


KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

APRIL 13, 2021

Pandemic Response: Shift to Long-Term Remote Work Creates Opportunities for Benefits but Requires More Planning to Mitigate Risk

This report is a review of risks and possible mitigation strategies related to remote work decisions. We have not yet completed our assessment of the County's transitions to remote work and are not yet making recommendations because of the evolving nature of these decisions. However, when our office's assessment is complete, we will use the information in this document as a starting point for making recommendations in the future. Visit the pandemic response page on the Auditor's website to view related reports.

King County is in the process of developing a multi-year plan about where and how King County executive branch employees work and deliver services to residents. In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, King County quickly transitioned roughly one-third of its 15,000 employees to remote work. By doing so, the County maintained operations and services while observing ongoing restrictions on public gathering. The remote work mandate has continued through the emergency and currently expires on July 5, 2021. Executive staff note that this mandated remote work provides the opportunity to learn more about the potential costs and benefits of adopting long-term remote work as policy. County employees have also expressed interest in continuing to work remotely after the current remote work mandate expires. The Department of Natural Resources and Parks (DNRP) has already decided to continue remote work with some in-person spaces available after the current mandate expires and Executive departments are developing proposals in the first half of 2021 for long-term work planning based on Executive-provided guidance. The County Executive plans to make decisions based on these proposals before the remote work mandate expires.

It will take time to understand the full impact of making remote work arrangements permanent on county finances and operations. For example, the potential cost or savings from capital actions resulting from remote work arrangements are dependent on future decisions. According to senior executive staff, they decided to close the Administration Building in 2020 in light of anticipated maintenance costs and the availability of capacity in other facilities. In the 2021-2022 budget, the Executive wrote that the closing of the Administration Building will "allow the County to avoid $40 million in deferred maintenance" in the longer term. These savings are a possibility. However, most of that money only becomes tangible savings if the County never re-occupies the building or that maintenance is never needed under county ownership to prevent the building from becoming unsellable or unsafe.

Additionally, county departments might find they need to make operational adjustments to address equity concerns or employee engagement needs. For example, there are common equity concerns for transitioning to remote work, including that some employees do not have suitable working conditions in their homes. Also, there are likely racial disparities between groups of people who work remotely and those who are required to work in person. We conducted a survey of county employees which indicated that more than 40 percent of respondents currently working remotely lack reliable internet access at least some of the time. A third of remote working respondents communicated that they did not have an appropriate space to take video calls, putting them at a disadvantage when trying to stay connected to colleagues and managers. Some agencies we interviewed reported staff morale issues when some employees are working in person while others are working from home, and that managers are struggling to support staff feeling frustrated with these situations. According to senior executive staff, agencies are considering survey results in their plans and how to use any savings to invest in employee programs or reduce carbon emissions. Also, executive staff expect that post-pandemic operations will offer different work locations and tools than those currently available under the pandemic teleworking mandate.

If hard-to-reverse decisions are made before departments have had a chance to test out their plans once post-pandemic operations resume, the County could incur operational challenges or potentially need to spend money to make adjustments. Mandatory remote work has given the County an opportunity to experiment with an operational model and one that county leaders state would not likely have otherwise been tried. Remote work plans will give departments a place to start post-pandemic operations and may need further adjustments if agencies see service demands increase and find more effective combinations for remote and in-person work. And, these changes might require more in-person facility space than initially estimated. For example, if these changes require more facility space, and the County has already made decisions to mothball or sell facilities it owns, new space will need to be acquired. The Facilities Management Division noted in the 2020 Real Property Asset Management Plan (RAMP) update that county ownership of its office space will be preferred to leasing as ownership provides greater stability and lower total costs than leasing due to economic cycles and steadier facility costs, depending on circumstances of the needed space.

The County is also at a disadvantage to make these space and facility decisions at this moment due to a lack of data. The 2020 RAMP noted that the County needs but lacks accurate and up-to-date data and a comprehensive asset management system to inform real property asset management decisions. According to senior executive staff, King County has sought to mitigate this risk by taking a more conservative approach to consolidating space for most departments except for DNRP. Executive staff anticipate the space in King Street Center vacated by DNRP will allow other departments to relocate within existing county-owned facilities.

The risks noted in this interim report can be mitigated by specifying major decision-making processes and countywide goals, and ensuring good data is available to guide departments in evaluating and adjusting their plans. The current remote work decision-making guidance to departments does not include the County's timeline for long-term decisions, particularly related to capital, and whether departments will have a chance to see what works for them under more normal operations and to subsequently adjust. The county guidance has a list of general areas to consider for impacts: equity; health, safety, and engagement; operational needs; change management; budgeting; sustainability; legal compliance; and worksite changes, but does not include the Executive's prioritization in these areas, nor does it specify how the Executive will assess department proposals for alignment with these areas. The guidance also does not require agencies to establish how they will assess whether their plans are working or how to determine what changes are needed—for example, there are no requirements for measures, targets, or baselines for the goals the departments chose to prioritize. Our future work in this area will focus on the extent to which the Executive takes these actions.

Justin Anderson, Elise Garvey, and Luc Poon conducted this review. Please contact the project supervisor Ben Thompson at 206-477-1035, if you have any questions about the issues discussed in this report.

Advancing Performance & Accountability

KYMBER WALTMUNSON, KING COUNTY AUDITOR

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The King County Auditor's Office was created by charter in 1969 as an independent agency within the legislative branch of county government. The office conducts oversight of county government through independent audits, capital projects oversight, and other studies. The results of this work are presented to the Metropolitan King County Council and are communicated to the King County Executive and the public. The King County Auditor's Office performs its work in accordance with Government Auditing Standards.

INTERIM REPORT

This product is an interim report, as defined in GAGAS 9.17.g, for an audit that complies with Government Auditing Standards.