

Report for Scottish Government

Scottish Chambers of Commerce | September 2020

Report & Recommendations

THE RETURN OF NON-ESSENTIAL OFFICES AND CALL CENTRES TO SUPPORT (1)
CITY CENTRE AND TOWN ECONOMIES, AND (2) STAFF WELLBEING

INTRODUCTION

The implications of COVID19 have been profound, and the path to business recovery will be evolving and unpredictable. The actions taken by Governments across the world have taken a toll on the economy but we are in no doubt that these measures have been necessary to protect our employees, our customers and our communities.

The coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted every aspect of our lives. Almost six months on, we are still dealing with the challenge and navigating the public health crisis and are working hard to support economic recovery.

Throughout this crisis, Scottish Chambers of Commerce has played a pivotal role in supporting businesses through this crisis. We are the “frontline responder” for businesses of all sizes and from all sectors when it comes to providing immediate business support, advice and guidance. We are on the frontline and have seen the economic and social impacts that managing the effects of Covid-19 has had on our city and town centres, our communities and key business sectors. In years to come, the most visible economic signs of this pandemic could be our favourite shops now shuttered and vibrant city centres now ghost-towns. Our wider city and town centre economies need the footfall that business premises and workers generate if they are to have the prospect of trading beyond the pandemic. There is a question mark over the vibrancy of our city and town centres without the footfall and economic activity of people who work there.

Our working lives have also been dramatically transformed. Lockdown measures have turbo-charged the adoption of digital technologies and of home working. Employers and employees have adapted quickly and despite the challenges, businesses are getting on with the day job and supporting employees to work from home. But where we have gained new skills, we have also lost some key fundamentals of how we do business. People coming together face-to-face, social interactions between employees and customers and the physical collaborations which trigger creativity and innovation cannot be easily replicated online. We know this is valued by employers and employees alike which is often cited as a significant positive contributor in supporting mental health and wellbeing; the often invisible by-product of the pandemic. The coming together of businesses and people is not just good for business, but for society too.

The process of re-occupation is already well under way all over the world and in England offices have been allowed to re-open since June. This continued delay to re-open offices in Scotland could present a risk to the competitiveness of some Scottish businesses, particularly as remaining offices in Scotland have already prepared or are preparing for an eventual return to the office with extensive engagement carried out with employees. We also anticipate a managed, phased and coordinated return of employees back to the workplace, not a wholesale return, which would not overwhelm the public transport system. Our initial data suggests public transport use of returning workers could be as low as 20%.

It's clear that we cannot, and indeed should not, retain the status quo or go back to pre-pandemic ways of working. Where one employee favours greater flexibility and improved work-life balance from the work from home policy, another employee struggles with their mental health, loneliness and unsuitable home working environment. In the long-run, we need to adopt a flexible model which combines the benefits of home working, digital technologies and on-site work opportunities. We must also learn from the restart and re-opening of other sectors such as the phased re-opening of the construction sector which provides a tried-and-tested blueprint for the re-opening of remaining offices.

METHODOLOGY:

To support the production of the paper, Scottish Chambers of Commerce consulted widely and established a short-life action group comprising private sector, trade unions and Scottish Government officials. The following is a summary of the methodology which supported the formulation of this paper and recommendations:

1. SCC coordinated and chaired **three working sessions** with Scottish Government officials, business and trade unions between 3rd – 19th September;
2. Consultation across the network of **30 Chambers of Commerce** in Scotland;
3. Dedicated research with hundreds of businesses **collectively employing 14,000 staff**;
4. **Direct engagement** with Scottish Government officials from various departments including Transport Scotland, Public Health Scotland and Safer Workplaces.

PRINCIPLES:

The following principles were devised by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and fully endorsed by the action group:

1. **The health and safety of employees and customers remains a priority for businesses throughout and after the crisis.**
2. **A non-mandatory approach will be applied to all employees if opting to return to re-opened offices.**
3. **A phased and co-ordinated approach should be considered to support the re-opening of offices to support employee wellbeing and economic recovery.**
4. **The wide variety of models of working should continue to be promoted eg hybrid models of office based and home working.**

4 Harms Assessment Process:

We note the Scottish Government's 4 Harms Assessment Process which will determine the decision-making process for the re-opening of remaining offices. The 4 harms are as follows:

1. **Public Health:** The virus causes direct and tragic harm to people's health
2. **Health & Social Care Services:** The virus has a wider impact on our health and social care services in Scotland.
3. **Society:** The restrictions which have been put in place affect our broader way of living and society.
4. **Economic:** The impact on our economy, with a damaging effect on poverty and inequality.

We support the testing of the recommendations against the 4 harms approach. It is our view that the economic, mental health and employee wellbeing factors mean the phased re-opening of offices should be initiated as per the recommendations included in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations have been prepared by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce after careful consideration of available evidence, engagement with businesses and contributions from the short-life action group.

RECOMMENDATION 1: FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS

One of the permanent effects of the pandemic is that flexible working patterns, particularly for “office workers” are here to stay. Employees expect businesses to allow for continued home working as well as the option to work in an office. Even before the pandemic, businesses supported and in many cases, were already implementing the transition to a more flexible working environment and improved work-life balance. We will continue to support this. However, as a result, the increasing shift to working from home has also redistributed economic activity away from cities to towns and rural area. Cities will require immediate support to diversify and adapt to the changing working patterns redesigning the City of tomorrow.

We recommend the Scottish Government:

- **Provides investment for businesses to support employees who choose to work from home, specifically on employee wellbeing and mental health initiatives and digital skills investment;**
- **Support to cities to diversify, adapt and respond to the changing environment.**

RECOMMENDATION 2: PHASED RE-OPENING OF OFFICES

As well as offering the opportunity for greater employee choice and addressing potential employee wellbeing challenges, the re-opening of offices is an important next step in economic recovery and enhanced business operations. The future of work will involve a hybrid mix of both office and home working. The current complete transition to work from home (for all but essential offices) has inevitably decimated economic activity in Scotland’s cities. A phased re-opening of offices will mitigate future economic harm whilst supporting the hybrid work model and employee wellbeing. A phased approach is a sensible one; it addresses the immediate economic needs but recognises the challenges of managing the spread of the virus. Each phase is flexible which businesses and office occupiers can easily understand, action and communicate. Many businesses have already adopted such an approach and have completed planning and implementation of workplace adaptations ahead of guidelines permitting a physical return to the workplace. Much like other sector guidance, each phase would provide clear guidance and timelines to businesses and employees. Our research, engagement and analysis of trends from other countries shows clearly that there will not be a wholesale return to offices but rather a slow, gradual, and planned return. We are fully aware that not all employees will want to return but we must facilitate safe options for those that do, respecting employee choice.

Returning offices should come back onto the route-map timetable rather than being deferred indefinitely without a target return date attached. SCC has provided a recommended phased plan on page 11 demonstrating a coordinated and managed approach.

We recommend the Scottish Government:

- **Publishes a clear timetabled plan to re-open offices in a phased, co-ordinated way in partnership with the business community;**

- **Commits to providing, as soon as it is able to safely do, a definitive date for phase 1 for offices to re-open utilising business research provided in this report as well as the wider health data.**

RECOMMENDATION 3: RESEARCH ON PRODUCTIVITY IMPACTS

One of the biggest gains to employees from working home has been time saved from commuting/travelling to and from the place of work.

A good work-life balance has always been an important contributor to boosting productivity however working from home does not automatically result in an improved work-life balance.

Additionally, new employees or younger employees on training programmes have the most to lose from a work from home approach without the physical interactions between co-workers, managers and mentors.

- **We recommend the Scottish Government analyses the short, medium and long-term effects of the work from home policy and the gains or otherwise to productivity, in partnership with the business community.**

RECOMMENDATION 4: DISPLACEMENT OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY FROM CITY AND TOWN CENTRES

It is suggested that working from home has seen economic activity displaced from cities and town to local communities, rather than being lost.

This is anecdotal and not supported by any base of evidence. Understanding the economic impact to the wider “eco system” of support businesses in our cities and towns from the continued closure of remaining offices should form part of any return assessment

- **We recommend that Scottish Government analyses the impact on support businesses in our towns and cities to identify clearly between displaced and lost activity.**
- **It is also recommended an analysis of UK-wide data is undertaken and to plug the data gap that exists between Scotland and rUK data. This would further enhance and support policy decision making in Scotland.**

OUTLINE

This report has been compiled and submitted by the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, in consultation with STUC, business and Scottish Government officials through the action group.

INTRODUCTION

Not all non-essential offices are the same. The category of “non-essential offices and call centres” includes a wide and disparate range of businesses by location, nature of activity and scale. For example:

- A single room office occupied by one person;
- A single floor in a multi-occupied building occupied perhaps by 50 staff;
- A large office building in single occupation occupied by upwards of 1,000 staff;
- A call centre where staff in the 00’s operate a shift pattern, in some cases over 24 hour continuous periods.

Much of current commentary on this topic is narrowly focussed on large corporate occupiers whose decisions on re-opening might reflect their own specific business models, but should not be taken as a standard approach applicable to a much wider sector.

Since lockdown, “essential offices” in Scotland have been able to open as usual provided appropriate measures, in line with guidance have been put in place. Reported instances of new COVID cases, whilst not zero, appear to have been low in number. Many essential offices have been open throughout lockdown without any issue. Essential office occupiers that have maintained operations from office premises are already operating a hybrid model with some staff working from the office and some staff working from home.

An unintended consequence of recent events has been that employers and employees have had to implement new working patterns which would otherwise have been the subject of future discussion and consideration rather than (in the main successful) implementation.

A return of remaining offices to the workplace will see these new patterns embedded into working patterns for the long-term.

NATURE OF OCCUPIERS’ BUSINESS

The nature of businesses occupying premises and the nature of activities will differ significantly. For example, a professional services office functions differently from an office providing back office support functions or from a call centre. Sector inconsistencies have emerged as lockdown measures have been eased. Residential estate agencies operating from retail premises (with frequent public visitors) have re-opened yet commercial estate agencies operating from office premises (with infrequent public visitors) are not permitted to open.

Latest LBTT statistics show a significant decline in receipts, underlining the importance of supporting a return to higher levels of transactional activity.

EVOLVING CHALLENGES OF WORKING FROM HOME

Businesses and their employees have shown remarkable and commendable adaptability since March in response to the work from home directive and closure of “non-essential” offices. A degree of long-term change in working patterns is likely to become a part of the new normal with employers offering greater flexibility to staff to work from home. Full time working from home for all staff will not however be the new normal in all instances and we suspect most businesses will offer a hybrid option which will see the extension of opportunity to work from home.

Evidence suggests that work from home and flexible working cultures have the potential to increase productivity, boost employee morale and generate an improved work-life balance. However, we would argue employee choice to adopt flexible working versus a government-led mandate to home working are differing concepts which would inevitably result in different outcomes.

In the current working from home mandate, employees cannot engage in face-to-face communication or in-person collaboration in a work/office setting which is an essential component of a flexible working model. It is also a critical enabler to foster creativity, innovation and knowledge transfer. Working from home in the current setting has also limited the ability for all employees, but particularly new workers, to build professional networks and participate in vital in-person training, which not only impacts on outputs and individual career development but on the overall wellbeing of employees. In reality, human nature means we thrive when we have the ability to meet and share knowledge and communicate to stimulate creativity.

Staff wellbeing is a key concern and whilst work from home remains the default position for a period now exceeds six months, some employees are finding this difficult. The ability to work safely, efficiently and comfortably from home will depend on the particular home environment. It is likely that some staff working in lower paid administrative functions may have less suitable home environments for working, resulting in increasing health and wellbeing issues.

Research shows that 25% to 35% of under 35's working from home are doing so in shared accommodation compared to 15% to 20% across all age groups.

The working from home experience is also not an equitable one. For example, unsuitable accommodation could trigger longer-term physical health issues. Those with children or dependents at home may find it more difficult to participate in work compared to when working in a physical office setting. A particular issue which has concerned many employers is the wellbeing of their employees. Several surveys have shown employees feeling lonely and isolated when working from home which would impact on their productivity, job satisfaction and personal wellbeing. **Therefore, a clearly communicated plan from Scottish Government which enables employers to utilise offices in a managed, safe and co-ordinated way would support those employees who would benefit from an in-person working environment and a hybrid approach.**

As a result of Covid-19 mitigation measures, the employee's ability to choose their best possible combination of work from home or work in office and the ability of employers to respond to those choices has been absent. This absence has meant employees have been unable to implement their preferred balance of home working or in-office working. Choice must be a consistent option for employees and a phased approach to re-opening offices will support employees to manage their preferred working arrangements, and the ability of employers to engage

BUSINESS VIEWS ON RETURN TO WORK

Our research and engagement with businesses provides real-life insight into the challenges faced by employers and employees as a result of “non-essential” office remaining closed. The work from home benefits are recognised by employers however the “in-work” aspects are cited as essential for workplace success, employee wellbeing and innovation. We asked a selection of companies with premises throughout Scotland the benefits to the business and to staff of being able to return to the office, even in a phased scenario.

“Maintenance of culture & team spirit and ability to onboard & train new starts.”

“Mental health and wellbeing: some of our team are finding working from home a challenge, balanced by the others who are loving it.”

Source: Recruitment Consultancy with offices in Glasgow and Edinburgh

“Some of our activity is currently permitted as being "essential" but there remains a reluctance on the part of clients, and from our perspective as an employer, to use our offices more widely until government guidance permits a more widespread use of offices. With appropriate protocols in place we believe steps can be taken that minimise the risks for our clients and colleagues in attending our offices.”

Source: Legal firm with offices throughout Scotland

“Much improved team collaboration; coaching & training; the whole meetings experience would be better and the lack of social interaction is a significant problem when working from home fulltime”

Source: Chartered Accountants & Business advisors with offices in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and London

“Greater collaboration and cross working on projects/matters; mental wellbeing for staff who have felt isolated and alone, as well as those wanting social interaction and routine/structure; staff may not be able to effectively work from home due to home set up, such as shared space/accommodation”

Source: Global professional services firm with offices in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen

“We have many young people who are just embarking on their professional careers and they need the support of their managers and peers. And currently they are living and working in bedrooms and box rooms 24-7, and they do not have any social contact or interaction with their teams and other colleagues. This is not good for their personal development nor for their health & wellbeing”

Source: Chartered Accountants & Business advisors with offices in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and London

BUSINESS INTENTIONS FOR RETURN TO WORK:

The number of staff that are able to return to any office, when permitted, will vary from business to business and will be influenced by the configuration of premises, the nature of business undertaken, the density of occupation (pre-COVID) and evolving health guidance from the Scottish Government.

Our research and engagement with businesses shows the vast majority are envisaging and preparing for a managed and gradual return of employees of around 20% - 30%, following physical distancing of 2m and health and safety mitigation measures on premises.

The research was carried out with firms based in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, collectively employing circa 6,000 staff, and were asked a range of questions including the percentage return of employees based on 2m physical distancing and percentage of those returning staff anticipated to utilise public transport.

Sector	No of employees	% return based on 2m physical distancing	Anticipated use of public transport
Professional services	270+	20% - 30%	Less than 20%
Legal firm	700+	20% - 40% (<i>various locations</i>)	50%
Legal firm	550	20%	50%
Accountancy firm	800	20%	0% of returning staff
Legal Firm	300+	50%	75%
Financial services	110+	30%	50%
Recruitment services	50+	55%	N/A
Legal firm	200+	35%	75%
Accountancy firm	1000+	25%	70%
Banking	40	50%	40%

Further detailed examples from CBRE demonstrates a managed return:

- The CBRE Glasgow office, when return is permitted, only 8 out of 44 staff will be able to return at 2m social distancing
- In the CBRE Edinburgh office (recently re-modelled) of 45 workstations, only 9 will be capable of use at 2m social distancing.
- The CBRE experience across the UK is that densities of circa 20% will initially apply, suggesting a more limited impact on public transport volume than may have been assumed

The manner in which commuting to an office location takes place will vary significantly between location, type of user and size of office, in relative terms. For example:

- **Professional Services** (In Town) –relatively less use of public transport
- **Large Corporate Office** (In Town) –relatively more use of public transport.
- **Call Centre** (In Town) –relatively more use of public transport.
- **Call Centre** (Out Of Town) –relatively less use of public transport.

We would encourage Government guidance to request that in considering which staff are invited to return to the office, employers give consideration (amongst other factors) to which employees have the ability to commute without the use (or with limited use) of public transport to avoid capacity pressures on public transport networks, and to instead promote active travel.

BUSINESS VIEWS ON RETURN TO WORK:

Our English offices have re-opened from 3 August with general positive feedback supporting the fact that the offices as configured under Covid-secure guidance feel safe and comfortable for people. We are restricting capacities to around 25% of headcount at present.

Source: Global professional services firm with offices in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen

Upon re-occupation and assuming 2m distancing we estimate that 31%, 28% and 33% of staff could return to our offices in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively. Of these numbers we estimate that 10%, 33% and 50% respectively would use public transport.

Source: Global professional services firm with offices in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen

Maximum of 30% per location but probably lower initially with those from this number using public transport quite small –less than 20%, certainly in Aberdeen

Source: Chartered Accountants & Business advisors with offices in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and London

Of 115 staff approximately 30 could return at 2m distancing. Approximately 15 of these are likely to use public transport. 1m distancing unlikely to make much difference, one-way systems, toilet and lift capacity would remain significant constraints.

Source: Financial Services organisation, Edinburgh

Business is operational from non-office environment. In the interest of staff/customer safety/health decision taken not to return in 2020. At 2m distancing, 20 out of 40 will return in 2021. Of those returning, 25% (12.5% of total headcount) will use public transport.

Source: Banking Sector with office in Aberdeen

Recommendation:

Phased Re-Opening of Remaining Offices:

The phased re-opening of remaining offices is a critical next step to support economic recovery and wellbeing of staff. For the purposes of this report, we have utilised a “phased” approach, mirroring the approach with the Construction sector. However, it is important to note that remaining offices have already invested in making premises Covid-secure with high levels of employee engagement and communication.

Since lockdown “essential offices” in Scotland have been able to open as usual provided appropriate measures, in line with guidance have been in place. Reported instances of new COVID cases, whilst not zero, appear to have been low in number. Many essential offices have been open throughout lockdown without any issue.

Some essential office occupiers are operating a hybrid model with some staff working from the office and some staff working from home.

Businesses regarded as “non essential” under current guidelines have also been preparing for the potential of return to the workplace for some time as previous Government route maps indicated potential dates (now passed) for a decision on the ability to return. Many businesses are fully prepared for return within a short period of time.

Therefore, **our starting point is not at the early stage but at an advanced stage.**

Phase	Timeline	Details
CURRENT PHASE	MARCH 2020 - PRESENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This phase is currently live where only essential offices are operating. Remaining offices have all been working from home since March 2020. ➤ Businesses have been engaging with employees and carrying out surveys and providing employee support. ➤ Investing in health & safety and risk assessments on-site preparing for an eventual re-opening.
PHASE 1: RESTRICTED CAPACITY	22nd October (recommended)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Allowing remaining offices to re-open with restricted capacity eg 20%. ➤ Work from home where possible, remains the norm, unless there are justifiable wellbeing or business reasons. ➤ Social distancing measures of 2m in place across all offices and internal spaces. ➤ Strict hygiene measures as per guidelines including no communal canteens, individual desks, screens. ➤ Non-mandatory approach for employees to return ➤ Work from home continues to apply to 80% of employees ➤ No un-necessary business travel ➤ (reference high risk employees health checklist) ➤ Staggered arrival & departure / shift patterns / approval processes
PHASE 2: LIMITED CAPACITY	November 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increase capacity from 20% to 30% ➤ Work from home the norm. ➤ Everything else as above
PHASE 3: EXTENDED CAPACITY	Jan 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Initial increase capacity from 30% to 50%, with transition through the month from 50% to 80% ➤ Shift patterns and approval processes continue

		➤ Hygiene measures continue
PHASE 4: FULL CAPACITY – BACK TO “NEW” NORMAL	Feb 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hybrid model normalised with mix of work from home and in-office work ➤ As above

RISK ASSESSMENTS:

ASSESS THE RISK:

Before re-opening, business owners should assess the risks to themselves, employees, suppliers and customers.

All employers are by law required to carry out risk assessments before re-opening. Businesses must fully engage its employees in the process. Protecting the health of employees is fundamental to establishing shared confidence around the safety of returning to places of work.

- Businesses must think about where it works, where its customers are and assess each risk identified;
- Businesses must identify risks associated with handling machinery or equipment where possible contamination may occur;
- Some members of a workforce may be disproportionately at risk and may need extra support to return to work;
- Safe travel to work arrangements must be considered as part of a risk assessment.
- Where a business occupies part of larger multi-occupied building, employers must ensure that measures put in place by the owner of the building to control and regulate the use of common parts such as entrances, lift lobbies, lifts, stairwells are adequate for the protection of all staff and visitors.

CONSULT WITH EMPLOYEES

Before re-opening, all businesses should consult with its employees to share key messages and information.

- Businesses should discuss how they can safely reopen with its employees or employee representatives as appropriate;
- It is important everyone understands the measures being taken to establish the safe working environment;
- Discussions should include arrangements for those working from home and adopting new or alternative working patterns;
- Arrangements should be made for staff who are shielding, ill or have caring responsibilities
- Businesses should take every possible step to facilitate employees working from home where this is practical and appropriate;
- This may include providing suitable IT and equipment to allow employees to do this;
- Companies should make arrangements to ensure staff are not disadvantaged due to medical advice;
- Travel to work and childcare considerations for individual employees should be taken into account.

INFECTION CONTROL

Before re-opening, all businesses must put in place infection and control measures.

- It is essential that physical distancing continues to be practiced, along with other good hygiene practice amongst employees, customers and those on business premises;
- Ensure physical distancing between employees, customers and suppliers is maintained, currently set at 2 metres in Scotland;
- Adapt work activity to be done in a different way so that a distance can be maintained;
- Limit the number of employees or customers on business premises.
- Consider changes in working practice, such as staggering start/finish and break times and reducing the number of people each person has contact with;
- Put in place good hygiene practices for all employees, customers and visitors to premises;
- Ensure adequate facilities are available for hand hygiene, including hand wash facilities or alcohol-based hand rub at key areas like entry points;
- If not possible, businesses must take equivalent preventative measures to provide protection which may include using Personal Protective Equipment.

KEEP REVIEWING:

Businesses should regularly review its risk assessment to make sure that all actions put in place are working well and continue to engage with its employees for feedback.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS:

Businesses should utilise additional tools from Scottish Government including the Occupational Risk Assessment Guidance. This tool focuses on the three things which affect the occupational health risk from Covid-19:

1. Prevalence of COVID-19 in Scotland: the amount of COVID-19 circulating in Scotland
2. Workplace considerations to protect staff from COVID-19
3. Personal characteristics that affect outcome from COVID-19Occupational

We would urge all businesses to undertaken individual workplace risk assessments as covered on page 15 to ensure premises are Covid-secure with necessary mitigation measures in place. After this is completed, individual employees should be supported with clear communications as well as an individual risk assessment checklist using the Covid-19 occupational risk assessment tool.

[Download checklist](#)

CHAMBER NETWORK RESEARCH:

Between August 24th and September 21st, SCC carried out research to aimed at office based business, to assess current and future working practises in the context of the lockdown restrictions. The survey received 20+ responses and the key findings are outlined below.

Breakdown of respondents

- 45% are in the business / professional services sector
- 20% are in the retail, tourism and or hospitality sector
- 10% are in the construction sector, 10% are in the manufacturing sector

Future outlook

- 32% of businesses say that they do not know when to expect their full workforce back in the office
- 25% say that they think they may have their employees back in the office in the next 3 months
- 20% say that they hope to have some employees back within the next month

Future work models

- 26% say that their workforce have come to **slightly prefer home working**
- 26% say that their workforce have come to **much prefer office working**
- 13% say that their workforce have to come **much prefer home working**
- 21% say that their workforce have to come to **slightly prefer office working**

CASE STUDY: BURNES PAULL LLP

Tamar Tammes, Managing Partner, Burness Paull LLP

A legal traineeship at Burness Paull requires trainees to complete 4 x 6 month seats in different practice areas. Our trainees are fully equipped to work from home and the majority of tasks required of them can be completed remotely. However, 82% of trainees in a recent survey indicated that they want to return to the office. The reasons for this vary but 95% of respondents indicated that both learning/training opportunities and social interaction were their main motivations.

In our current circumstances trainees work closely with a virtual supervisor but they are undoubtedly currently missing out on exposure to wider team conversations/ learning interactions, observational learning and ad-hoc opportunities to attend client or internal meetings that are crucial for their learning.

It takes longer for new employees to integrate into a virtual rather than in-person team, establish good working relationships and produce results and this challenge is compounded for trainees who only have 6 months in each seat. For the most part our most recent intake of trainees have not yet had the opportunity to meet the rest of their cohort. The majority of them live in shared properties and are relegated to working from a bedroom or communal area which is not conducive to working or learning for a prolonged period, potentially negatively impacting their mental and physical health.

Career progression

The current situation has impacted upon some career progression decisions. We have delayed our partner and senior lawyer annual promotion process although the process is back up and running now. The firm have, however, used video calls to conduct virtual interviews to appoint trainees to permanent roles and has proceeded with time-served promotions.

For external recruitment, uncertainty around when offices will open presents a significant challenge in relation to the time and expense incurred to ensure fair and robust online recruitment, selection and assessment procedures to replace our normal office based processes. Many of these processes rely on methods which are optimal when face to face e.g. psychological assessments, action learning sets, peer review, presentations, group exercises and panel interviews.

Mental Health

From the outset we have taken steps to help our colleagues manage the impact of the pandemic on their mental health. However, prolonged remote working is blurring the boundaries between work and home with nearly 50% of respondents in our recent health and wellbeing survey indicating that they are struggling to effectively switch off from work to make time for rest. Particularly during lockdown, those with home-schooling/childcare responsibilities felt ill-equipped to balance the increased demands of work and home life and we are aware of several employees who are struggling with the isolation that comes with remote working and are very keen to return to the office.

We still have a number of employee whose office based roles cannot be performed from home but will be required when the offices open again. These employees have been on furlough leave since the end of March, we are of course aware of that and general uncertainty about their roles long-term potentially impacting upon their mental health.

Although we are confident that most of our teams have adapted and are communicating well, it's inevitable that opportunities to recognise the signs and symptoms of poor mental and physical health are being missed.

Moreover, some of the strategies we use to promote mental and physical wellbeing are not possible, for example, complementary fruit, blood pressure checks, office massage, yoga and walking groups and there is a sense that people are reluctant to reach out to our Mental Health First Aiders remotely.

“82% of trainees in a recent survey indicated that they want to return to the office. The reasons for this vary but 95% of respondents indicated that both learning/training opportunities and social interaction were their main motivations.”

ABOUT SCC:

The Scottish Chambers of Commerce Network sits at the heart of local business communities, representing over 12,000 businesses in Scotland. With 30 local Chambers rooted in communities across Scotland, the Chamber Network provides practical advice and support to Scottish companies through unrivalled expert leadership, business-to-business connections, mentoring/coaching, business support services and international trade support.

Report Prepared for Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work & Culture, Fiona Hyslop MSP by Scottish Chambers of Commerce.

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