

Shetland Islands Council - Guidelines on Remote Working

1. Introduction

The Council is committed through the Corporate Plan to improving the efficiency of its workforce by developing a single Council campus. As part of the planning of that project, it is also committed to moving some of its activity away from Lerwick, to assist rural communities remain and/or become places where people can live and work with good career prospects.

The Council is therefore committed to encouraging employees to consider working from home or a remote location on a voluntary basis. It will also consider advertising vacant posts with the option of some remote working, where there is a clear benefit and no detriment to the service or individual. These guidelines have been developed to ensure that remote working is appropriately planned and managed.

2. Integration with other Council Policies

Certain employees are already able to request an alteration of their working arrangements through the provisions of the Employment Act. If an employee has a child under 6 years old and the application is for the sole purpose of better enabling the employee to manage his/her childcare arrangements, it is possible for them to work from home for some or all of the week. Any change to working patterns is permanent under this particular piece of legislation. Further details on the Council's flexible working arrangements are available through the following link or from Personnel. www.sic.gov.uk/services/personnel/policies/

These Guidelines on Remote Working are distinct from the flexible working guidelines as they apply to all employees and the alterations to an employee's place of work need not be permanent.

3. Definition of Remote Working

Remote working, for the purposes of this policy, refers to any time spent working from a location other than the normal office base. For instance, the location could be a school, community centre, care centre, community work office or the employee's home. The venue very much depends on the individual situation.

The arrangement could also be for all or part of the working week.

4. Potential Benefits

Council

- Alongside improvements in transport systems and other community regeneration activity, more flexibility in work location can give better chances

for people staying in remote communities to work for the Council. That could make these remote communities more secure and sustainable;

- More general use of community facilities as flexible working locations could improve the potential for enhanced local service delivery;
- This initiative, taken together with the other policies in the Council's Flexible Working Package (Job sharing, Flexitime Policy (when introduced), Flexible Working Policies) has the potential to improve traffic flow in Lerwick by reducing the number of vehicles entering and leaving Lerwick at peak times of the day;
- By encouraging employees to reduce the amount of travelling they are doing each week, the Council is making a contribution to reducing the Council's impact on the environment and therefore promoting sustainability;
- There is potential for savings to be made in the amount of office space required (whether at a single Council campus or otherwise) if more employees are encouraged to work from home or remote locations;
- In an increasingly competitive market where the Council is seeking to recruit and retain the best employees, it is important that talented people are not inhibited from contributing their skills just because they live somewhere remote from Lerwick. Apart from that, the Council wants to offer attractive, flexible opportunities and is concerned about the well-being of its workforce, for example in terms of work-life balance. The opportunity to work remotely can assist in capturing these benefits.

Employee

- Potential employees with skills to offer, who are at present unable to apply for jobs with the Council by virtue of living in one of the remoter parts of Shetland, will be able to gain employment that is likely to be relatively secure and well-paid while remaining in the area of their choice;
- Supporting employees to work from remote locations can allow them to organise other life commitments (childcare, care of elderly relatives, leisure time etc) around work commitments. As a result of the improved feeling of control over their work situation, employee stress levels can be reduced and productivity and employee retention levels can be improved;
- With the rising cost of petrol, employees who commute long distances using their own cars could make substantial savings on fuel and car maintenance costs if they were able to work from their home or a remote location for some or all of their working week;

5. Before setting up a remote working arrangement - Considering the options

Remote working arrangements are heavily dependent upon the existence of mutual trust and respect between the manager and employee. The manager must show trust in the employee to carry out the work required without supervision and the employee must be self-disciplined and organised enough to ensure that required outcomes are achieved. If this trust does not exist, remote working cannot be expected to succeed.

It is therefore important for both a manager and employee to take some time to consider some of the following issues relating to remote working, before deciding whether to pursue an application.

Employees who are likely to be able to successfully work from a remote location are likely to possess some/all of the following personal characteristics:

- Self-motivation;
- Focus on the job;
- Self-reliance;
- Ability to work on own initiative;
- Ability to organise time/work targets effectively to meet deadlines;
- Good communication skills both by e-mail and on the phone;
- Ability to deal with reduced social contact and additional pressures of working in a remote location;
- Trustworthiness – proven ability to work with relatively little supervision;

Clearly, remote working will not be suitable for all posts in the Council. Each post will have features that make it suitable or unsuitable for potential remote working. Accordingly, applications will have to be dealt with on their individual merits. Some features that could make remote working difficult (or restrict the amount of remote working carried out) include;

- Where the employee is a line manager and is required to supervise a team or is an authorised signatory etc;
- Where face-to-face contact with the public is a significant part of the job (not just meetings) – and reorganisation of this proves to be impossible;
- Where it is difficult to set specific and measurable targets against which the employee's progress and effectiveness can be measured;
- Where the place of work is in Lerwick and the job must be carried out at that location e.g. school, Halls of Residence, residential care home, youth club, College, home of a client based in Lerwick etc;
- Where other team members in the office would be adversely affected by the remote working arrangement;

- Where job sharing arrangements are in place – meaning that the other job sharer would be adversely affected by the fact that their job sharing partner was not based in the same office;
- Where there is a need for additional ICT links that are not readily available. e.g. a very high speed broadband link to enable connection to the CHRIS system, Integra, Orchard etc;
- Where the cost of providing additional technology, such as laptop, mobile telephone, fax machine, printing facilities etc cannot be met from within existing budgets and proves prohibitive; however, in making this judgement, Managers will need to bear in mind the cost of providing and maintaining office space and equipment at the normal base

There will be a presumption that the post can be discharged remotely unless an active decision is taken that this is not possible. It is therefore extremely important that managers always complete the Remote Working Checklist (attached as Appendix 1) when considering an application to work from a remote location.

This Remote Working Checklist will also be the basis by which managers make a judgement about whether a post should be advertised as suitable for remote working or not. In this situation, the duties of the post and the personal characteristics expected from the postholder will help determine the practicability of remote working.

6. Setting up a remote working arrangement

Step 1

Employee completes the Remote Working Application Form (identifying the post and the basis on which remote working is requested) and submits to his/her Service Manager (or equivalent)

Step 2

Service Manager considers the request using the Remote Working Checklist, (Appendix 1) taking advice from Personnel, Safety & Risk and ICT if required, and makes a recommendation to the relevant Head of Service for his/her decision. S/he will provide a written response to the employee within 2 weeks outlining the final decision as to whether this can be taken forward to the next stage.

Step 3

Service Manager must discuss the detailed practical arrangements with ICT services to ensure that necessary equipment is available and can be provided / installed – ICT will provide a date for this to be carried out.

Service Manager must ensure that the employee is clear on the Health and Safety requirements under relevant legislation (Display Screen equipment, RIDDOR etc)

Employee will complete a risk self-assessment form and submit to the manager. (This will cover basic risks associated with the work location).

Step 4

Manager will ensure that a letter is sent to the employee confirming the details of the remote working arrangement. This must be signed and returned by the **employee** before the arrangement commences. It may be the case that a trial period is put in place after which success or otherwise of the arrangement can be assessed.

It is anticipated that Heads of Service will have prime authority for granting or refusing requests for remote working on the recommendation of Service Managers bearing in mind these guidelines. Should a member of staff wish to appeal against a decision, this would be expected to be heard by the relevant Executive Director or Chief Executive. Periodic monitoring of requests and refusals will be reported to Executive Management Team and the Council in line with other Council Performance Management arrangements.

7. During the remote working arrangement

Policy issues

As employees will be deemed to be 'at work' during periods of remote working, all Personnel policies will apply. Managers and employees are asked to pay particular attention to the following areas of policy.

Electronic Communications Policy:

This policy sets clear rules for the appropriate usage of the Council's electronic equipment. Should an employee be in breach of the policy when working from a remote location, the same sanctions will apply as if they had been working in an office. i.e. misuse of internet/e-mail facilities. This can include removal of equipment from an employee's house and checking of internet/e-mail usage through a full content audit following appropriate authorisation.

The Council will be responsible for installing any ICT equipment and for ongoing network support but the employee must ensure that the equipment is used appropriately (for Council business) and that all reasonable care is taken to ensure it is not damaged.

In the event of a remote working arrangement coming to an end, all Council equipment must be returned to the office/ICT Services, as appropriate.

www.sic.gov.uk/services/personnel/policies/documents/electronic_communication_may04.pdf

Absence Management Policy:

The Council's normal arrangements with regard to sick leave apply during periods of remote working. In the event of an employee being unable to work owing to illness, doctor's appointment, hospital appointment etc, the relevant manager must be notified as per policy requirements. The Council's Absence Management Policy is accessible through the following link;

www.sic.gov.uk/services/personnel/policies/documents/absence_mgt_nov04_sr.doc

Health and Safety:

During periods of remote working, employees are responsible for ensuring that they conduct themselves in such a way that will not be detrimental to their own health and safety or that of others. However, the Council has a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) to protect the health, safety and welfare of its employees - this includes those who work from remote locations. As such, the Council will take all reasonable steps to ensure that checks are carried out on the identified workstation – including a risk assessment of the work environment, and an analysis of the workstation to ensure that the Council meets its obligations under the Health and safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992.

ICT will be responsible for the installation and checking of any ICT equipment. It should be noted, however, that electrical sockets and other parts of the electrical system are the employee's own responsibility.

As the remote work location will be considered his/her place of work, should there be an accident, the employee must report it and it will be dealt with in the same way as though the employee was in an office. Employees must also comply with RIDDOR requirements.

The following is a link to the Council's Health and Safety section.

www.sic.gov.uk/services/safety-risk/safety.asp

Security and Data Protection:

Where an employee is using sensitive or personal information whilst working at home or a remote location, it will be imperative that suitable storage and security arrangements are in place. Employees must discuss this with their manager before the period of remote working commences and, where possible, the Council will install suitable storage facilities. Further details on data protection is available from the Committee Services intranet site – see attached link,

www.sic.gov.uk/services/committeeservices/data-protection.asp

Insurance:

The Council's liability cover will extend to remote workers where necessary. This is of course based on the proviso that appropriate risk assessments have been completed and recorded.

Where remote workers are working from home on a regular basis they would be advised to inform their Household insurers.

Tax

Any Council Tax consequences that may arise from the use of a room in a house for office purposes will be the responsibility of the employee. Further advice can be obtained from the Council's Revenues Section on 01595 744603.

Building Standards Regulations

It is permissible for the occupant of a dwelling to use part of a house for office or similar use. A Building Warrant would only be required in the unlikely event that the area to be used exceeded 50 square metres, if the house was to be extended or structurally altered, or if any change was proposed to the waste water system. If an employee needed to make any such alterations in order to use part of the house for office purposes, they would need to discuss their proposals with the Council's Building Standards Service at Grantfield, Lerwick. A guidance leaflet is available.

Planning Permission

In planning terms, the question of whether a change of use is involved depends on the degree to which the use of the building would change. In most circumstances, however, provided that the main use of the premises continues to be a house and the use of a room for an office is incidental to that use, planning permission would not be required.

Costs

If the remote location is an employee's home, it is not anticipated that the Council will assume any costs for adaptation, alteration or modification of the accommodation. ICT equipment used by the employee is expected to be supplied by the Council, other ancillary equipment such as a table, chair, heating & lighting or telephone including normal telephone line / basic ADSL connection would be expected to be provided and paid for by the employee.

Any cost incurred by the employee would clearly need to be considered by them in their evaluation of the desirability of remote working and off-set against reduced travel costs. The Council will give the employee guidance as to how s/he can calculate the additional insurance, tax or any other relevant costs that s/he may face.

If the remote location is another public premises then any "rent" or adaptation will be a matter for agreement between the employing service and the owner of the other building. Services will however be expected to be flexible and accommodating in the use of their buildings to deliver the Council's decentralisation objectives.

Expenses

Direct expenses wholly attributable to the discharge of business when at home such as business calls and mileage incurred in attending meetings will be reclaimable using normal procedures.

Costs associated with travelling to and from the normal office/base and the remote working location will be met by the employee.

8. Communication and performance monitoring

In order to ensure that the manager is aware of how well the employee is performing and can keep abreast of developments in the remote working arrangement, it will be important that a suitable mechanism for monitoring performance is established before the arrangement commences. The way in which this is put in place will be left to the manager and employee to discuss – however, it is anticipated that it would include a discussion of work targets, the setting of a timescale for completion and then a review of progress after the timescale has elapsed. Training for supervisors in Employee Review and Development is available through Train Shetland. As this covers the basics in performance management, all managers are encouraged to attend.

As well as a formal system to review performance, it will also be important that informal communications are maintained. This would help to avoid the employee feeling isolated or for issues such as employee stress levels to go unnoticed. It would be recommended that managers maintain weekly contact with employees either through telephone, e-mail or face-to-face meetings. Employees should also be asked to come in to the normal office/base for monthly team meetings, to maintain contact with colleagues.

During the arrangement, the manager and employee should agree core times when the employee will be available to be contacted and colleagues/clients be made aware of these. This will help to avoid confusion when passing on phone calls. Software such as Microsoft Outlook calendar should also be used wherever possible to allow office-based staff access to a remote worker's diary.

9. Ending the arrangement

Either party can bring the arrangement to an end as long as the reasons for this are set out in writing and at least one month's notice is provided. Managers must seek advice from Personnel as soon as possible, if considering ending a remote working arrangement.

Where the employee feels that s/he has been unfairly treated in having the remote working arrangement brought to an end, reference should be made to the relevant Grievance Procedure.

10. Some useful resources

'Homeworking – Guidance for employers and employees on health and safety'
(Health and Safety Executive)

'Time to go home – embracing the homeworking revolution' Tim Dwelly and Yvonne Bennion

'Teleworking' Department of Trade and Industry

Appendix 1

Checklist for Managers to use when evaluating application for remote working	Yes/No
Job-specific	
Does the nature of the job easily lend itself to the setting of work targets and performance monitoring?	
Are there any significant concerns that have been raised by the Safety and Risk/ICT section regarding the employee's proposed workplace?	
Will the proposal to work from home have any impact on service delivery or the remaining employees in the office? (If so, this must be quantified in financial terms as far as possible).	
Can the cost of providing equipment be met from existing budgets?	
Does the person work with sensitive personal information on a regular basis and can arrangements be made to ensure this is appropriately stored in the remote location?	
Are there any system requirements that make the arrangement difficult? i.e. access to CHRIS, Integra, Orchard etc.	
Employee-specific	
Does the employee or candidate have any outstanding disciplinary warnings regarding timekeeping, performance etc?	
Have any concerns been raised with the employee over his/her level or quality of work or, if a candidate, have any such concerns been raised in references?	
Have any concerns ever been raised with the employee over misuse of Council facilities, such as e-mail or internet or have such concerns been raised by a candidate's referees?	
Is the employee or candidate already working under some other flexible working arrangement e.g. job sharing, flexible working?	
Do you feel that the employee or candidate has the required personal traits (self-motivation, self-directed, self-disciplined) to be able to work effectively from home?	
Does the employee or candidate have the necessary ICT and telephone equipment to allow regular contact to be maintained?	
Are arrangements in place for monitoring the employee's performance e.g. regular review and development sessions?	