THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Homeworking for Local Government Staff

Dr Michelle Weldon-Johns, Senior Law Lecturer at Abertay University, examines some of the issues surrounding homeworking amongst local government staff. Dr Weldon-Johns has a particular interest in examining work-life balance, work-family rights and the issues around home working from a legal perspective. The paper is part of a wider examination of homeworking within the Improvement Service Thought Leadership Programme.

It is important to draw a distinction between voluntary homeworking and involuntary and/or mandatory homeworking because the experiences of homeworking, good and bad, are significantly influenced by the degree of choice that individuals have in opting for this kind of work. Equally, the experiences of homeworking during a crisis are markedly different from homeworking in 'normal' circumstances. Consequently, this needs to be considered when making decisions regarding the future of homeworking for local government staff. Therefore, it is important to determine whether homeworking in the future will be the norm or whether it will be voluntary, as this will also play a role on the impact that it will have on current and future staff.

How might homeworking exclude or disadvantage current or future staff?

Homeworking could exclude or disadvantage current or future staff in the following ways:

▶ Lots of people thrive in an office-based environment and need to work with others to work most effectively, so a move to mandatory homeworking might exclude or disadvantage those people. However, for those who work more effectively without these distractions, homeworking could result in higher staff productivity. Having the option to homework or work from a workplace would help mitigate any disadvantages here.

▶ It may exclude or disadvantage staff who would otherwise be socially isolated if they did not physically go to work. It may also disadvantage staff whose home lives are challenging and who benefit from the ability to work outside of their home. These issues are more acute during lockdown contexts but may still be an issue in the future depending on personal circumstances. This can be mitigated by ensuring that there are opportunities for staff to connect with each other on a regular basis and/or making homeworking voluntary rather than mandatory.

▶ It may exclude or disadvantage staff who do not have the requisite resources to work from home effectively, e.g. reliable broadband services, appropriate IT skills and/or training on online resources that are being used etc. This can be mitigated by providing staff with appropriate resources and training.

▶ Staff may also be disadvantaged by bearing the additional costs of working from home, e.g. increased electrical bills, broadband services, replacing equipment and/or using their own equipment, costs associated with creating a home office etc. While there are some tax reliefs that can be claimed, it can be difficult to draw distinctions between wholly work use and personal use and, therefore, these may not be available to staff in practice. This is more difficult to mitigate, except for providing the required resources. Since local government would see a reduction in spending on physical workplaces, an additional payment could be made to staff to reflect these increased costs if homeworking were to become the norm.

▶ It could disadvantage teams which are unable to work as effectively online as they would have in person. Although this should not be used as a reason for not trying to work more flexibly and creatively to continue to collaborate effectively.

▶ It often requires using a screen far more often than people may do otherwise, which could have negative effects on physical health both for those with underlying conditions and those who may develop related conditions in the future, e.g. vision related issues, headaches etc. This can be mitigated by ensuring staff have the appropriate equipment and that they are aware of relevant health and safety advice regarding workspaces.

Lots of people thrive in an office-based environment and need to work with others to work most effectively, so a move to mandatory homeworking might exclude or disadvantage those people.

▶ Staff who require reasonable adjustments to their workplace may not have access to the same adjustments at home and so this could exclude or disadvantage them. This can be mitigated by ensuring that staff have access to the requisite adjustments while homeworking.

Specific ways that it could exclude or disadvantage current staff:

▶ It may be difficult to develop current staff depending on the nature of development needs, training and skills required. This can be mitigated by making training available online and re-evaluating what development needs, skills and training staff will need in the future given the changing context.

However, it could also retain staff, e.g. those with caring commitments who are better able to balance commitments by homeworking.

Specific ways that it could exclude or disadvantage future staff:

▶ Applicants may be put off from applying for new jobs given the changing nature of workplaces with the likelihood of homeworking. However, this is unlikely to be limited to local government jobs. Furthermore, the ability to homework may also make working in local government more attractive to a more diverse pool of applicants in the future who would otherwise not have been able to apply for the job.

▶ It may be difficult to train and develop future staff as well as to monitor their progress. This could be mitigated by ensuring that training is available online and that regular meetings are held between line managers and new staff to provide them with the support they need.

▶ Homeworking may make it more difficult for new staff to become integrated into a team. However, this can be mitigated by using online mediums that enable the team to collaborate and to meet virtually on a regular basis.

What mental health and wellbeing pressures are presented by staff routinely working from home?

Mental health and wellbeing pressures:

▶ Social isolation

▶ Blurred boundaries between work and home life

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▶ Increased pressure to be available at all times during a 'normal' working day

▶ Burnout

▶ Double burdens of work and care – including expectations that work can/ should be done effectively around these commitments

▶ There could be enhanced opportunities for bullying and harassment to go unseen in this context. Alternatively, homeworking could remove staff from toxic workplace environments and enable them to work more effectively and free from these concerns/experiences.

▶ Unsuitable working environments:

- Unsuitable equipment, such as inappropriate workspaces = physical health issues

- Increased use of screen-time = physical and mental health and wellbeing issues

- Competing commitments = mental health and wellbeing issues

However, the above mainly relate to involuntary and/or mandatory homeworking (except for concerns relating to working environments) and there could equally be increased opportunities for better mental health and wellbeing by enabling staff to routinely homework. For instance:

▶ Increased control over working life may enable staff to draw clearer boundaries between work and home life. It could also enable them to better balance work and care commitments, particularly if they have choice and flexibility over how they schedule their work. This could also reduce concerns regarding burnout.

▶ Effective use of calendars, core-hours/required weekly meetings, clear deadlines with sufficient lead-in time to reflect flexible working etc, could ensure that staff have the ability to work flexibly and do their work without fear that they must be available at all times during a 'normal' working day.

▶ If staff are provided with the appropriate equipment and resources to do their job, this would reduce physical and mental wellbeing concerns and help to ensure that homeworking workspaces are suitable.

How might remote working impact on employees' opportunities for promotion, team cohesion, or feedback and support from managers?

Promotion:

▶ The ability to demonstrate the kind of skills required for promotion may be difficult when remote working. However, re-evaluating the kinds of skills that are now required for promotion in an increasingly online virtual working environment would help mitigate this.

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Team cohesion:

▶ This could be challenged, but effective use of online mediums could address this. Regularly scheduled meetings could help teams to keep in touch with each other and work effectively. In many instances, teams already work together effectively in a virtual environment as this can help team members keep in contact more regularly than in-person meetings might, e.g. if people can't attend due to other commitments etc.

Feedback and support from managers:

▶ This could be impacted by remote working, particularly if the manager is also working flexibly and is unable to respond to staff quickly. However, effective use of online mediums could address this. Regularly scheduled meetings could help managers to keep in touch with individuals and support them. Effective use of calendars would also help staff know when their managers are available.

How might existing ways of managing staff need to change to adapt to the new ways of working? What impact might homeworking have on staff productivity?

Managing staff:

▶ All staff may be required to make effective use of calendars to indicate when they are working/not available, and core hours may be required for some/all staff. This will help managers to manage work and staff more effectively.

▶ Mangers will need to be proactive in ensuring that staff are well and will need to manage staff using online mediums.

▶ Deadlines for work may need to be more flexible to account for staff flexibility.

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Productivity:

▶ There is an enduring perception that staff working from home are less productive than those present in a workplace. While staff productivity could be reduced when working from home, it is just as likely that staff will work more and be more productive. The current crisis is likely to have shown that staff can work productively from home, although perhaps not in the same way as they did previously. The key here is challenging the mindset around expectations of appropriate and 'normal' working patterns and instead recognising the value of flexibility. Having more flexible, but still reasonable, deadlines can help ensure both flexibility and productivity.

5. What leadership behaviours have been most effective during the crisis?

Supportive leadership:

▶ Understanding and empathising with staff

▶ Providing access to relevant physical and mental health and wellbeing resources

▶ Embracing flexible working and the potential benefits it has for all

▶ Allowing staff to access special leave to recognise their personal circumstances

Trust:

▶ Allowing staff to have more autonomy over their working lives

▶ Trusting that they are doing their job as well as possible in the circumstances

Decisive leadership:

Clear and early decision-making when working practices are going to change, thus giving staff time to adjust to those changes.

What does our workforce need to be more effective as they work remotely or from home? What particular challenges might greater homeworking present for local government as a sector?

Needs:

▶ The necessary resources to do their job effectively, e.g. the right equipment, appropriate management of their workload, flexible deadlines, clear boundaries between work and home life (e.g. clear hours of work and reduced expectations that people will regularly work more than these hours).

The current crisis is likely to have shown that staff can work productively from home, although perhaps not in the same way as they did previously.

▶ An understanding that until schools and nurseries fully re-open that many staff will have additional care responsibilities that make working from home more challenging. This will also be the case for carers of vulnerable adults, who also may be unable to access appropriate care services, and/or those with enhanced caring responsibilities.

▶ The right tools to deal with mental health and wellbeing issues that they face while involuntarily working from home.

Challenges:

▶ Not all jobs can effectively be done from home and access to some public services may be reduced and/or affected by homeworking. This may impact vulnerable service users who are unable to access these services online or via telephone and instead require face-to-face access. The socio-economic impact is likely to be borne by those already in a particularly vulnerable position.

▶ Working flexibly may reduce the availability of services to service users. However, it could also make them more accessible by increasing access to services at different times of the day than previously.

▶ Some staff will not thrive in this environment and will find it challenging to work from home effectively.

▶ Increased costs in providing equipment for staff working from home.

▶ Reduced productivity if staff do not have access to the appropriate resources.

▶ Working flexibly could pose challenges when collaborating with others who are also working flexibly. This can be mitigated by using calendars, agreeing times when everyone must be available (as far as possible) etc.

▶ The double burden of work and care.

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However, there could equally be benefits for local government too:

▶ Increased use of homeworking could reduce the costs of physical workplaces, although the costs of equipment would still need to be borne by local government.

▶ It could enable working carers/parents to remain in employment as they are better able to work around their other commitments – so potentially reduce staff turnover and/or staff reducing hours and losing expertise.

▶ It could enable a more diverse group of people to enter the workforce than before, e.g. those with caring responsibilities, those with physical and/or mental health issues that have prevented them from entering working life until now.

▶ It could reduce absenteeism, but there is the related concern that staff will continue to work when they are ill.

▶ Teams could find more creative and innovative ways to work together more flexibly. It could also facilitate greater opportunities for collaboration across services and different local government areas, without the physical restrictions of travel and related costs and loss of time.

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