

## Executive Team – for assurance

**Date:** 11 March 2021

**Prepared for:** Executive Team

**Prepared by:** Jen Green

**Topic:** Volta – Returning to the office and staff consultation plan

**Purpose of report:** Volta have been working on a plan to reopen our offices when government guidance and restrictions allow, and to hold an all-staff consultation on how and where we work in future. This paper sets out the approach considered by Volta and their proposed plan.

**Reason for report:** ET is asked to consider the proposed plan to reopen the offices, when restrictions allow, and if they support the proposed plan for the staff consultation process for the future of how and where we work.

**Time required:** 15 minutes

### 1. Background

- 1.1. This report builds on previous work by Operation Volta and is split into two main sections – reopening our offices and future of work

### 2. Reopening our offices

- 2.1. The message remains that no one will be expected to return to an office while social distancing measures are in place, however with the introduction of the new road map for the easing of Covid-19 restrictions announced by the Prime Minister on 22 February, we can prepare to reopen our offices in England.
- 2.2. Volta reviewed the guidance in place and recommended that from 29 March the offices in England are reopened for essential tasks and for health and wellbeing reasons only. Although greater indoor activities are not part of the lockdown easing until April, we are particularly aware of those requiring access to the office for essential tasks and wellbeing reasons. Following the approach in place before Christmas, Wilmslow would be open for 2 days a week initially. Should the numbers attending the offices replicate the numbers from our previous experience, we expect there to be less

than 30 people using the offices. The London office can open as many days as needed.

- 2.3. As restrictions continue to ease, the Wilmslow estate can increase the numbers of buildings available and increase the numbers of days they are available for taking a staged approach. Volta will continue to monitor the changes in the guidance as well as demand for office space.
- 2.4. The pace of restrictions easing across the devolved administrations is slower, Scotland and Wales still have a 'stay at home' order in place, and Northern Ireland has extended their lockdown until 1 April. Again, we will monitor changes in restrictions to allow people to return for essential tasks and wellbeing reasons as soon as restrictions allow.
- 2.5. We have reviewed the risk assessments, protocols and measures put in place when the offices were reopened in September last year, and are confident that everything is in place to reopen the offices in Wilmslow and London with one week's notice. Two more members of the Learning and Development team have been trained and are ready to deliver the mandatory Safe Ways of Working training for any staff who need to return but have not yet completed it.
- 2.6. Protocols are being developed for the use of meeting rooms and will be included in the Safe Ways of Working Training. A suitable method for staff to safely book a desk in the offices in advance is being developed by Digital and IT and HR.
- 2.7. Volta are also considering the additional protocols or policies that would need to be in place once restrictions are lifted. This includes our approach to employee testing and vaccination, colleagues that may not want to return to offices, or colleagues that may never want to work from home.

#### Conclusion

- 2.8. If ET are happy with this approach, an internal comms could be sent to all staff to outline the approach, in advance of 29 March. This would be in keeping with our commitment to give colleagues as much notice as possible before we make any changes.

### 3. Future of work

- 3.1. An important objective of the Volta board is to consider how we recover from the pandemic. The board have been reviewing the external context we're operating in, what we have learnt from a year of working from home, the nature of the demand from our customers and stakeholders during the pandemic, the way other organisations are approaching their recovery, alongside our future accommodation strategy, as well as listening to colleagues formally and informally through the health and wellbeing surveys, the staff forum and ET briefing sessions.
- 3.2. While nobody expects that full time working from home is our long-term approach, there have been some benefits that could be capitalised on for the future.
- 3.3. We could leave our office accommodation as it is and when restrictions are lifted encourage or require colleagues to return to them. However, Volta have discussed the opportunity to seize the possibilities of operating differently, both in terms of how we work and where we work. Workshops with a diverse group of staff across different levels and areas of work discussed the opportunities of working differently last year. They suggested that a blended way of working, with some time in the office and at home, could help to:
  - expand our recruitment reach with more diverse talent sought from across the country rather than localised to our Wilmslow estate
  - adapt to meet the nature of demand for our services by understanding the impact of the pandemic on our customers and stakeholders
  - support greater collaboration and productivity
  - change the way we configure our offices with more space for collaboration for outcome focused project teams or quiet spaces for those that need to meet privately.
- 3.4. Throughout the pandemic ET and Volta have committed to including staff and Trade Unions in the development of any future approach. We are also aware that following the announcements from government and the devolved administrations that staff are keen to understand the next steps for returning to our offices

would be. As stated above we committed to letting staff know about any changes in plans with sufficient notice. With that in mind Volta suggests a broad staff consultation.

- 3.5. To start this consultation a vision statement (annex 1) has been drafted which encourages participation in the consultation and sets the parameters we would be willing to consider for the future of work.
- 3.6. Volta are suggesting that we run an all-staff questionnaire, hold guided team meetings based on solutions and outcomes and then run smaller focus groups to probe the detail if needed, as follows:
  - **Team meeting discussions:** Held from the end of March, the purpose of this activity is to gather insight and feedback at a local level, asking teams to consider their collective requirements, their personal experiences, the needs of their customers and stakeholders and their overarching departmental objectives. Internal Communications will produce a guidance pack to help managers structure discussions and provide feedback.
  - **Quantitative activity - staff survey:** Managed in house from the end of March, the purpose of this survey is to give all staff the opportunity to share their views. This would consist of a series of questions that draw out the requirements for individuals to do their job – not just focus where they do it, but when and how they work too.
  - **Qualitative activity - focus groups:** Held during April, the purpose of this activity is to further probe any recurring themes, trends or areas of focus following the teams' feedback and survey data. They plan to draw out themes and enable collective consideration about what we have learnt to date. This activity will comprise of various invited groups of staff, with no more than 10 members at each group, including a specific group for our Trade Unions as suggested at Volta.

## 4. Next steps

- 4.1. Should the approach be agreed then the planning for the internal communications and consultation approach will begin.

- 4.2. The insight from the consultation will then be used to inform our future ways of working strategic approach as well as our accommodation strategy.

## 5. Equality, diversity and inclusion considerations

- 5.1. The approach to consulting with colleagues before making any changes to how and where we work could have positive impacts for equality, diversity and inclusion. The way in which the consultation is planned, by using a variety of mechanisms to collect feedback, is designed to include as many people as possible by making it as accessible as possible. Feedback has been captured through the staff forum to understand how people prefer to engage in consultations such as these and a range of options have been selected.
- 5.2. The potential outcomes of the consultation will support those with protected characteristics to work in a way that enables them to be as productive and effective in the workplace as possible; increase awareness about diversity in the workplace and any specific requirements to support those with protected characteristics. Furthermore, if we change the way we work in the future, this could increase diversity in the workplace so that it is more representative of the community we serve.
- 5.3. The approach to reopening the offices also has positive impacts for equality, diversity and inclusion. While no one is being asked to return while social distancing is in place, we are planning to reopen offices for those that need sometime in the office for their health and wellbeing.

## 6. Communications considerations

- 6.1. Internal communications plan is in development for both elements of this paper, the ICO's plan for reopening the office, as well as the consultation for the future of how and where we work. Internal communications are represented on the Volta programme board and have already contributed to the plan set out in this paper.

## 7. Alignment with values

- 7.1. Ambitious – this plan sets out how we make the most of the lessons learnt about our ways of working during the pandemic, not simply returning to business as usual. It could enable the ICO to capitalise on the opportunities identified.

Collaboration – Both ET and Volta have committed to taking a collaborative approach to the development of our plans following the pandemic. We have also sought feedback and insight into the way other organisations have approached their recovery from the pandemic period.

Service Focused – The changes to the way we work should encompass the nature of the demand for our services and feedback from our stakeholders. This insight will be embedded into and future plans.

## 8. Impact on Risks and Opportunity Register

- 8.1. R84 – Major incident response and R83 – staff wellbeing and welfare.

## 9. Publication considerations

- 9.1. This report can be published internally and externally.

**Consultees:** Michael Collins, Jane Williams, Emma Deen, Emma Titley, Tim Bowden, Su Bansal, Louise Byers

**Annexes:** Annex 1 - Proposed Future of Work vision statement for staff consultation

### **Proposed Future of Work vision statement for staff consultation**

No one foresaw the dramatic changes to the way we work at the start of 2020, the pace, scale and types of change has undoubtedly created challenges, but there have been benefits for our ways of working too.

We have learnt a significant amount about the way we work, and the conditions we need to make work productive, effective and satisfying. Whether that's personally or collectively as a team or an organisation.

Even before the events of 2020, government had laid out plan to make the Civil Service more economic and provide faster services to the public, including office accommodation.

It's important to say that while social distancing is in place, no one will be expected to return to our offices. But now, with some light at the end of what has felt like a long tunnel, it's right that we reflect on what we have learnt, and think about how and where we'll work in the future.

In keeping with our ambitious value, we don't want to simply return to 'normal' or business as usual, we want to capitalise on this opportunity to make improvements to the way we work.

We know that nobody expects full time home working to be our long term approach. Equally, we don't expect that we'll all return to full time office working. It's likely that we will have a blended approach, based on the needs of our teams, our priorities and objectives and our personal needs to deliver the best we can.

We understand that the flexibility of working from home can be a real benefit, both personally and for the organisation too. Not having to navigate a long daily commute is appreciated by many, for some it may enable a better work life balance. As an organisation, we have the opportunity to broaden our recruitment and selection pool by supporting people to work at a greater distance from our office space. This can increase our opportunities for greater diversity or different skill sets. However, working remotely may reduce the opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, it certainly cuts our social interactions and can make it harder to work together to solve some of the complex challenges we face as a regulator.

Throughout the pandemic we have listened to colleagues, and as we plan for our future, that's what we'd like to do again. We want to explore

collectively how we evolve for the future. For example, based on our objectives, personally or as a team, where and how do you work best? As a manager how can you support and enable your teams differently if they are blended, both in the office and virtual? How can we collaborate effectively? And what infrastructure might we need to support this?

In short, we're asking you to think about the physical, technological and cultural changes we need to continue to be an effective regulator and employer of choice. It's not just about returning from the pandemic, it's about preparing the ICO to meet the challenges and opportunities we have ahead of us for the future.