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Midlothian: Listen and Learn Final Report

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Listen and Learn: Context and Summary

Unprecedented challenge

Midlothian and its communities have faced an unprecedented challenge as we have grappled with how to respond to a global pandemic with far reaching consequences for thousands of people locally.

Across Midlothian Council, staff have rapidly adapted to working completely differently, delivering more services remotely and trying to maintain business as usual whilst supporting people through the crisis. At the same time, many of our staff have been forced to shield and isolate, unable to work, or having to undertake reduced duties.

Catalyst for change

Whilst this experience has been extremely challenging, it has also acted as a catalyst for change. There are things we have paused or stopped doing and we've also started doing lots of new things. Listening to and working with the 5000+ staff who work for Midlothian Council will be central to learning from our response to the crisis and building upon the positive changes that we've made.

Working in partnership with Nesta, an innovation foundation, we interviewed staff from across the council's two directorates. Midlothian staff volunteered to take part in the interviews and from social workers to refuse collectors; teachers to maintenance staff we heard about their experiences during the pandemic.

In this report we share the insights from this work, along with the recent staff survey and begin to explore what a future Midlothian could look like as we learn to live with and beyond Covid-19.

Listen and Learn: Activities and Insights

In July, Nesta began a series of interviews with a wide range of staff working across Midlothian Council directorates in order to listen to their experiences of working during Covid-19 and understand:

- what it has been like to work through the pandemic,
- the new ways of working that are emerging,
- how people have adapted and been forced to innovate,
- and the challenges that they have faced, and what their views are on the future.

The insights which have emerged (including some data gathered from the Midlothian Council Staff Survey), have been grouped under the following themes:



Valuing
Community

Remote/
Flexible
Working

Digital First

Leading
New Ways
of Working

Education

Listen and Learn: Who did we speak to?

51
Staff interviewed

11
education staff

1125
Staff Surveyed

75%
Of people we interviewed had spent at least some time working from home (or working flexibly)



Staff we spoke to included:



Social Workers



School Facilities Coordinators



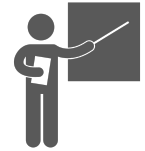
Maintenance staff



Union reps



Surveyors



Teachers



Administrators



Care workers

Notes on our approach

Whilst we endeavoured to hear a broad and diverse range of perspectives, the insights and recommendations within this report are reflective of the experiences of a relatively small cohort. The majority of interviews were with people from the place directorate and we also spoke to 3 care workers. Around 20% of the interviews we carried out were with Education staff, whose experiences and reflections have been explored in a specific section of the report.



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Midlothian: Listen and Learn Themes



Valuing community



Remote/flexible working



Digital first



Leading new ways of working



Education

Listen and Learn: Entering Lockdown

A difficult time for many

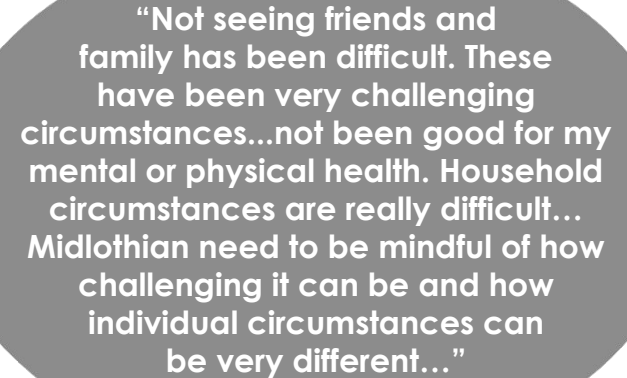
It is important to acknowledge that many of the people we spoke to told us that they have struggled with at least one aspect of lockdown and its impact on their mental and physical health.

Challenges include the lack of ability to socialise, see friends or family and missing the routine and structure that work usually provided. This was particularly felt by those who were forced to shield.

Resilience and hope for the future

In the midst of these challenging times, people from across Midlothian have demonstrated adaptability, creativity and dedication.

There is now an important opportunity to reunite and re-engage with the workforce. Working together to build upon what's been learned and the positive changes made, to both mitigate the impact of any future lockdowns and move forwards towards the future vision for Midlothian.



“Not seeing friends and family has been difficult. These have been very challenging circumstances...not been good for my mental or physical health. Household circumstances are really difficult... Midlothian need to be mindful of how challenging it can be and how individual circumstances can be very different...”

Valuing Community

“We are bringing focus back to towns that have been neglected, people are using local businesses more - that could save high streets. How do we make sure it continues?”

Valuing community

Insights from the interviews: Persona



David lives and works in Midlothian. During lockdown, he was keen to help his community but wasn't sure how. When lockdown began to ease, David noticed on social media that people in his local community needed help with gardening and grass cutting.

Ian had to shield during covid and was looking for someone to cut his grass. David decided to offer his help. David then got speaking to James, who lives down the road from him. James had been furloughed and was looking for something to do. So James joined David and found other people in the area who were also able to help.

Between them, they cut the grass verges as well as helping their neighbours. David and James felt more connected with their community. This made a huge difference to their mental health - to be outside, meet new people and know they are making a difference in their community.

David was grateful to be able to use contribute to his local community and would love to see this become the new normal. **How can we keep this community spirit going?**

Valuing community

Insights from the interviews

Rooted in the local community

Many of Midlothian Council staff live in Midlothian and lots of those we spoke to expressed being driven by a desire to support local communities. We heard several examples of local people pulling together during the pandemic and starting grassroots initiatives.

Support Midlothian's grassroots organisations. Be creative and work collaboratively with local initiatives to involve them in the council's future vision.

'Penicuik's Helping Hands' Facebook group was started on the 17th of June by members of the local community. The group is now organising weekly clean ups around the town.

Meaningful local engagement

Some employees spoke about having better job satisfaction and feeling more valued. This was helped by staff noticing communities saying "thank you" more. Many participants expressed a sense of urgency to harness this community spirit. **Help staff to strengthen and build upon emerging ties with communities and work in partnership to deliver local, place based services.**

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“If there's a project that we could do completely virtually (eg walk people through a town) and involve the community... have voices and views involved from the beginning.”



“Public spaces could become outdoor gyms and when schools go back they could be outside classrooms... we need to innovate how we use our wonderful outdoor spaces”

Valuing what's on our doorstep

There was anecdotal evidence of an increase in people accessing outdoor spaces during the pandemic and a perception that a wider range of people were using these spaces than before. Participants reflected that Midlothian's outdoor spaces are an often underutilised resource and that the last few months have demonstrated the ways in which people can directly benefit from from accessing these open spaces. **Work with local communities and co-design how to best make use of outdoor spaces, e.g. outdoor classrooms and meeting rooms.**

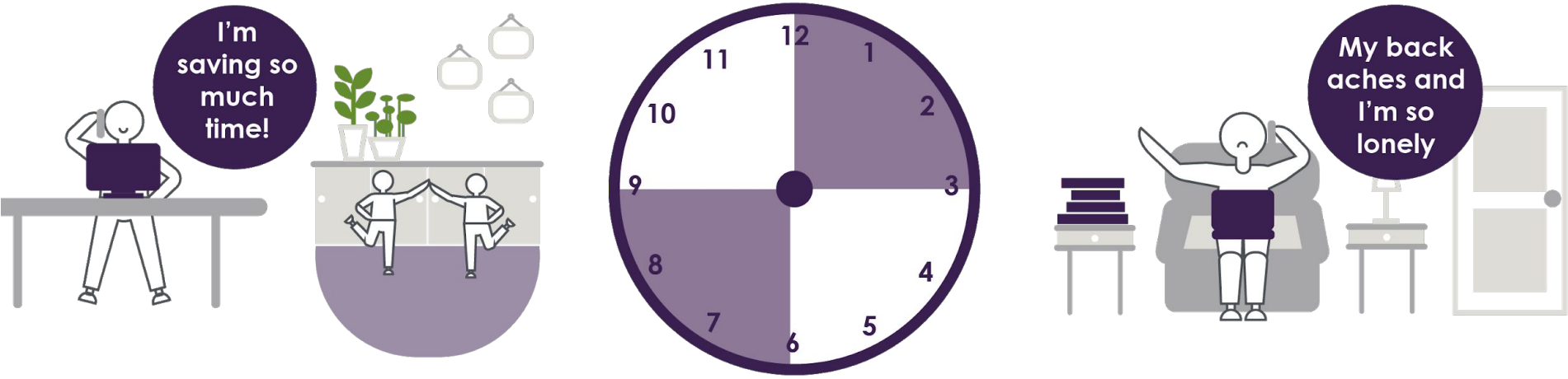
Being well, together

There was understandable concern for the wellbeing of Midlothian communities, families and local businesses who have been directly impacted by the pandemic; economically, health wise and socially. Social media can support community development and provide a platform for people to help each other during and after challenging times. **Build upon the #KindnessMidlothian campaign. Use social media to engage with citizens, highlight stories of local community action and showcase examples where council staff have gone above and beyond.**

Remote/flexible working

“I have saved so much time not commuting or travelling to meetings and it has meant that I have been able to help out with the kids. My meetings have been shorter and there has been less distraction so I have been more productive”

Insights from the interviews: Persona



Emma works for Midlothian Council. Since she's been working from home she has gained 2 hours a day not having to commute. This has meant she has more time with her children, saves money and starts work less stressed as she doesn't have to drive round the city bypass. She also knows it is better for the planet.



Graham, a colleague of Emma's, lives alone in a small flat. He doesn't have a proper desk or chair and has been struggling with back ache. Emma is worried about his mental health as he's been feeling very lonely, not being able to see work colleagues and friends face to face.

Flexible hours mean Emma and Graham can now work at the time they are most productive. Emma has worked around homeschooling her children and Graham has felt able to act on Emma's advice to start a daily team tea-break on MS Teams. He has since felt more connected to his colleagues, although he would prefer to catch up in real life.

To continue to work like this and look after their physical and mental health, Graham would like a better chair for his flat and they would both like **flexible working** to include the use of **local buildings**. This would allow Graham to set up some face to face meetings and Emma to work near her children's school after doing the school run.

Remote/flexible working

Insights from the interviews

Working Smarter

Covid-19 has fast-tracked Midlothian council into a digital world. Smart phones have enabled social workers to respond quicker to emergencies; using Microsoft Teams has resulted in better turnout in meetings; and new electronic processes have brought about time-saving, efficient ways of working.

Embed equal access to technology; digital training; a flexible work culture; and digital working into policy and practice.

Sustainable Futures

Many people told us about the benefits of reduced travel. People spoke of less stressful commutes, a reduction in the time and cost of attending short meetings, and the ability to use travel time in a more productive way. Some job roles may always involve an element of travel, however, even within these roles the need to travel may be reduced. **Work with staff and teams to identify ways of integrating flexible working into their roles to enable a better work-life balance and reduce travel.**

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“We need to learn from other organisations about successful ways of remote working. How do we manage our diaries better so we have blocks of time to work? What’s our view on virtual meeting etiquette? How do we engage everyone in meetings when there’s a mix of people working remotely and in the office? “



“We need to do an analysis to see what the minimum requirements are for people to work at home. Health and safety assessments from where they're working...

People need to know that working at home is different to working in an office and have the reassurance that that's okay.”

Local and flexible place-based working

Many of the people we spoke to felt that flexible working could enable Midlothian Council to establish local “hubs”, replacing Dalkeith as the centre for services to enable a better use of buildings and help to localise services. **Think creatively about how the council can utilise its estate and assets, alongside digital remote solutions, to better respond to local community needs.**

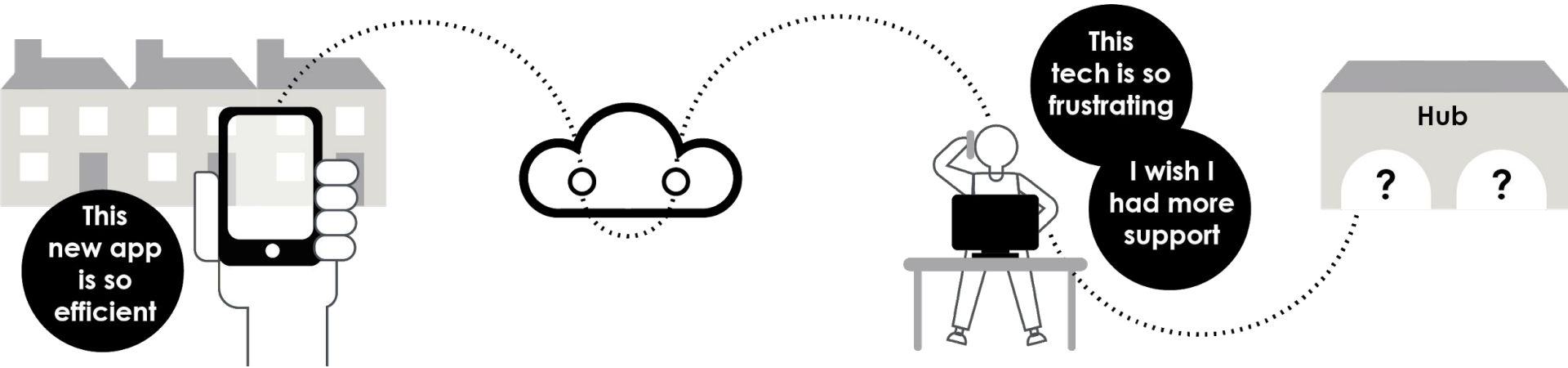
A tailored approach

Remote working doesn't necessarily mean working at home. People experience a myriad of personal circumstances so efforts should be made to tailor support to individual needs. At a minimum, each person should have access to suitable tech to enable them to work remotely effectively (such as laptops and smartphones), as well as training and support to use it. **Work in partnership with individuals, teams and directorates to understand what flexible working means for them and what they need to make this a reality (infrastructure/training/technology, etc).**

Digital First

“Prior to covid all my work was paper based. I had to go into the office to log things and travel around a lot more. Since covid I have been able to use an app on my phone that has been used by other staff in the council (parking attendants). It means I can take photos and record my work when I am out, its made my job quicker and easier”.

Insights from the interviews: Persona



This new app is so efficient

This tech is so frustrating

I wish I had more support

Hub

?

?

Marie is a surveyor. Prior to Covid-19 all her work was paper based. She had to go into the office to log things. Now she is able to use an app that parking attendants use. It means she can take photos and record her work when she's out, making her job quicker and easier.

One of her colleagues, Robert, has an older laptop which is slow and he isn't as confident as Marie with technology. Marie regularly gets phone calls from him asking how to work certain digital tools and platforms which she doesn't mind, but it often uses up the time she saves. Robert is very thankful for Marie's help but he feels frustrated.

Robert wishes he had more tech support. He knows the IT department are rushed off their feet so he has been relying on Marie. The overnight adoption of new digital tools slowed down Robert's productivity but he can see from Marie the potential in the new app and he wants to learn more.

Marie thinks if Midlothian could invest some money into appropriate **technology** for everyone, **training** and **ongoing IT support**, the work they do could be even more efficient, **saving time and money**. It would also help upskill people like Robert and help them feel more confident.

Insights from the interviews

Making things easier

Many staff we spoke to described using digital ways of working that would enable them to become more efficient longer term. These included using enabling tech such as cameras, online collaboration tools and electronic versions of standard forms. In several cases, shifting processes online made things run more smoothly and reduced duplication.

Work with teams and directorates to understand the changes to process that have been made during the pandemic, the tools and technologies that have been introduced and the impact these have had.

Digital by default

Some interviewees reflected on how changes in governance had allowed them to use digital processes and technology, which had in turn reduced their need to travel. The ability to hold multi-agency meetings remotely meant people were much more likely to attend and freed up time that would have been spent travelling. **Develop governance and policies, e.g. for remote multi-agency meetings, to encourage and enable teams to adopt a digital by default approach long term and reduce travel time, costs and Midlothian's carbon footprint.**

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“...using different ways of not having to visit construction site - ie photos - rather than physically visiting, using virtual systems to certify buildings. This has massively speeded up the process”



Staff from a care facility (independent flats) currently have no access to wifi where they work. If they were able to access online banking, they could manage the care facilities finances remotely, saving time and money on travelling to the nearest branch.

Access to wifi across council directorates & facilities

We heard examples from staff across all directorates of where access to WiFi could act as an enabler to modernising services, creating efficiencies and reducing travel. People working in care settings, centres supporting children & families, and those working with vulnerable pupils expressed frustration over their current lack of WiFi. **Provide access to WiFi across all services and facilities to help deliver modern, local and accessible services for all.**

Technical Capability

The majority of interviewees rapidly adopted new digital ways of working during the pandemic. There were honest reflections that this was not always easy and training and development was required, along with support if things went wrong (which they sometimes did). **Invest in an infrastructure that supports digital ways of working, which includes training, technology and ongoing support.**

Leading new ways of working

“My line manager doesn't sit on my shoulder - we are now trusted to get things done”



I'm so excited to test these ideas

What's the plan for recovery?

Fiona is usually based in an office full time. At home she's been more productive and has enjoyed more collaborative working across different teams. More people have been showing up to meetings and are open to phone calls to bounce ideas off one another.

Fiona has been given permission to take on new responsibilities and test new ideas she believes will improve the work she does. This has made her feel empowered, giving her her mojo back. Fiona's manager is more relaxed and supportive, understanding personal situations during Covid, which has improved their relationship.

However, there isn't much clarity or communication about the plan for recovery. Her manager doesn't seem to have the answers either. She's hoping that leadership communicate this soon. Fiona's partner has noticed she's struggling to switch off when finishing her work, which is affecting their home life.

Fiona reflects that her job role has changed, and she's excited to keep developing the skills she's learnt. She is hopeful that this carries on in the future, allowing her to grow and build **new skills**. More consistent and **regular communication** would help her feel **less stressed** about the future.

Leading new ways of working

Insights from the interviews

Shaped by staff experience

The pandemic forced the adoption of new ways of working. For some, this created a new sense of trust and autonomy, with staff seeking solutions without relying on management permission. Some teams are communicating better, collaborating more effectively and experiencing more empathetic and supportive management. For others, the lack of structure has left them feeling isolated and unable to draw boundaries or switch off. **Develop new governance, policy, training and support to embed positive new ways of working, e.g. autonomy, communication, leadership and collaboration.**

New opportunities

We heard several examples of where people had enjoyed adapting to new roles and responsibilities during the pandemic. Examples include working across services (e.g. road and land services) or adopting alternative duties in a different setting, in some cases leading to employment in these settings (e.g. in health and care services). **Work with teams across the whole organisation to better understand the skills and capabilities of staff and develop new roles and career pathways, built upon experiences and learning from the pandemic, e.g. skills development opportunities.**

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“You should be trained to do completely different jobs based on your skills and gain new skills - it's like a personal development plan for different staff, a clear path for everyone”



“Better communication between services (and line managers) to avoid confusion and duplication... comprehensive guidelines and explanation of decision making process would be beneficial”

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Clear, consistent and regular communication

Many of the people we spoke to particularly appreciated regular contact from the exec team, especially as the pandemic progressed. When communication from management was regular and consistent, it was hugely appreciated - colleagues felt well informed and “in the loop”.

Where there was a lack of consistency or an abundance of new information, people felt isolated, confused or overwhelmed. The survey highlighted that some employees felt they needed more clarity and direction during the crisis, into the recovery phase. Whilst 81% stated their manager had been in regular contact, just over 50% said that this contact was helpful. Some people also expressed disappointment over a “lack of communication” from line management.

Reflect upon what worked well during the crisis, such as: the Chief Executive’s daily message to staff, increased points of (formal and informal) connection between team members and regular updates from managers. Work with teams and directorates to develop a consistent approach to communication, which can then be tailored to meet the needs of different groups.

Education

“...they are interacting and asking lots of questions if they don't understand, they can take their own time and they can 'mull it over', there is no 'peer pressure' so they feel able to ask what they like...”

Insights from the interviews: Persona



It's taken time, but my lessons are better now

...But how will the others catch up?

Callum is a secondary school teacher in Midlothian. Before the pandemic, he hadn't incorporated digital tools into his lessons before or used Google Classroom. Since working from home, he is teaching his students online and communicating with his colleagues using his personal



laptop.

Callum has had to adapt his lessons to make them suitable for independent learning but he quickly realise the majority of his students haven't been taught the relevant skills to work on their own. Adapting the learning methods has been extremely time consuming but this experience has enabled Callum to reflect on his style of teaching and make positive changes.

Callum has found he now has the capacity to give his students more thorough feedback which they are responding extremely well to. However, there are students who have engaged very little since the beginning of lockdown and he worries about them and how they will ever catch up. He's also been feeling professionally isolated and has struggled to switch off resulting in working longer hours.

Callum would like to see digital learning become a permanent and prominent feature in Midlothian schools. To help this he would like **better access to training and technology** for both teachers and students, with a particular focus on those who aren't engaging.

Transforming Education in Midlothian

Several teachers reflected on the experiences of working during Covid-19 as an opportunity to transform education in Midlothian. We heard accounts of a rapid, steep and frequently stressful learning curve as teachers and pupils needed to shift overnight into a new model of teaching. We also heard some real concern about pupils' access to technology and their ability to respond to being taught differently. **Work in partnership with school staff, pupils and families to consolidate what they have learned from the pandemic and co-design an approach to taking this forward.**

Develop an evidence informed approach

Experiences of teaching during the pandemic varied across different age groups and schools, shedding light on a potential disparity in approach, particularly in relation to subject area and skills and knowledge. **Draw upon evidence and best practice at a local and national level and support teachers to build skills and capacity in remote teaching, e.g. using resourced peer support.**



“Midlothian should consider following other local authorities and adopt BYOD (bring your own device) or providing devices to all of its students so that teachers can consistently design lessons that all children can engage with using tech.”



The pandemic provided lots of opportunities for teacher development. With a return to relative normality and the need to be in school, online webinars/training would mean that teachers could still access this flexibly.

Digital Learning for All

Improving students' access to digital tools and remote learning support may help to reach populations who find engaging or attending school challenging and create a more inclusive learning environment.

However, some interviewees were concerned that even when given access to technology, not all students may be willing or able to engage.

Work with professionals, children, families and carers to iteratively test ideas to help overcome the barriers to children and young people accessing learning support remotely.

Equitable and consistent access to tools and technology

Staff described the benefits of access to technology that allows them to work flexibly. Examples were shared of where technology had improved time efficiency and attendance at meetings and could in the future reduce travel. Interviewees also expressed frustration with the variability of learning platforms and access to technology and school systems for some staff.

Work with schools to establish access to consistent tools and platforms, alongside remote access to school systems to enable education staff to work to full capacity.



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Midlothian's Future Vision: Building on staff insights and grounded in their 9 drivers for change

Midlothian's Future Vision

Built on staff insights and grounded in the 9 drivers for change

Holistic

One Council:

Consistent, joined up services and support

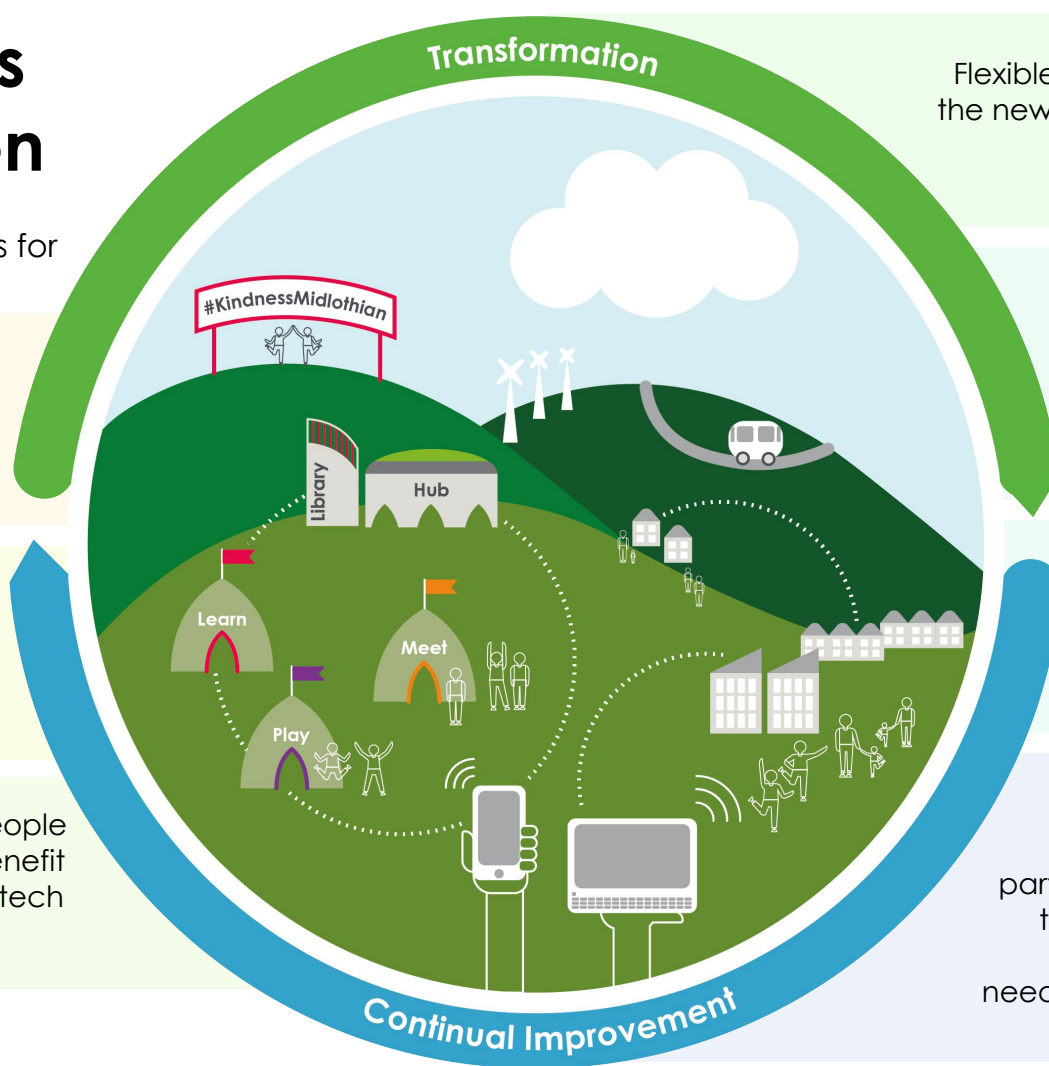
Hub + Spoke

Local by default:

Creative use of the council estate and digital solutions

Modern

Digital by default: People and communities benefit from modern digital tech capabilities



Sustainable futures:

Flexible and remote working as the new normal, reducing travel time, costs and carbon emissions.

Sustainable

Proactive early intervention:

Understanding and responding to the needs of citizens and local communities.

Preventative

Valuing local communities:

Local people feel heard. Local assets are identified and utilised.

Asset based

A tailored approach:

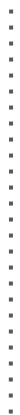
A culture of working in partnership, helping people to develop and thrive by responding to individual needs and leading together.

One size fits one

Recommendations: Valuing Community

Being well, together

Build upon the #KindnessMidlothian campaign. Use social media to engage with citizens, highlight stories of local community action and showcase examples where council staff have gone above and beyond.



Holistic

Meaningful local engagement

Help staff to strengthen and build upon emerging ties with communities and work in partnership to deliver local, place based services.



Valuing what's on our doorstep

Work with local communities and co-design how to best make use of outdoor spaces, e.g. outdoor classrooms and meeting rooms.



Rooted in the local community

Support Midlothian's grassroots organisations. Be creative and work collaboratively with local initiatives to involve them in the council's future vision.



Asset Based



Recommendations: Remote/Flexible Working

Working Smarter

Embed equal access to technology; digital training; a flexible work culture; and digital working into policy and practice.

A tailored approach

Work in partnership with individuals, teams and directorates to understand what flexible working means for them and what they need to make this a reality (infrastructure/training/ technology, etc), and ensure staff are fully aware of the support available to them

Local and flexible place-based working

Think creatively about how the council can utilise its estate and assets, alongside digital remote solutions, to better respond to local community needs.

Sustainable Futures

Work with staff and teams to identify ways of integrating flexible working into their roles to enable a better work-life balance and reduce travel.



Recommendations: Digital First

Access to WiFi

Provide access to WiFi across all services and facilities to help deliver modern, local and accessible services for all.

Technical Capability

Invest in an infrastructure that supports digital ways of working, which includes training, technology and ongoing support provision.

Making things easier

Work with teams and directorates to understand the changes to process that have been made during the pandemic, the tools and technologies that have been introduced and the impact these have made.

Digital by default

Develop governance and policies, e.g. for remote multi-agency meetings, to encourage and enable teams to adopt a digital by default approach long term and reduce travel time, costs and Midlothian's carbon footprint.

Modern



Recommendations: Leading New Ways of Working

Clear, consistent and regular communication

Reflect upon what worked well during the crisis, such as: regular bulletin from chief executive, increased points of (formal and informal) connection between team members and regular updates from managers. Work with teams and directorates to develop a consistent approach to communication, which can then be tailored to meet the needs of different groups.

Shaped by staff experience

Develop new governance, policy, training and support to embed positive new ways of working, e.g. autonomy, communication, leadership and collaboration.

New opportunities

Work with teams across the whole organisation to better understand the skills and capabilities of staff and develop new roles and career pathways, built upon experiences and learning from the pandemic, e.g. skills development opportunities.

Holistic

Hub & Spoke

Continual
Improvement

Midlothian's Future Vision

Recommendations: Education

Equitable and consistent access to tools and technology

Work with schools to establish access to consistent tools and platforms, alongside remote access to school systems to enable education staff to work to full capacity.

Develop an evidence informed approach

Draw upon evidence and best practice at a local and national level and support teachers to build skills and capacity in remote teaching, e.g. using resourced peer support.

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Digital Learning for All

Work with professionals, children, families and carers to iteratively test ideas to help overcome the barriers to children and young people accessing learning support remotely.

Transforming Education in Midlothian

Work in partnership with school staff, pupils and families to consolidate what they have learned from the pandemic and co-design an approach to taking this forward.

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A landscape photograph of rolling hills. In the foreground, a stone wall and a wire fence run across the frame. The hills are covered in green grass and some darker patches, possibly heather. In the distance, a valley with a town is visible under a clear sky.

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