

Setting the Scene

As you know, there has been a great deal of work going on behind the scenes planning and preparing for the way forward, or ***Back to the Future***, for Warwick District Council. There is still more work to be done, but based on our current situation and the information we have from your surveys and checklists, I'm now in a position to share our plans for the next steps we will be taking.

What do we know so far?

1. We know that coronavirus is still out there, it's still a threat and so your protection from the virus continues to be our priority. The Government advises a return to work where it is safe to do so. We do not have the necessary safety measures in place at Riverside House currently, so my instruction for you to continue to work from home where you can, has not changed and will not change for the foreseeable future.
2. We know from the staff survey and from your checklists that some of you have found it difficult to work from home, either through lack of space, circumstances or the impact on your wellbeing. We have worked through your comments and are addressing your issues within our steering groups:
 - ICT steering group is managing the requirements for ICT equipment
 - Workforce steering group is co-ordinating desks and office furniture and liaising with staff whose wellbeing has been impacted
 - Asset Steering Group is carrying out risk assessments and devising ways to make it safe for accessing and social distancing inside Riverside House and our other buildings.

Riverside House

We've taken the opportunity to review the purpose of our HQ building, indeed many of you asked about the building in your survey responses. We don't have an agreed long term vision at this stage, we are working with current insight and the current situation, but I expect that as both evolve and with your input, we will find ourselves working towards agreeing a shared vision for the future.

Based on your checklists, which we used to analyse in more detail your survey responses, we have found that around 40 staff need to work from the office, which leaves a great deal more office space in Riverside House than we currently need. On that basis, we have taken the decision to close off the fourth floor; to "mothball" it.

This means that although we will still own that floor, we will no longer be able to use it. This will enable us to make savings on our business rates and energy bills at a time when we are receiving no funding from the Government and need to manage our own budgets efficiently.

Next steps

We have identified an area on level 3 which can be managed as a safe working space for those staff that need to return, which needs to be cleared. The clear out will be planned in two phases:

Stage 1 - clear the desks within the safe working space on level 3 for staff who need to work from the office for an operational or health and wellbeing requirement. This means getting these specific desk 'owners' in first. Once cleared and health and safety measures are in place, those staff identified to initially work in RSH (approx. 40) can return.

Stage 2 - clear space to allow the mothballing of level 4 and to facilitate this we will co-ordinate by appointment, your safely managed access into the building to collect any personal belongings. In addition, we will need to carefully manage the categorisation of files and paperwork (keep, scan, dispose etc) – which will be a large task.

So in summary our priorities at the moment are:

- Get the 40 identified staff back into Riverside House.
- Get level 4 cleared as soon as possible, ready for mothballing

To be clear, Riverside House is still our work base, it's still our building. But we will be setting up those staff that need to work there first, whilst putting in place safety procedures for social distancing and managing the number of staff in the building at any one time. I will provide more detailed information on this along with the timescales for our clear out and collect programme in my next update.

We know that many of you miss the people, the office environment and all the social interaction and support groups that make Warwick District Council a great place to work. I miss the cake; you won't be surprised to hear. But all the good things we stand for and enjoy as part of our working day, don't just exist when we are in the office, they do not belong to the building, they belong to you the people, the teams that bring them to life through the work that you do, and the relationships you build. We are developing our social networks and our communication to ensure that you continue to feel that you belong to the community that is Warwick District Council while you work remotely.

I realise this is a lot of information and I don't have all the details yet that you may want to know about, but please have a read through the FAQs attached and then we will continue to update these as our plans develop.

Once again I must thank you all for your continued commitment and dedication to your work and for supporting our residents at a time when they've needed us most - we've come a long way on our journey ***Back to the Future!***

Chris Elliott

FAQS

1. What are the timescales for the next step?

We are working on ensuring there are safe working practices in place in RSH with a proposed plan for those we have identified through either operational of health and well-being requirements to return to the office by the end of August. Your Head of Service will provide further details of how this will be managed to your Line Manager to discuss with you e.g. you will need to go through a safe working practices induction to return to the office.

2. Can I still come into Riverside house as I usually do for forms/photocopying/signatures?

Only with prior permission through your Line Manager. A formal process is now being set up to ensure we are aware at all times how many staff are in the building at any one time.

3. Are we selling Riverside House?

There are no plans in place at present to sell Riverside House

4. Are Stratford DC still working from home?

Stratford is also reviewing safe working practices, the safety of staff is at the forefront of all preparations for WDC and SDC.

5. Is this to prepare for a merger?

The steps being proposed are nothing to do with a merger. They are very simply about making sure we can ensure your health and safety and enable you to do your job effectively.

At this stage, our joint work with SDC is looking at the vacancies we both have at SMT level and at the opportunity to do joint work around our major contracts and our Local Plan reviews. We may though consider other joint working opportunities as they arise.

6. Where will my desk go?

Obviously with social distancing guidelines and safe working practices we will be reviewing the arrangement/layout of the office. This will probably mean that those returning to the office will not have the same desk prior to lockdown. Your manager will have more information for you on this once details have been worked through.

7. How do I collect my stuff?

This will be through a managed and phased approach. Initially we will be asking those that have desks that have been allocated in the 'Safe Working Space' area to clear their desks. This will then be phased to other areas to do

the same. The timeline for this is being worked up and will be shared in due course/via line managers.

8. Why can't I stay in my own area?

We have a legal duty to consider the safety of staff, put in appropriate cleaning arrangements and the financial impact that can be gained by giving up a floor. Its simply not possible for us to leave things as they are and enable staff to work safely in the building.

9. How do I meet up with my team if we can't sit together?

Once we have the initial staff identified working in the office, the next phase planned for the beginning of September will be to identify the requirements for occasional working in the office and the use of meeting rooms to allow 1-1's and team meetings where possible. We will also be looking at our other buildings to identify the 'space' that people can meet in.

10. What happens to my specialist kit I need?

You can review this with your Line Manager how this can be managed.

11. Is anyone else going to be sitting at my desk?

Possibly dependant on the area identified as the safe working space.

12. How will I know if it's clean or not?

Measures are being introduced to ensure a safe working environment. For those returning to the office to work or visit and an induction to the safe working practices in the office will be provided.

13. What if I change my mind about working from home and want to work in the office, will there be room?

COVID-19 is still with us and we are following government guidelines for staff to continue to work from home where possible. If your situation changes either operationally or through your own health and well-being you must inform your Line manager immediately. Following further review, we will be investigating the opportunity for 'occasional working' areas when required.

14. What if I want to do both, can I?

Sorry but no, it would not be safe to do that.

15. Why can't you sit teams together?

Where possible we will aim to sit teams together but with only 40 staff being catered for initially, its unlikely that number will include all of a team.

16. Will you be renting out the 4th floor?

If we could do it safely and if there was interest and there was a better financial impact than leaving it mothballed we would be sensible to consider that as an option but it is not currently planned.

17. I work off-site – how will this affect me?

By and large it won't affect you but we would want you to continue to discuss with your Line Manager safe working practices with your role and the requirements you need.

18. Will our passes still work at RSH?

Only when you have requested through your line manager so we are aware of how many staff are in the building at any one time. We are looking at a 'Permit to Access' system to ensure those that need to go into the office for specific operational reasons still can.

19. Why are you making the changes now, when we're coming out of lockdown and want to go back to the office?

With effect from 1 August the government is no longer telling people to work from home if they can. However, employers have the discretion to ask employees who have been working from home to return to the workplace, provided they have taken steps to ensure the workplace is COVID-19 secure and social distancing measures are in place. The government has emphasised that employers have the discretion to make decisions about how their staff can work safely, which could mean continuing to work from home.

Warwick District Council has taken the decision that those who are currently working from home should continue to do so, whilst we are still maintaining social distance and protection against coronavirus. Work is being undertaken to ensure all Warwick District Council workplaces are COVID-19 secure and we have identified and are prioritising those members of staff that have to return to the workplace. However, if you are unable to carry out your duties from home, or you feel your physical or mental wellbeing is adversely impacted by working from home please discuss with your line manager. Priority will be given for staff to return to the office if they are recommended to do so by Occupational Health or are not able to do their job from home.

20. Where is my work base now then, I'm confused!

Your administrative base is still Riverside House (if that's where you were based previously). Although the Council does not pay home working allowances directly, HMRC has confirmed that it will consider claims directly from employees who are required to work at home because their usual workplace has been closed owing to coronavirus measures.

Remember, you can [contact the HMRC to claim tax relief](#) for working from home.

21. Am I officially a working from home now?

All employees have a work base. Your work base is classed as where you go to attend meetings, even if infrequently, for example: team meetings, training, appraisals, 1-2-1's. This applies even if you are working from home. Where those that can work from home continue to do so we will be providing the 'kit' you need to continue. We don't know how long COVID-19 will be a threat so we are preparing for the long term. This also has allowed us to

review our agile working approach and how different ways of working can support our operational services to our customers, which we have many positive examples of.

22. How do I get the kit I need at home?

Managers have been sent guidance to help with co-ordinating this and they will discuss your requirements with you.

23. Will you pay my mileage if I drive into the office for a meeting?

All employees have a work base. Your work base is classed as where you go to attend meetings, even if infrequently, for example: team meetings, training, appraisals, 1-2-1's. This applies even if you are classed as a home worker.

Your work base has not changed and is still Riverside House (if that's where you were based previously). You can claim for any excess miles undertaken for the purposes of work related travel (business travel or travel for training purposes).

Normal home to work mileage, e.g. from home to the employee's contractual work base, should be deducted on each occasion. Where it is more beneficial for an employee to travel direct from home to a work appointment, or vice versa, rather than call into the workplace first, only mileage in excess of the normal 'home to work' mileage can be claimed. Contact your manager if you need to discuss further.

24. Do I record mileage to attend meetings with external agencies or customers from my home to the venue?

The response to Question 23 applies here.

25. What do I need to do if I worked on level 1,2,3? (Do I need to collect my stuff)

Access will be through a managed and phased approach. Initially we will be asking those that have desks that have been allocated in the 'Safe Working Space' area to clear their desks. This will then be phased to other areas to do the same. The timeline for this is being worked up and will be shared in due course/via line managers.

26. What about my personal locker do I still have that?

Not really. Access will be through a managed and phased approach. Initially we will be asking those that have desks that have been allocated in the 'Safe Working Space' area to clear their desks. This will then be phased to other areas to do the same. The timeline for this is being worked up and will be shared in due course/via line managers.

27. We note the concern about our personal belongings but what about all the work stored on level 4 where does that go?

This is part of the review and further details will be provided to managers when we are at that stage.