Senedd Cymru
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau
Gweithio o bell: Y goblygiadau i Gymru
EIS(5) RW(16)
Ymateb gan: Mitie

Welsh Parliament
Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee
Remote Working: Implications for Wales

Evidence from: Mitie

## Mitie response to the Remote Working: Implications for Wales consultation

1.  Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on workers and employers throughout the UK. At Mitie, we are fully focused on supporting our employees working on the front-line, in offices or from home during this difficult period.

Based on public health guidance, we have taken the decision ask all our office-based employees to work from home and travel to the office only where it is essential.

We welcome the issues raised and the debate stemming from the Welsh Government's own plans to "develop a hybrid workplace model" targeting 30% of employees working for home or close to home. Mitie has consistently been a strong proponent of adopting greater flexibility around working arrangements and we are pleased to respond to this consultation providing our own expertise.

Due to Mitie's large workforce across the UK as well as our mix of front-line and office-based workers our response to this consultation will focus on issues affecting the workforce from the Welsh Government's remote working proposals.

2.  Background to Mitie

As the UK's leading facilities management company Mitie employs 77,500 people across the UK including 2,500 people in Wales. We have long-standing expertise in delivering high-quality services from estate and facility management, to cleaning, security, landscaping and waste management. We are a key supplier to Government focused on helping commissioners deliver value for the taxpayer. As a business, our services are underpinned by strong service delivery, engaged people, solid IT systems, disciplined financial control and an innovative mindset.

We are a business whose strength is its people and are committed to investing in and protecting our workforce. Many of our employees are doing essential work during the pandemic including cleaning hospitals, guarding supermarkets, maintaining buildings and providing catering services to workers.

3.  Impact of Welsh Government's proposals

We welcome the debate that has emerged from the Welsh Government's own remote working proposals and wish to focus on its impact on the workforce. However, we believe an agile model which combines the benefits of a both time in the office (when appropriate) and remote working offers better balance than a full remote model.

*Agile working – maximising the benefits of remote working and mitigating any potential risks and negative impacts*

Prior to the pandemic, Mitie embraced the concept of agile working allowing all employees whose roles had been assessed as suitable for agile working able to work in this way. We believe this template of agile working can maximise the benefits of remote working while mitigating any potential risks and negative impacts, by providing the utmost flexibility around employee schedules and lifestyles.

Agile workers at Mitie can decide how their work is best delivered and build flexibility around this. In some circumstances, this can mean not having a permanent desk at any site and delivering work from different locations on a regular basis, including at home. It can also mean working alternately between the nearest Mitie office or hub, client site or from home, as agreed with their line manager.

We ask our employees to think through the flexibility of work to improve performance and productivity. It is about encouraging employees to discuss with their line manager how best to deliver the most effective way of working, without setting out a mandatory work from home requirement. Working in an agile manner enables our employees to flex the location of their work to suit both their personal circumstances and the tasks they need to perform in a particular week. As well as increasing the productivity of employees, an agile working model also ensures that individuals that do wish to spend their time in an office are able to do so. We would strongly encourage the Welsh Government to explore this employee-first approach to greater flexibility in working arrangements.

Part of the agile working concept that Mitie has embraced includes the creation of 'hubs' – flexible workspaces offering an 'office when needed'. This may not be a Mitie employee's contractual place of work, but rather the most appropriate Mitie office or client site to wherever the employee is and their role. Agile workers will have a designated hub or office location which is treated as their usual place of work, balanced alongside other flexible work locations such as their home, other Mitie offices, or client sites.

We are therefore fully supportive of the idea for a network of community-based remote working hubs as proposed by the Welsh Government if this provides the flexibility for workers to also come into the office when they wish to. We are happy to provide our expertise in establishing these hubs to the Welsh Government while these proposals are developed.

*Creating an effective workplace environment for agile and hybrid working*

As discussed, Mitie uses hub locations to promoted agile working within its business. However, central to making this model work is creating efficient workplaces that support employee productivity. As experts in managing workplaces, we are in a unique position to understand how to optimise work environments in this way. In 2019, Interserve (which Mitie acquired in December 2020) undertook a review of its own new flagship office, Ingenuity House in Birmingham. Ingenuity House was used by 1,400 employees – 54% without a fixed workspace.

This work identified four different types of employees based on their physical working habits and how frequently they move around the site during the working day. By undertaking surveys of these different groups, it was possible to understand the different factors affecting their productivity. For example, those who regularly moved around the site value space for meetings and telephone calls, while those at a fixed desk prioritise limiting the number of colleagues passing their desk. Using this information allowed the team to create a 'Workplace Index Score' for each stakeholder group. Our Workplace Index Score examines the effect workplaces have on their users from a practical, psychological and behavioural perspective. It shows the impact not only on their wellbeing and productivity but, in turn, wider employee efficiency and business metrics. Calculating this score enabled us to identify ways in which to make the workplace for efficient for each stakeholder group. Many of these changes were simple to achieve with limited capital cost. Understanding how employees use the space also ensures that the workplace has an appropriate mix between hot desks, fixed desks, meeting rooms and breakout areas.

It is also worth considering that many businesses began reviews of their properties in the summer of 2020, when many areas of the UK were seeing relatively loose restrictions and working from home was still a relative novelty. However, feedback we have received from both clients and our own colleagues is that now we have spent nearly a year working from home, employees have a better understanding of the benefits of the office environment. The hybrid model of working should bring together the best of both worlds, combining the advantages of the office and home. As with all other aspects of the Index, these benefits need to come from the workforce themselves, so that decision making with regards to office design and use are driven by facts.

Based on our own experience, we would recommend that businesses looking to move to an agile working model undertake a review of each site to create a Workplace Index Score and make any optimisations as required. This will ensure workplaces are suited to the needs of employees to support their productivity and mean colleagues are more likely to find the space suits their needs.

*Front-line workers – a workforce that would be particularly affected by remote working proposals, projects and initiatives*

While we fully recognise the value of remote working and embrace a shift to more flexible working, there must also be recognition that not all roles will lend themselves to home working (or not all of the time) and some employees wanting to work from home will not be able to do so. Many of the services Mitie provides are front-line services such as cleaning and security, requiring delivery at various sites and they are often people facing.

For our employees that continue to work on the front-line during the pandemic, we are constantly ensuring that they are protected to the utmost, including through personal protective equipment where appropriate.

Considering this, we welcome Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport Lee Waters MS recognition that the Welsh Government "are also conscious of the needs of those for whom - for various reasons - home working is not a viable option". For many roles remote working is not possible even at the proposed remote working hubs and we urge the Welsh Government to recognise that not all jobs can be carried out remotely.

*Workforce survey*

Mitie conducted a survey of its workforce exploring the initial impact of the pandemic in May 2020. A further survey will be conducted in the coming months and we would be happy to share the results with the Committee once completed.

The survey of our employees found that 69% had a positive perception that the virtual work arrangements are meeting the needs of customers, with just 16% holding a negative view. Meanwhile, 49% had a positive perception of the technology provided by Mitie that allows them to work effectively from home. Since then, we have worked hard to ensure our technology better supports employees in being able to work more agilely, moving between office and home locations, as appropriate.

This highlights the appetite amongst many of our workforce to embrace virtual working arrangements which we believe is met by our agile working programme.

A core pillar of our agile working policy, which as mentioned was introduced before the pandemic, was our significant and continued investment in our technology systems, as well as the use of relevant Mitie services such as the 'digital mailroom' to ensure employees can still receive business post.

*Customer survey*

Similarly, in 2020 we undertook a survey of a number of our clients with regards to their changing priorities following the pandemic. Of those we asked, 70% told us that their medium-term focus has changed in terms of how buildings are used by their organisation. When asked why this was, by far the most common response was because of an increase in agile/flexible working, which was mentioned as a factor by a third of these customers. Meanwhile, 63% of customers told us that they viewed the customer and workplace experience as more important now following the impact of COVID-19.

These results demonstrate that there is an appetite and understanding among many UK businesses that a focus on agile working and the workplace experience will be a priority going forward.

4. Conclusion

Mitie has consistently supported embracing more flexible working arrangements and, as for many businesses, the pandemic - where our office-based workers are all working from home - has expediated this commitment. However, many Mitie employees are critical front-line workers that are unable to work remotely and recognition of this must be a key part of any proposal for remote working.

We also believe that our agile working arrangements, and the solutions we offer to our clients, provide the much-needed flexibility to improve work-life balance as well as productivity while ensuring that employees can access the office if required based on their work schedules.

We look forward to engaging with the Welsh Government and your Committee further on these proposals and if you require any further information please contact: lucy.bielby@mitie.com.