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DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE AND DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR REVIEWOF HYBRID WORKING POLICY

Further to your request for consideration of the ToR and design principals I have provided some comments on the TOR attached and below:

I welcome the proposed review of the Hybrid Working Policy. Hybrid Working provides many benefits for the employee and the business. However, it also presents challenges with a potential loss of networking, connectiveness and impacts on career development. It is therefore an opportune time to assess how this has been working in practice and ensure we have an appropriate balance between in the office and remote working.

It is vital that the focus is on business need and productivity. The benefit of ability to work from home is acknowledged but needs carefully balanced with attendance at the workplace with colleagues. Studies have demonstrated that engagement, learning and development are negatively impacted by hybrid working, and leading effectively in such an environment places increased time and cognitive demands on leaders. Emerging themes include:

> Connection – with new employees, leaders and building teams is more difficult in hybrid and is much more effective in person.

Effort from leaders - more is demanded of leaders to communicate across several media. Encouraging collaboration in hybrid meetings is challenging with people less engaged online. Planning and cognitive demands are increased with hybrid.

Learning and Development – onboarding new staff takes longer, networking is more difficult, tacit learning is lost.

The real time support to staff wellbeing and learning in the workplace must be emphasised.

Again, it is important that the hybrid working policy focuses on business need and a requirement for flexibility from staff. This is in line with the People Plan which emphasises what we expect of both the line manager and the individual.

We have experienced different interpretations and applications of the policy across Departments and business areas. A consistent approach is critical to ensure Departments do not end up with some areas unable to attract staff due to perceived more favourable working patterns elsewhere.

I acknowledge there is a concern about a mandatory requirement in the workplace but without at least an NICS standard approach we will create issues for particular business areas and their ability to attract staff. This standard should be framed in the context of the significant benefits of regular attendance in the workplace with members of your team. Indeed, the Hybrid Working Policy survey highlights the main challenge from line managers was agreeing the workplace/remote working split. Having an NICS assessed minimum requirement in the office to deliver business need and meet our duty of care to staff would remove this element of debate, with the negotiation focusing on increases above this to workplace attendance. Any deviation from the minimum standard could require authorisation at Director level for example. The NICS Survey (2023) also evidenced increased lack of connection to the Core Department since introduction of hybrid working and a standard attendance in the workplace with our teams could help address this.

Another challenge experienced in the implementation of the hybrid policy is the level at which workplace agreements were signed with examples of line manager's signing off on a pattern that their G7/5 did not agree with, creating significant issues within teams and appeals. This is another issue that is highlighted by the survey and could be mitigated to an extent by a minimum standard, and a revision to authorisation levels.

I welcome the review of academic research but exercise caution on some of the earlier pieces as we are now seeing more and more private sector organisations increasingly bringing their employees back into the office for longer periods of time. This suggests the benefit of more regular attendance in the workplace with colleagues is now better understood and recognised.

I note the approach taken by Cabinet Office, to now increase attendance in the workplace to 3 days. If I recall correctly, they were one of the first Departments to require two days a week in the office. It is interesting that they have now increased this and further information on why they have taken this further step may highlight further the benefits of regular attendance in workplace.

The TOR focuses very heavily on the survey and I note the TOR highlights that the policy coincided with the cessation of prolonged periods of homeworking during covid. However, you will note the low representation from DoJ which could suggest that this survey was perceived to be only for those working a hybrid pattern and therefore was not completed by those working full time in the office. It is important that we gather evidence of the impact of the hybrid policy on these individuals.

It is important that a clear distinction is made between the hybrid policy and other policies for alternative working patterns, reasonable adjustments etc. I am fully supportive of the sustainability agenda and the focus on reducing our footprint but this cannot be at the expense of effective business delivery. I would suggest that the current patterns of hybrid working are not effectively using the current accommodation, with significant drop in footfall on particular days of the week – most notably Mondays and Fridays. Accommodation usage needs maximised 5 days a week, and while I do not underestimate the logistical challenges of this, workstyle agreements should take account of this.

Hybrid working has changed the way we deliver our business. The review of the policy is an ideal opportunity to recognise the benefits of hybrid working while also assessing areas to provide future support to staff including communication and digital skills. This is also something that could be fed into a review of the competency framework to ensure this supports our recruitment and development.

There are other emerging issues that could be explored in the review and it is important that these are captured. Further evidence will be required, but one emerging issue is the difficulties experienced in attracting staff to full time office roles and whether a monetary incentive needs considered. It has also been suggested that POD should attribute an employee value to the policy and use in eg pay negotiations.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these initial comments and I look forward to the engagement throughout the process.



DEBORAH BROWN