView, the remobilisation of some council services has been paused due to the spike in people testing positive for Coronavirus and, this includes One Stop Shops.

Throughout Covid-19 we have serviced customer enquiries on-line and by telephone to ensure customer requirements could be met and ensure business continuity. This has worked well and over 39,000 residents now access Council services via a <https://my.wirral.gov.uk/e-citizen> account, but we do understand that some of our residents cannot access online services.

In respect of the renewal of blue badges, there is an extension/amnesty until 30th September 2020. The best way to access the service continues to be via an application online as this is a process where relevant documents can be uploaded and payment can be made. A third party can complete the application on behalf of someone else with their permission.

If this is something that a customer may struggle with, they can contact us on a dedicated line (666-4529) and leave details and we will call them back to assist with the application over the phone.