

## LEADERSHIP

# Flexible working

With flexible and agile working here to stay, it's important to take stock of the lessons learned during the pandemic in how to operate remotely while remaining committed to the best outcomes for children



Starting a new job at the beginning of a pandemic has been a fascinating experience. On 1 April 2020 I became chair of Brighter Futures for Children, an arms-length company delivering children's services on behalf of Reading Borough Council. I moved immediately into a world of virtual meetings, virtual induction and webinars.

At Brighter Futures for Children, we have not only embraced virtual meetings but have used the learning from the pandemic to accelerate our commitment to an agile way of working. The pandemic forced us to think differently and accelerated the flexible working we had planned but hadn't yet rolled out. We realised during the first lockdown that standard "office hours" didn't always fit with our employees' own lives. Home schooling, living alone or in a tight space with a large family, all present challenges. Working flexibly and being trusted to do so can mean staff cope better personally and deliver a better service for children and families.

We're not 100 per cent there yet but we're determined not to go back to our old ways of working. Finding a desk to sit at in our hot-desking office was a challenge at the best of times. That won't work in our new, socially-

distanced world but flexible working, with its personal and wider benefits, just might. Here's how we approached it in Reading.

**1 Keep in touch.** The pandemic has shown us how easy it can be to become isolated and disconnected. Keeping two-way channels of communication open has been crucial. We've never needed our communications and HR teams more. At the height of the pandemic, we were sending out employee briefings daily. The briefings featured bite-sized chunks such as "must dos", updates on use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and operating procedure changes alongside information on "Wellbeing Wednesdays" and a link for live yoga sessions every Thursday.

We're now down to two briefings a week but feedback tells us they are vital to keeping everyone part of the "team" and in touch. We've woven in some fun too – Friday quizzes, virtual tea breaks and a healthy dose of humour.

But keeping in touch isn't just about messages out. It's about knowing where everyone is and that they're safe. That's why making sure our staff are using lone working fobs has been so important. We've been clear that if you're going to work in an agile and flexible way, you need to take responsibility for your safety by keeping – and staying – in touch too.

**2 Listen to learn.** Every month we've held "all staff" roadshows on MS Teams to help keep the company united. I've introduced each one and together with our two executive directors, Deborah Glassbrook and Richard Harbord, have developed these sessions to ensure visibility and accessibility of leaders and managers. They have been a time to share important messages like celebrating coming out of Department for Education intervention but also a time for us to really listen to our workforce.

The breakout discussions have been lively and an effective way of gauging mood, appetite for longer term changes to the way we work and capturing some great ideas. We've surveyed everyone for their views on agile and flexible working and any barriers to it. We want the whole company to feel part of the new working journey and to embrace it.

**3 Focus on the outcomes.** Any historic resistance to flexible working was knocked on the head overnight by the pandemic. We moved as much of our work into the virtual space as we could. Our senior leadership team swung into action to ensure our services could carry on, albeit in a different way. It showed we can adapt quickly, work remotely and in a more flexible way and – for some of our offer – it's the better way.

Nothing can replace real visits and so we have developed best practice guidance to promote virtual contacts that are meaningful for children and families. Virtual visits and meetings have been vital in lockdown but we are also very aware of the limitations of virtual contact in really hearing the voice of the child. The speed of the change may have been forced on us all but the focus on the right outcomes is – and will always be – the plan.

**4 Have the right kit.** Before the pandemic, we'd already set out our strategy for agile working for key workers. We wanted a compelling offer to encourage social workers to join us and stay so decided to invest in Microsoft Surface Pros for frontline staff. Armed with one of these, a smart phone with hot-spotting, good-quality headphones with mic, and wireless keyboard and mouse for those who want them, and we have an agile – and flexible – workforce. Add our new, integrated phone system, where you can also make and receive calls through your laptop, and we're good to go.

**5 Work together.** We have worked closely with our safeguarding partners during the pandemic and have seen multi-agency working improve with better attendance at meetings held virtually. This is something we want to hold onto beyond the pandemic. Above all, our commitment to agile working gives a strong message to our staff that they are trusted to deliver to the highest standards and that flexibility is the norm, not the exception. We have learned a lot over the last year and will continue to explore with our staff how agile working can enable them to perform at their best for the company, and ultimately for the children and young people of Reading.