

Future Work Design

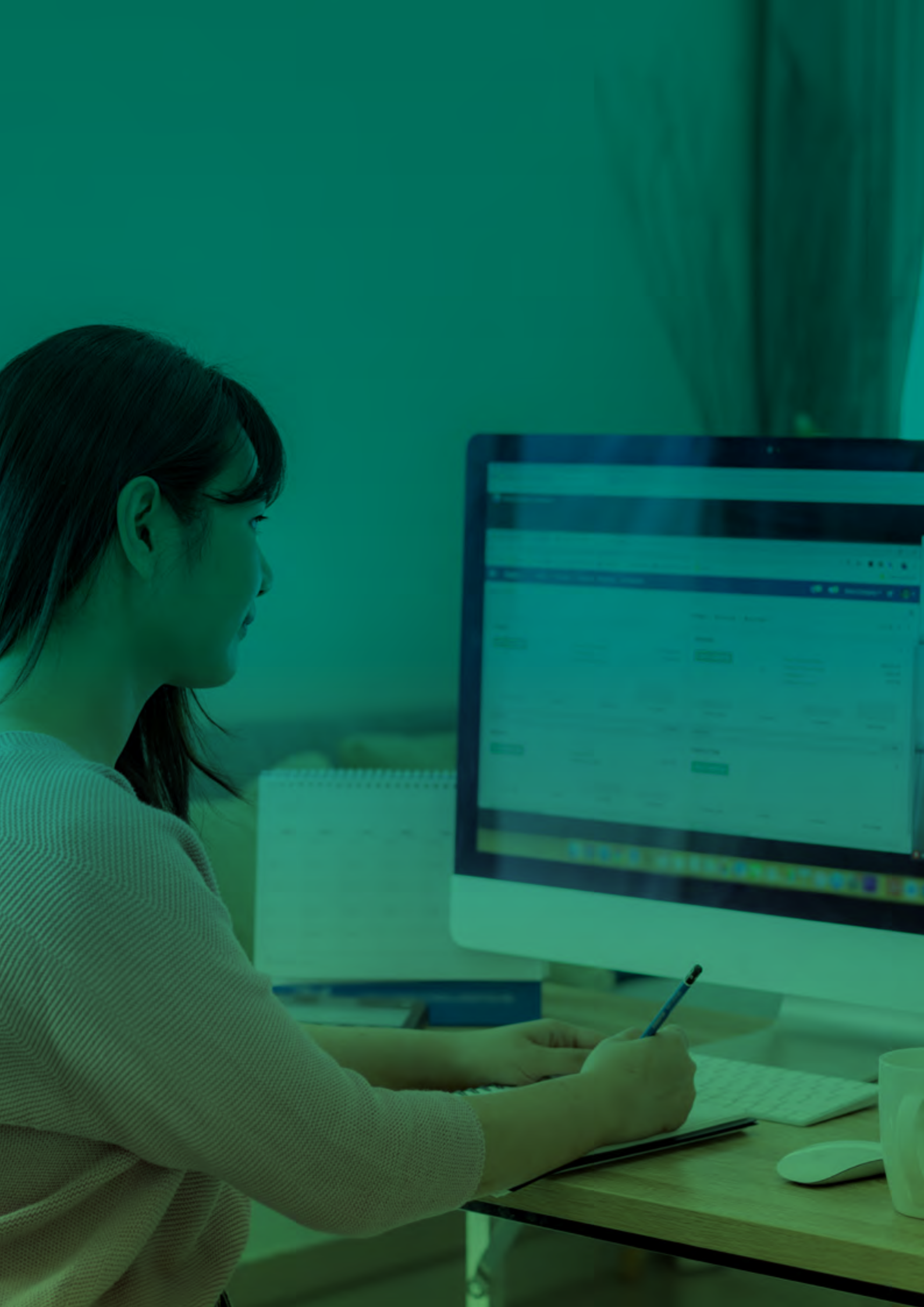
Using staff experiences of newly adopted working practices to inform the way we work in the future

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Foreword

As Director of Corporate Resources at East Riding of Yorkshire Council, I and my colleagues are determined to make sure that our staff are supported in the best way possible during these unprecedented times and indeed in the future once the pandemic is consigned to the history books.

The University of Hull (UoH) is one of our key partners in the region and we have worked closely with the Centre for Human Factors over the years to provide development opportunities for our staff. The UoH research team involved in this project has strong academic and industrial credibility and included Dr Fiona Earle (Chartered Occupational Psychologist, Director of the Centre for Human Factors, and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology), Dr Katie Cunah, (Psychologist and Postdoctoral Researcher) and Helen Roberts (Associate Consultant with over 20 years of people experience, working with senior leaders, executives and management).

COVID-19 has brought much change and many opportunities. East Riding of Yorkshire Council had to enable over 4,000 staff to work remotely almost overnight, making new IT solutions and physical resources easily accessible to enable staff to work effectively. We have proven beyond reasonable doubt that for many of us, work is very much an activity and not a location. These very same challenges were mirrored across the country, both in the private and public sector. These are challenging times, and technology is only one element that enabled us all to continue to work. Without the resilience, resourcefulness and passion of staff, services would have struggled to deliver what our residents need. The challenge now facing every organisation and individual is to understand what we have learnt from this experience and to determine what it means for how we work in the future.

The wellbeing of our staff is at the forefront of any future decisions about future ways of working.

The issues we face are national or indeed global. We felt there was a significant opportunity provided through the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government funding and decided to work with the Centre for Human Factors to undertake qualitative evidence-based research to help us understand more about how our workforce is coping with these significant changes to working practices. We recognised the merits of doing this in collaboration with our close partner local authorities across the Humber region – Hull City Council, North East Lincolnshire Council and North Lincolnshire Council.

This report highlights the challenges and opportunities which our workforces are facing, and a number of themes have emerged which can help us all in developing our future plans for how we work.

The research has also led to the development of some practical tools which can support us all in our journey. These include Working Practice Profiles which will help us to understand the needs of different staffing groups and allow us to tailor our approaches, recognising that a 'one size fits all' approach is a thing of the past. As well as a bespoke survey tool, using the themes emerging from the research will help facilitate local authorities nationally to engage with staff and create solutions which will benefit our residents, staff and taxpayers.



Darren Stevens
Director of Corporate Resources,
East Riding of Yorkshire Council



Executive Summary

Recent changes to working practices have been unprecedented, with far-reaching consequences. Whilst it is easy (and currently common) to make assumptions about the potential costs and benefits of remote and home-based working, it is important to take an evidence-based approach and develop a balanced view. On the basis of this evidence, decisions that impact on future work design can then be well informed, taking account of the full range of potential impacts on the health and wellbeing of an organisation and its people. To address this, a collaborative team consisting of four Local Authorities (LAs) in the Humber region teamed up with psychologists at the University of Hull. Funded by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the work aimed to consider the experiences of staff in adapting to the changes to working practices, with a view to using the information to inform work design for the future.

A series of 32 focus groups were carried out with participants representing a wide sample of roles across the four regions. Data gathered here has provided a substantial body of qualitative evidence to support the decision making of LA recovery and forward planning teams, including the four partner LAs and wider national authorities. The project delivers three outputs: A qualitative report, presenting the breadth of issues and experiences from LA staff, a series of Working Practice Profiles presenting issues of relevance to specific role types, and a bespoke survey tool to enable the measurement of stress risks within LA remote working populations.

From the qualitative phase of research, it seems clear that for many people the benefits of remote and/or home-based working do outweigh the challenges and costs, but also that the challenges are significant enough to be potentially harmful at an individual and organisational level, if unchecked.

The issues explored and experiences described in this research outline the many aspects of remote working that require further consideration and possible intervention.

A high proportion of the participants in this study hope to see blended working arrangements moving forwards and we would expect that any subsequent quantitative data gathered using the survey tool will further support this finding.

If teams or organisations take a decision to return to traditional office-based working practices, it may have a negative impact on staff morale, undermining the genuine excitement that was expressed by many participants regarding the recent pace of change and positive cultural shifts. We have highlighted here that flexibility, choice and trust are highly desirable features of the future workplace for the employees.

These features of work characteristics are consistent with a long history of psychology research, which evidences their value to productivity, wellbeing and job satisfaction, and with the CIPD's concept of Good Work. Achieving this vision will require further investment in equipment and people, particularly management. Using best available evidence to support managers to develop their skills and confidence in managing agile workers will be likely to reap systemic health and wellbeing benefits. Local authorities may do well to seize this moment in order to achieve long-term positive transformation.



01. Project Introduction

COVID-19 created an unprecedented situation, and Local Authorities (LAs) were forced to rapidly develop emergency working practices to maintain service delivery, most frequently consisting of remote and home-based working. Recovery task-groups recognised the need to understand the experiences of staff in adapting to these new ways of working so that future work can be properly 'designed' according to the needs, experiences, hopes and expectations of staff.

To explore these crucial issues, East Riding of Yorkshire Council (ERYC) partnered with the three other regional LAs and a team of psychologists and researchers from the University of Hull (UoH) to develop a plan for understanding staff experiences and perspectives. This report is one of three outputs from the project, sharing the qualitative findings of this applied research.

1.1 Background & Aims

The aim of this project was to provide the LAs with timely information about the experiences and perspectives of staff regarding the changes to working practices. The LAs plan to use the findings to inform the design of future working practices and consider the kinds of resources, training and support that staff and managers may need to support them in developing healthy and sustainable working practices for the future.

The project was one of 11 national projects selected from over 90 applications to receive funding from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) via the COVID-19 Local Digital Challenge Fund, awarded in August 2020.

The MHCLG have been involved in weekly project meetings and have offered guidance and advice throughout.

The project began on 1st August 2020 and involved the delivery and execution of 32 virtual focus groups across the four local authorities, undertaken by experienced researchers from UoH, and conducted, analysed and reported upon from an occupational psychology perspective. The project outputs were delivered in late October 2020; this report is one of three outputs, outlined below.

Definition of terms

Throughout this report, a range of terms associated with working practices are used, including *home-working* and *working from home* (interchangeably), *agile working*, *remote working*, *smart working*, and *flexible working*. These terms are used differently within organisations. Within the context of the current report, we have assumed the following meanings:

Home-working and working from home

specifically relates to working either part or all of the time from (or at) home.

Agile working and Smart working are terms

used to refer to an outcomes-based approach to task-delivery that enables flexibility in terms of time and place. The LAs in this study had all to some extent rolled out initiatives that aimed to achieve agile (or Smart) working.

Remote working incorporates a range

of locations of working which could include: a vehicle, a client home, in community hubs, at home, or in locations other than their main office-base.

Whilst flexible working generally refers to

hours of work, participants often used the terms 'flexible working' or 'working flexibly' to refer to both place and time. Where possible, we have used flexible working to refer to hours, unless it is within a participant excerpt.

1.2 The Team

Led by Eddie Niblett at ERYC, this project has been a multi-disciplinary and multi-organisational collaboration between ERYC, and the three other regional LAs, Hull City Council (HCC), North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC) and North Lincolnshire Council (NLC) together with psychologists and researchers from The Centre for Human Factors at the University of Hull (UoH), and a communications team consisting of UoH and freelance marketing and communications experts. The LA teams comprised a mix of staff with responsibility for ICT, OD, HR, Transformation, in recognition of the various significant organisational impacts of the changes to working practices.

Local Authority partners

The four LAs (ERYC, NELC, NLC and HCC) combined cover a large geographical area within Yorkshire and Lincolnshire often referred to as 'The Humber Region', and together they serve the populations of the City of Hull, the towns of Beverley, Goole, Bridlington, Driffield, Barton-upon-Humber, Brigg, Scunthorpe, Grimsby, Cleethorpes, the East Yorkshire and North East Lincolnshire coast, and the smaller towns and villages in between. The region lies on the North and South bank of the River Humber, on the North East coast of England, and is joined by The Humber Bridge, and it sits within the Yorkshire & The Humber region. Further contextual information regarding each LA is provided below.

East Riding of Yorkshire Council (ERYC)

ERYC is a unitary authority and serves a population of over 300,000 covering around 1000 square miles of coastal and rural communities, mostly small towns and villages.

It employs over 5,000 people the majority of whom were office-based prior to the COVID-19. There were a minimal number of staff home-working with agile working adopted by specific teams within the authority prior to COVID-19.

North Lincolnshire Council (NLC)

NLC is a unitary authority and serves a population of over 172,000 covering around 328 square miles of coastal and rural communities, mostly small towns and villages but including Scunthorpe, Brigg and Barton-upon-Humber. It employs over 5000 people with just over one third of these being office-based prior to COVID-19. There were some staff home-working with agile working adopted by many staff within the authority prior to COVID-19.

North East Lincolnshire Council (NELC)

NELC covers an area of 74 sq miles and has an estimated population of 159,563 (ONS 2019). North East Lincolnshire is on the south bank of the Humber estuary and includes the 3 towns of Grimsby, Cleethorpes and Immingham and an area of surrounding Wolds villages. It employs around 2,200 people with just over half being office based prior to COVID-19. There were some staff home-working with agile working adopted by many staff within the authority prior to COVID-19.

Hull City Council (HCC)

HCC is a unitary authority and serves a population of over 300,000 covering around 27 square miles. Hull is the fourth largest city in Yorkshire and Humber. It employs just under 5000 people, a third of our workforce had started to adopt smarter working practices, including already performing many tasks remotely prior to COVID-19.

University of Hull

The University of Hull has a proud history of academic excellence and an ambitious research and knowledge exchange agenda. Our team at the Centre for Human Factors includes psychologists and researchers with expertise in quantitative and qualitative research methods, occupational health psychology and human factors. The team undertakes applied research exploring aspects of psychosocial risk in occupational settings. Working with a broad range of partners, we aim to improve future working practices, placing employee health and wellbeing at the centre of business decision-making.



Researcher backgrounds

The UoH research team for this project included Dr Fiona Earle, Dr Katie Cunnah, and Helen Roberts.

Dr Fiona Earle is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, Director of the Centre for Human Factors, and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology. With over 20 years' experience of working in academic and industrial settings, her main focus is working with organisations to understand the sources of work-place stress, and implementing solutions to minimise the impact of these stressors.

Dr Katie Cunnah is a Psychologist and Postdoctoral Researcher working in the discipline of occupational health psychology within the Centre for Human Factors. She has expertise in qualitative research methods and her experience within clinical mental health settings brings a clinical psychology perspective to her work.

Helen Roberts is an Associate Consultant with over 20 years of people experience, working with senior leaders, executives and management. She works with the team at the Centre for Human Factors to provide a HR perspective and support data collection, analysis and reporting on applied research projects.

Earle and Cunnah co-led the design and execution, analysis and reporting for this project. Roberts contributed by undertaking and reporting four of the 32 focus groups, and providing a HR perspective on the recommendations.

1.3 Outputs: Outline

The research team undertook virtual focus groups with LA representative staff groups to collect data about what works well and what has been difficult from an employee perspective in relation to the changes in working practices. This data was used to develop the three outputs: (1) this qualitative report detailing the research findings from the focus groups; (2) a series of 'Working Practice Profiles'(WPP) outlining specific challenges for certain types of workers; and (3) a survey tool for which the questions were formulated using the themes emerging from the qualitative research.

Qualitative report

The purpose of this report is to provide a detailed outline of our findings from the qualitative research. The research process involved the collection of a vast amount of rich qualitative data from participants across a range of services, departments, levels and roles from all four LAs. In order to ensure that a full and fair range of views are represented here, this qualitative report is detailed and offers selected excerpts illustrating participant perspectives.

Working Practice Profiles (WPPs)

The WPPs (Appendix A) accompany this report and should be read in conjunction, but they provide an outline of role-specific challenges, with roles grouped together by ways of working. The qualitative report provides perspectives of general working practices, whereas data regarding participant experiences that related to specific role types, such as those required to undertake home visits, work in community centres, leisure and/or tourism roles, or customer contact centres, was siphoned off in the early stages of data analysis and instead used to develop the WPPs. The groupings for reporting the role-specific findings in the WPPs suggested by the researchers, based on the data collected, are:



1. Home Visits

Examples: social workers (adult, children, disability, fostering, adoption); family co-ordinators; housing; rents; fostering and adoption service; welfare visits.

2. Business to Business

Examples: Environmental health, finance for schools and other services to schools such as admissions; waste management; commissioning; care brokerage; flood risk; partnership delivery; trading standards

3. Leisure Services

Examples: Events and venues; libraries; parks and gardens; museums; galleries; creative arts and culture.

4. Community Outreach and Hubs

Examples: Teachers/Adult Education; community outreach; Family support; Children's Centres; Youth Community Development workers; Road Safety.

5. Customer Contact

Examples: Call Centres; debt management; tax; bereavement; waste management; electoral services; neighbourhood nuisance; collections.

6. Business Support –Office-based

Examples: Human resources(HR); learning & development (L&D); payroll; finance; marketing; communications; PR; business change; policy; recruitment; procurement; legal (corporate); business intelligence;

7. Business Support – Facilities-based

Examples: ICT; Facilities management and building control; projects; safety.

8. Court-related & legal processes

Examples: Registrar & bereavement; Coroners court; magistrates court; independent reviewing officers; court enforcement.

9. COVID-19 Hub

Individuals were brought in from elsewhere to support the development of COVID-19 response hubs.

For those whose roles are primarily office-based, this content is more broadly relevant and so is reported within the qualitative report rather than in the WPPs. The volume of information reported in the WPPs reflects not the volume of information that was collected from participants in those roles, but the volume of information that relates specifically to those role types. There are many other types of roles which have been less impacted by COVID-19 and therefore were excluded from this research. However, further work could be undertaken with these roles to develop a fuller picture of any impacts for these roles.

Bespoke survey tool

The qualitative data has been used to formulate a series of context-specific questions that reflect the findings. These questions have been added to a 35-item question set called the Management Standards Indicator Tool (MSIT) to generate a 76-item survey for measuring occupational stress risk in the current LA context, particularly regarding remote working. The MSIT is a standardised tool for proactively measuring occupational stress risk within organisations, as recommended by the UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE)¹. The resulting 76-item survey provides organisations with an evidence-based tool for assessing stress risk, with an accompanying scoring and interpretation guidance (Appendices B & C). Organisations using this tool may also wish to add brief screening tools for mental health status and/or other health outcomes.

Data from the quantitative survey will offer evidence of the prevalence of the issues raised in the qualitative research, with opportunities for analysis of differences between groups, such as by organisation, service, department and team.

Where organisations also include mental health or health outcome measures, the data can be used to explore relationships between potential sources of stress (the presence of stressors within the organisation) and health outcomes (the presence of stress within the workforce).



¹Health and Safety Executive. (2020). "The Management Standards". Available at: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/> (accessed September 10, 2020).

How it all fits together

Taken together, this report, the WPPs, and the survey data offer a uniquely broad yet nuanced evidence-based understanding of the experiences and needs of staff within LA settings in relation to the changes to working practices. The current funding extends only as far as the production of this report, the WPPs and the survey tool. However, it is hoped that the four regional LAs and national LAs will then take the necessary steps to make use of the bespoke survey tool to gather stress risk data for their own organisations. This data can then be used to identify priority areas for intervention to protect staff health and wellbeing in the long-term.

Why Use These Resources?

Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work; the relevant legislation – the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 – places a legal responsibility on employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees. This includes minimising the risk of stress-related illness or injury. The Health & Safety Executive is clear that employers should meet this duty in relation to psychosocial risk by doing a risk assessment and then acting upon it, just as they would for a physical health risk. Using the survey tool developed for this project will enable organisations to assess general occupational stress risk via the MSIT, as well as assessing the stress risks associated with the new ways of working. Acting upon these findings should consist of understanding from the data where the priorities for intervention exist, devising a plan to target these areas, and keeping track of progress.

1.4 Methods

Data collection via virtual focus groups took place between 11th August to 14th September 2020, with data analysis and reporting taking place between 15th September and 15th October 2020. This section provides a brief outline of the research methods; a more detailed methodological explanation can be viewed in Appendix D. Methods.

Data collection & analysis

32 focus groups lasting between 1-1.5 hours were undertaken via MS Teams, with an average of 8 participants in each (range 3-12). The group participants were invited to participate by LA project teams. The research received ethical approval from the University of Hull Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee, with informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and GDPR considerations.

Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; field notes and transcripts were then analysed as 'textual data'. This data was then analysed using Template Analysis which is a type of thematic analysis². A full description of the data collection and analysis processes is available in Appendix D.

Reporting

The analysis involved organising the data into coherent themes within the categories of Challenges; Benefits; Caring for Others; Management, Communication & Relationships; Digital Transformation; and Hopes for the Future. The themes within these categories also consist of subthemes where appropriate.

Each theme is a representation of the views of the research participants. Some, but not all, themes are evidenced with illustrative excerpts; providing excerpts for every theme and subtheme would have made the report unmanageably long. To protect individual and organisational confidentiality, all identifying information has been removed, however, the range of quotes incorporated into the report reflects the views across the full range of focus groups and all four LAs.

Representing participant views

Qualitative research aims to elicit, record, analyse and then document the views and perspectives of research participants. It is therefore beyond the scope of this report to explore every possible angle of the categories, themes and subthemes, and a reader can assume that any omission is due to it not being raised by participants in the focus groups.

To protect the anonymity of participants and organisations, excerpts are reported without identifying information or codes. Further explanation of this approach can be found in Appendix D.

²King, N. (2012). Doing template analysis. *Qualitative organizational research: Core methods and current challenges*, 426, 77-101.





2.1 Findings Introduction

During the focus groups, a series of discussion points were put to participants (see Appendix E. Focus Group Topic Guide). The sessions were semi-structured, allowing the groups to be largely participant-led, but based around the structure of the topic guide.

Participant contributions were then coded (or 'labelled') according to their content, and arranged into 'themes'. These themes were arranged into core categories, broadly reflecting the questions posed in the groups:

1. Challenges
2. Benefits
3. Caring for Others
4. Management, Communications and Relationships
5. Digital Transformation
6. Hopes for the Future

The nature and extent of the experiences explored within each category were typically influenced by role type and personal circumstances; the impact of personal circumstances is discussed throughout the report, but role-specific implications of remote working are addressed within the WPPs. Caring for Others is presented and discussed as a discreet section due to the multifaceted nature of the relationship between caring responsibilities and remote working.

The findings begin with the 'Challenges' section which may appear to set rather a negative tone for the report. However, the report has been written to appropriately reflect the data and the balance of content is based on the balance within the research data. We hope that participants will feel that the report taken as a whole adequately represents the full range of views expressed in the focus groups. This will be further explored through the collection of quantitative data in the follow-up survey which has been developed using these findings.

2.2 Challenges

Overview

The challenges reported by participants were varied, complex and frequently interrelated. This section presents the findings associated with the major challenge theme of Threats to Wellbeing and further attention is given to the themes of Barriers to Effective Home Working, and Identity. The main body of this section refers to challenges associated with remote working, but the final section reflects on challenges specifically resulting from the COVID-19 situation and consequences.

2.2.1 Threats to Wellbeing

Dominant across all discussions were five clear stress-risk themes: Work demands, Peer relationships, Conflict between work and homelife, Home working environment, and Unhealthy behaviours. Understanding these risks and developing risk control and mitigation strategies will be critical in developing good future work design.

Work demands

This was found to be a complex and important theme, with many closely-related elements. For the majority of participants, workload has undoubtedly increased and, in many cases, reached concerning levels with potential for considerable threat to wellbeing. Although the factors underpinning this change were initially related to the emergency response, there are additional aspects of remote working which have clearly contributed to changes in work demands.

Emergency response

Unsurprisingly, demand on key parts of the council went up significantly at the start of lockdown, resulting in more work. This was unavoidable, as was the imbalance of demands on those with greater responsibility for emergency adaptation of work systems.

Ensuring the maintenance and continuation of vital LA services required a major collaborative effort, which was confirmed by many participants, one of whom described initially working 12-hour days and weekends to manage their workload. Whilst participants frequently reported positive feelings and pride for their personal contribution, it was clear that maintaining service delivery resulted in significant costs to individual psychological well-being.

Workload

In addition to the challenges of managing the emergency situation, remote working in itself was reported to have an impact on both the volume of work and work intensity. A higher volume of work was a feature of the discussion in many groups, with frequent comments relating to the fact that the work day was now typically longer, "starting earlier, finishing later, with more packed into the day". Interestingly, this was despite having no daily commute; in fact, it was commonly reported that participants were taking advantage of this time gained to undertake the additional work hours required to meet their work demands.

Although many factors, such as changes to both role and systems clearly contributed to a higher workload, increased meeting frequency has certainly been a key factor in managing workplace interaction remotely. One participant explained that:

"There are too many meetings in diaries; meetings that would have been five minute conversations are now 30-minute meetings."

This further contributed to the closely associated issue of work intensity.

Work intensity and work breaks

Strong themes emerged across the discussions in relation to the impact of working from home on patterns of work/rest behaviour. Following initial periods of intensity at the start of lockdown, work for many did not appear to settle to pre-lockdown levels. Conversely, some reported feelings of increasing intensity, noting the "pressure seems even more intense now" as normal practices are resumed. One individual noted:

"I am more productive at home but I think this is detrimental to my own wellbeing."

The same individual cited long periods of time working without breaks:

"My husband gets in at 5pm and I've literally been sat [sic] at my desk all day."

Exploration of this issue identified two important causal elements: the trend towards back-to-back meetings, and the commonly reported need to be "always on".

Back-to-back meetings: A consistent pattern seems to be emerging in the remote working experience, characterised by one participant, who reported 'You log out of one call and go straight into another... everyone has become more accessible'. This is a new tendency towards intense meeting schedules, which would have previously been punctuated by the need to travel between in-person meetings, providing some form of regular break. However, this is not the only factor influencing reported work/rest behaviour.

Guilt over taking breaks: Aside from meeting schedules and workload, many participants reported finding it difficult to force themselves to have time out when working at home; common experiences included simply forgetting to take breaks; "I found myself glued to the screen". This pressure was both intrinsic and extrinsic – one participant reported:

"[I feel] huge guilt over stopping, particularly when supporting vulnerable people; people need your help, things like prescription collection are urgent, even when you have done as much as you physically can, you still feel guilty for stopping... we put this pressure on ourselves."

This theme of guilt was also related to wider perceptions of productivity and expectations around performance. Many participants referred to the concern about moving away from the screen, for example, "If I disappear and the phone goes... is that ok?". This particular group acknowledged and agreed that their management had been great at encouraging people to take breaks, and it was personal guilt that made them think "I can't not be seen to be there and available". Other groups echoed these concerns with one participant stating:

"You worry you might have missed a call....or someone might wonder what you are doing....I would never have worried about that before."

As discussed in several groups, managers have a very important role in setting expectations and developing new healthy and safe ways of working. This is particularly relevant in relation to remote availability and the scheduling of meetings. However, it was also noted in one group that managers themselves need support from the wider organisation to effectively develop healthy new remote working practices. These issues are explored in detail in the Management and Communication Section, 2.5.1.

Work variety

A final aspect of challenge relating to work demands identified within the focus groups is the reduced variety in tasks when working from home. One participant stated:

"Working from home brings with it a certain amount of monotony – it can feel like Ground Hog Day."

This sentiment was echoed by several others, suggesting that they missed the different environments that come with working in an office and some participants referred to 'the days all blending into one'. Although monotony may be less of an immediate concern for recovery teams, this is an important consideration for longer term planning, as work variety is an important component of healthy work characteristics. If unresolved, this is unlikely to impact on longer term employee engagement, satisfaction and perhaps employee retention.

In terms of forward planning, evaluating work demands at the individual, team and department levels will be a vital component of an effective recovery plan. Furthermore, for workers who retain remote working as a core aspect of their role, it will be important to develop systems which support positive expectations relating to online availability and regular breaks.

Peer relationships

Interaction with colleagues has been significantly impacted, as most local authority workers have shifted from largely office-based roles to working from home. This change has unsurprisingly had a major impact on social contact and peer relationships. While communication between and within teams is discussed in detail in Section 2.5, this section of the report considers the challenges to wellbeing associated with social isolation and reduced peer support.

Social isolation

Reduced face-to-face contact was frequently discussed, and has emerged as a significant threat to wellbeing. One participant indicated the importance of this issue:

"...the biggest challenge of working from home is the isolation."

Further insight was provided by a participant who agreed that this was their single biggest personal challenge, explaining that they had "gone from 60 people in a lively office, to being at home alone" and that this had had a significant impact on their mental health.

It should be noted that not all participants experienced social isolation as part of their working from home; some conversely reporting a clear preference for the reduced social contact. However, the majority of participants recognised that this was a significant threat for many, with particular concern for those living alone. Clearly, personal circumstances will impact on the extent to which remote and/or home-based working results in social isolation.

However, feelings of isolation are not restricted to those living alone, for example:

"Even though I have my husband working next door, it does feel as though you're sat [sic] there, on your own and not connecting with anybody, whereas before you'd have the buzz of the office."

Loss of support system

A further implication of this reduced social interaction is the loss of the informal support system generated through the natural day-to-day interactions within an office. This support system consists of a range of elements of interactions between colleagues, including what participants called 'debriefing', informal learning opportunities, team and relationship building, 'banter' and general non-work related social interactions, and the picking up of 'bigger picture' information. These themes are explored in detail in Section 2.5 in relation to team communications.



Home working environment

Participants reported a broad variety of home working environments. Due to pre-existing agile working arrangements, some participants already had established home offices. However, many participants reported difficult working environments, characterised by inadequate working space. It was common for participants to be working from their kitchen or dining room table, without appropriate office chairs. One participant referred to the "room of doom" where they work from the top of storage boxes, and several participants reported a complete lack of table and chairs and were working from their bed or the floor.

This is concerning and has major health and safety implications. Although the circumstances of lockdown created emergency working conditions, forward planning must consider responsibilities for the health and safety of home office equipment and environment when working from home. Furthermore, there are wider implications for recruitment and selection: if a role is designated as 'home-based', with limitations on acceptable working space, this may inadvertently introduce Adverse Impact into the selection system. Consideration of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion will be important in developing positive remote working policies and systems.

It is also worthy of note here that many participants reported sharing their workspace with other members of the household. In some cases, this was considered to be enabling, providing much-needed social interaction, but this was largely dependent on the fit between available space/resources and family demand.

This issue was discussed in many focus groups and lack of boundary between work and homelife emerged as an important theme and potential threat to well-being. One participant reported sharing the kitchen table with his wife, and a further participant noted that there were "three or four of us working from home at any one time, so every room is an office which places pressure on shared resources". It is likely that this was exacerbated by the regular use of video conferencing software, creating distraction as well as issues relating to confidentiality. Whilst this is not dissimilar to the challenge of sharing resources in open plan offices, this blurry boundary between homelife and working life does introduce additional challenges.



Separating work and homelife

A widely recognised effect of lockdown was the erosion of healthy boundaries between work and homelife. This is an important stressor associated with increased risks of burnout and negative organisational outcomes, including reduced commitment and impaired job performance. Furthermore, the lack of boundaries is also known to lead to heightened conflict between work and family, exacerbating the negative impact on worker wellbeing. Three interrelated aspects of work and home separation were identified:

Loss of home as sanctuary

One interesting aspect of working from home was the changing concept of home. Some participants undoubtedly valued a clear separation between their work and homelife and were unhappy with the invasion of work into homelife. One participant stated

"It is supposed to be a sanctuary away from work", which was echoed by others agreeing that "...home was a sanctuary but now that separation is not there".

The need to separate home and work is an interesting individual difference and is perhaps an important factor in an individual's suitability to working from home.

This 'invasion' of work into homelife is closely related to the earlier issue of feeling the need to be 'always on'. With less separation of work and home, participants reported a 'blurring' of their two life sections; as outlined above, this was a common experience, well described by the participant who stated:



"It's more difficult to switch off, as you never really leave work... work is home, home is work...."

A participant from the same group explained,

"I'm in the kitchen – [it's] more difficult to switch off and escape as I can't shut the door on the room at the end of the day."

It is likely that those participants with a separate home office are less at risk of the negative effects of working from home due to the ability to 'shut the door' on their work.

It is relevant to note that this 'blurring of the boundaries' was also reported as a positive aspect of working from home, discussed in detail within Section 2.3.

Whilst many of these boundary issues are beyond the scope of LA systems and policies, it will certainly be useful to keep in mind the importance of individual differences and, therefore, the substantial value of providing choice, wherever that is possible.

Commuting as a break between home and work

Similar to the above, the loss of commuting as a feature of daily life had an interesting pattern of effects. This was frequently a lively topic of conversation, with many participants being extremely positive about the reduction in commuting, with benefits discussed in detail in Section 2.3.

However, it was evident from some discussions that the loss of this punctuation between work and home also generated some important implications for boundaries, for example:

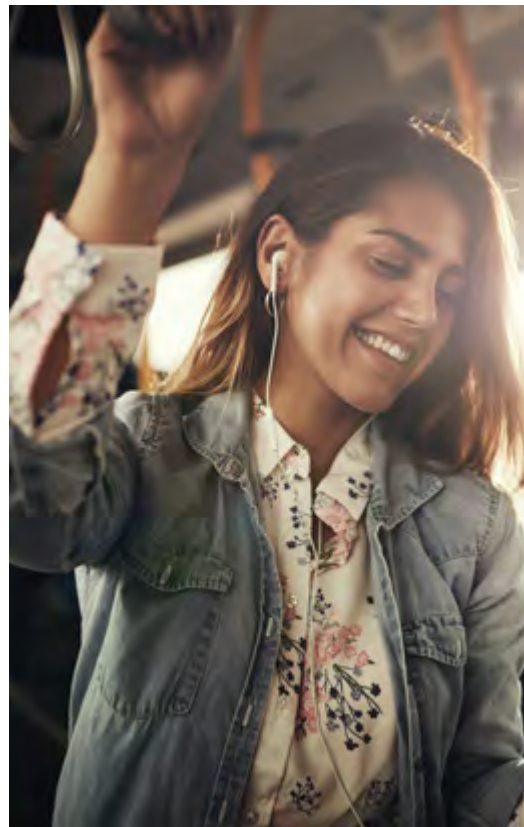
"...It's harder to unwind without the commute; the benefits outweigh the costs... but it is difficult to chop veg while still having work whizzing around your head."

Another participant added:

"Driving home used to be a break between home and work; the ritual of driving and walking to work... it really separates it."

There were many other similar comments, particularly focusing on the transition – "I don't miss the commute – but I miss the transition time". The impact of this carryover on family life was commented on, and one group in particular talked of the challenge of switching between work and home without the transition time:

"I'd come downstairs and immediately my three year old would want to play...but my head was still in the previous call."



Clearly the loss of a commute removes the physical and psychological distance between home and work, which is an inevitable part of remote working. This has both positive and negative consequences, which will be differently weighted depending on workers' individual circumstances, including distance to work, family circumstances and home environment. When moving towards a more permanent agile working model, it is important to understand the broad spectrum of effects, so that decisions at the organisational and individual level can be well-informed.

Work-family conflict

Closely related to the previous threats to wellbeing, working from home has implications for work-family conflict. This is a bi-directional process, in which work can affect home life ('Work-to-family' conflict) and home life can affect work ('Family-to-work' conflict), sometimes simultaneously. In fact, one participant summarised this complex challenge well, referring to the guilt of

"...not being there for the team when you needed to be with your family, and the guilt of not being with your family when you were there for your team."

This experience was common, and participants frequently gave a strong sense of frustration and distress at trying to balance the multiple aspects of their lives. This situation was, of course, significantly exacerbated by the unique circumstances of lockdown, but is likely to be challenging for some, even under normal circumstances of home-based working.

Unsurprisingly, work-to-family conflict was frequently discussed, particularly in relation to the extended working day, the presence of work equipment in family spaces and trying to work in shared areas with family. This will be discussed in more detail later, in relation to childcare challenges (Section 2.4.1).

Family-to-work conflict was also discussed, and is explored further in Section 2.4, including the intrusion of private family behaviours in the background of video calls and the presence of family during what was (prior to lockdown) a quiet 'working from home' day. As previously discussed, this work-family conflict has implications for wellbeing, and although a feature of modern life, will have been a serious challenge for many over the period of lockdown, where their prior support systems were suddenly removed.



Unhealthy behaviours

In addition to the work / home interface and its impact on wellbeing, working from home is also associated with different habits from office-based work. Some of these habits are healthy, such as using what would have been commute time to exercise, and cooking healthier food (explored in Section 2.3). However, there were notable individual differences in reports of the impact of remote working on health behaviour.

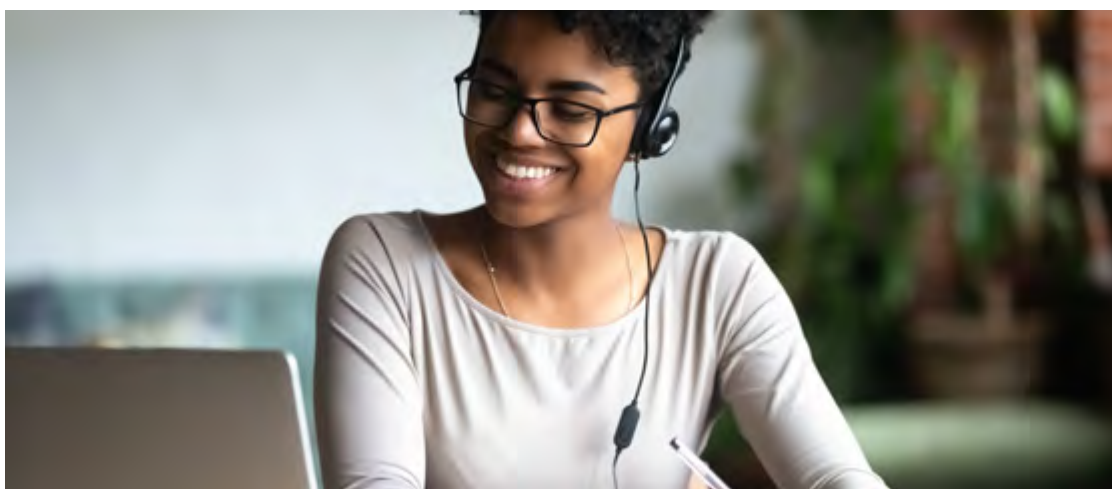
Some participants reported finding it particularly difficult to “stay away from the fridge and the biscuits”, and others agreed that “avoiding the things you shouldn’t do when you’re at home is really difficult”. The issue of eating habits when working remotely was discussed in several focus groups, with recognition that participants were responsible, but that this was a challenge. Similarly, physical activity was a bipolar topic, with some participants finding increased opportunities for exercise, whilst others found themselves sitting all day. One participant described how they now go straight to the garage after finishing work and run on the running machine to ‘switch off’, while others have found themselves unable to take physical breaks during the day and feel unmotivated or unable to exercise in the evenings.

Even where participants had established good working practices when working at home, these were not always easy to sustain. One participant noted that she had “a very good routine at the beginning of lockdown, a dog walk, lunch, logging in and out of work at healthy times”. However, she has slowly reverted to “no lunch, working extra hours and no dog walk”.

She described that “there is a temptation to just try to get it all done when working from home”. Another group agreed that they move less when working from home and that there is a “danger of just sitting staring at the screen for seven hours”.

In forward planning, it is important that healthy remote working guidelines are provided, with advice and support for maintaining healthy behaviours. Managers will be crucial in setting and supporting this expectation and the success of this will be influenced by positive behaviour modelling from line managers.

2.2.2 Barriers to Effective Homeworking



Working from home has many advantages, discussed in Section 2.3. However, in addition to the potential threats to wellbeing, participants also outlined two aspects that they considered to be barriers to effective homeworking: reduced learning opportunities and absence of healthy work structures.

Formal and informal learning and development

Formal training was noted as a particular challenge for new starters, which will be discussed in detail later (Section, 2.5). Beyond the issue of formal training, remote working introduces particular learning and development considerations, as the naturally occurring office interactions are inevitably reduced. Important aspects of this will be discussed later in relation to team communications (Section 2.5.2), but it is worthy of note here that the loss of office interaction impacts on spontaneous

learning opportunities – several participants expressed insightful concern, recognising that this was an important feature of the traditional working environment that would be difficult to replicate remotely.

A further major barrier to effective remote working is the impact on team collaboration. While digital systems offer good opportunities for interacting with team members, participants noted many interesting aspects of this way of working that were affected by the remote nature of the connection. This is an important aspect of remote working and is discussed in detail in Sections 2.5 and 2.6.

Lack of healthy structures

As previously discussed, many participants had found themselves working more hours from home due either to increased workload or because they wanted to be available, often concerned about impression management. The development of support systems and remote working policies will be important in setting expectations about healthy working practices. Some participants reported evolving their own structures to ensure healthy working hours, frequent breaks and punctuation between home and work life. However, new LA guidance which supports staff in setting and formalising these healthy work boundaries will benefit those who are struggling to limit their work intensity. Conversely, this would also benefit those who find it difficult to maintain motivation.

Some participants found themselves less motivated and productive from home. One participant explained that this was because she was “missing the stimulation from others in the office”. This participant also talked about her inner voice being “louder at home” and how she was distracted by all the things that need doing in the home environment. A further participant said that they love their job and look forward to going to work every day but, since working from home, there have been many mornings where they’ve woken up and didn’t want to turn the computer on. Similarly, one participant reported that they had lost structure and just felt that they are not really “doing it right”.



In a different group, a participant reflected on this from a management perspective, reporting:

“For some staff, productivity has gone down and it’s difficult to pick out why that is happening.”

Again, this perhaps reflects an important individual difference in suitability to work at home, possibly related to the personality trait of Conscientiousness. In the same way that overload is a threat to wellbeing, reduced engagement and motivation is also a threat to wellbeing; while long and intense working hours are likely to lead to fatigue and burnout, disengagement is also known to have a negative impact on mental health.

2.2.3 Identity

Some interesting discussions emerged within the focus groups relating to identity. Frequently, this was regarding strategies for maintaining identity, often using dress to support work persona. Some participants had persisted in 'dressing for the office' and referred to the value of wearing a shirt and tie: "It feels like I'm going to work; I like the change of location and dressing smart". However, others were clearly enjoying the break from formal dress. Interestingly, one participant reported feeling more able to virtually connect with their senior manager, who had uncharacteristically dressed informally for video-conference meetings during lockdown.

Although there is a strong personal preference to this, there was an overall feeling that LA workers were 'dressing down' and that this was associated positively with a more relaxed attitude to work conventions.

However, remote working also brings some potential challenges to identity at the individual, team and organisational levels.

At the individual level, physical distance from the workplace was reported to impact on professional confidence, sense of capability and professional identity. One participant reported questioning themselves more when working away from the office and another said he finds himself asking "do I even know how to do my job anymore?".

Similarly, a further participant said:

"I do seem to think I've lost some of my identity...I do need to go into the office occasionally to feel part of the face-to-face team and get a connection".

This is clearly also a concern at the team level. For those teams currently working completely remotely, there was concern that they would "lose the team identity" which was described as having a collective understanding, and being a part of something. This group went on to agree that it was important to foster a team culture, and that remote working could be a barrier to this.

It will be very important indeed for forward planning to ensure that teams, wherever possible, have regular opportunities to work collectively. This will not only impact positively on their ability to effectively undertake their work, but will also allow people to 'feel part of something'. This is also relevant at the organisational level, and the challenge of remotely maintaining organisational culture and identity may be particularly difficult.

Managers will inevitably be influential in developing and maintaining team culture and Senior Management communications will be critical in establishing and communicating a sense of organisational community and identity, reminding LA workers that they are part of something much bigger.

2.2.4 COVID-19 Circumstances

Although the challenges detailed above were frequently exacerbated by the emergency circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdown, many of these challenges will be relevant to remote working and working from home, with or without the context of national restrictions.

However, this section details some concerns and challenges that relate specifically to the emergency context of COVID-19. It is important to recognise these challenges, as they represent important participant experiences and provide insight that may help future preparedness in the event of similar emergency circumstances.

Home-schooling during lockdown

People with children frequently felt that one of the biggest challenges during lockdown was home-schooling. With the home-schooling demands alongside work and home life, many participants felt they were “splitting themselves between three full time jobs”. However, people did note that the flexibility offered by work did make home-schooling easier.

People also struggled with what they perceived to be “expectations of childcare during lockdown” which was exacerbated by social media. For example, one described:

“...baking and all of the things you were supposed to do with children but I was just keeping my head above the water trying to manage work and childcare... It's not all rosy, it's not all perfect.”

The group also discussed the expectations of school and the challenges they had experienced in trying to do what was expected of them as parents whilst also trying to maintain work-life balance and do what they needed to do for work.

Those with parenting responsibilities frequently commented that they were looking forward to working from home in September when schools reopened.

Safety concerns

One participant highlighted safety concerns, reporting that some safety protocols for community visits were disrupted. Participants reported that changes in work roles, government guidelines and access to systems resulted in patches of disruption to safety systems, leaving some participants with increased concerns about working in the community.

Other safety concerns included the requirements to work on NHS sites during the height of concern over infection. Several participants mentioned the lack of PPE initially, and comments were made about not feeling safe going into work “when the rest of the world was being told to stay safe at home”.

Similarly, participants reported concerns about needing to use public transport to get to work. These issues are not unique to LAs and dealing with both the practicalities and the anxieties of staff returning to work will be an important part of the recovery process.

Fairness

Interestingly, the issue of fairness was raised from several different perspectives. As previously mentioned, key areas of the LAs were differentially affected, with considerable efforts required to maintain prioritised services. Interestingly, those who have been part of these key working groups tended to reflect positively on feeling valued.

Conversely, one participant reported feeling guilty, 'I was sat [sic] at home for 7.5 hours a day with hardly anything to do'.

Clearly the impact of lockdown created diverse impacts, which in turn created many inequalities. The impact on inter- and intra-team relations will be considered below in Section 2.5.

In the medium term, one of the major challenges will of course be dealing with the uncertainty of the current pandemic. Participants reported finding it difficult to plan, with little understanding of how temporary the lockdown circumstances were going to be.

One manager reported that, as the lockdown progressed, more people started to accept they had to get a new chair, or a monitor and that their temporary solution was inadequate. At the beginning, people were willing to "grin and bear it", but then started to realise they needed a more permanent solution for home-working. At the time of writing this report, we continue to face considerable uncertainty, with regional lockdowns and the potential for more widespread restrictions at the national level. This uncertainty will inevitably have an impact on the well-being of the LA workforce, and it will be particularly important for management teams and organisations to monitor the impact of this threat on the wellbeing of their teams.



2.3 Benefits

Overview

Although the challenges associated with remote and/or home-based working tended to receive more attention by participants in the focus groups, there were a broad range of benefits reported. The broader benefits are outlined here; emergent themes included choice, flexibility, convenience, time savings, cost savings, wellbeing benefits and improved work/life balance. Specific benefits associated with caring responsibilities are briefly mentioned but are discussed in more detail in Section 2.4, whilst benefits relating to management, communications and relationships are explored in more detail in Section 2.5.

2.3.1 Choice

The most prominent theme amongst the described benefits of remote working was that of choice. Lockdown itself in many ways actually removed choice, especially for those who already had the freedom to work in an agile way, and no longer had the choice that they had previously. However, for those who had previously been required to work in an office full time, the shift to remote working reportedly felt freeing, providing increased feelings of autonomy and control over how they worked. Participants across the focus groups were almost unanimous in their hope to retain that choice through blended working arrangements that enable remote working. Key to this hope is the freedom to choose where to work – not necessarily just ‘at home’ and ‘in the office’, and the freedom to choose how and when they work, where it is practical and possible.

Some participants reported increased confidence in their own decision-making when working remotely, feeling empowered to “make a judgement and just do it”.

However, it must be noted that this was not the case for everyone; some felt less confident and the lack of proximity to colleagues made them less sure of their decisions. There are also those who prefer regular routines and being ‘managed’. For those individuals, choice can be bewildering and have a negative impact on levels of motivation and engagement with work. The need to individualise management skills according to individual differences is discussed in Section 2.5.

Despite this, research shows that high levels of control can act as an important buffer against pressures in other areas, such as work demands. Therefore, future work design that aims to maintain this element of choice as much as possible is likely to have significant wellbeing benefits within the workforce.

2.3.2 Working Flexibly

A key element of choice was the flexibility that this afforded. Whilst it is important to ensure staff are maintaining appropriate boundaries between work and home life, many very much valued flexibility in terms of working hours. For example, some commented how being able to work evenings and weekends of their own accord enabled them to better manage their familial responsibilities, whilst another said:

"I can work longer because I can take more breaks throughout the day; not rushing home in rush hour traffic, and I can spread it out through the day."

There was also the strong theme of convenience in working from home in terms of managing other responsibilities; a large number of participants spoke of how their wellbeing had improved because of the ability to do things like accept deliveries during the day, put a wash load on, and just do bits and pieces of menial household tasks, little and often, during the day rather than coming home from work to it all at the end of a busy day:

"Work is more flexible; working earlier means better evening work/life balance, you can manage aspects of life, minor interruptions like a delivery, without major workday interruption."

Flexibility was also of great value to those with caring responsibilities for adults and/or children. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.4.

2.3.3 Catalyst for Change

There was palpable excitement across all of the groups about the transformation that was occurring; people noted that the dramatic changes in working arrangements pre and post lockdown had given them a sense of belief and confidence in what it was possible to achieve in such a short amount of time. In many groups the belief was that they had achieved things that they had not thought possible previously, for example:

"We've been pushed into things we wouldn't either have done or would have prevaricated on previously."

Another responded to this point by highlighting that their council's five year vision had been achieved in just 2.5 months. The rapid pace of change has forced quick decision-making, which has also been experienced as a significant shift in culture in the LA environment. Getting decisions from senior management has been experienced as "much quicker", as well as decisions from support services such as HR and IT. Online ways of working also seem to have removed some hierarchical barriers and boundaries – "I've never been able to get hold of a director as easily!".

There was some discussion in several groups of a hope that organisational culture will move to "a culture of productivity, not presenteeism". People spoke of how the focus should be on outputs instead of hours, and many participants spoke of a previous perception that "being at work meant you were working". There was a view that this needs redefining. They felt that there were clear benefits for their organisation because an increasing culture of flexibility, adaptability and trust had reaped rewards:

"If it didn't work – we adapted it or changed it...we were very slow before, very structured and procedural... we moved to [an attitude of] 'what the heck – let's give it a go....'"

People were forced to embrace new systems, and although this caused initial anxieties for some people, on the whole there was a view that this had a positive impact overall. People felt that the new tools and behaviours, particularly supported by MS Teams (discussed in more detail in Section 2.6) brought huge advances to working practices. One individual noted that she had "become braver" in trying things out; another added they had become more creative in their workarounds. People noted the situation had forced them to use technology in a way that they had not previously, which had helped speed up the move into the digital era – "at last we've got rid of people walking around with briefcases full of bits of paper".

There were many occasions in the groups when individuals said that they were previously very averse to working from home but, having been forced into it in this way, they had not only accepted it but thoroughly enjoyed it. One noted "It was strange at first – but it just seems natural now". Many participants were clear that they do not want to go back to how things were. There was a strong sense across all of the groups that this rapid process of modernisation and increased flexibility had been experienced as exciting, refreshing and truly transformational for the majority of participants.

There were also comments made about how remote working had shifted people's attitudes and the ways they interacted with colleagues. The enhancements and challenges experienced by teams are explored in Section 2.5, but it is worth noting here that there was a sense of community and "everyone pulling together" experienced due to COVID-19 lockdown that was perceived by many to have been beneficial. There were some views that people were being "more friendly" now, and that internal politics and conflict had eased slightly in some areas. These views however must be considered alongside other data that suggests some teams experienced increased conflict whilst remote working due to escalations of problems over email (see Section 2.5). Quantitative data will provide deeper insight into areas that have been positively and negatively affected from a relationships perspective.

2.3.4 Reduced Commute

One of the biggest benefits reported was not needing to commute or use public transport. Many participants talked of the benefits of not rushing around as much, and the impact this had on work/life balance and wellbeing. People reported feeling much less tired and less physically drained. Not having to rush to get children to school or get home in time to collect them, not needing to sit in rush hour traffic, worry about parking, and not having to drive all significantly decreased levels of stress for a high number of participants. This has traditionally been a major stressor for many participants and the impact of reduced/removed travel on wellbeing is significant. Furthermore, many people reported using that time for family activities or for exercise that they could not ordinarily fit into their week, for example:

"I used to spend up to two hours driving each day and now I'm getting that time back, which means improved work/life balance, more exercise and feeling healthier."

Even those who only had a short commute reported feeling like they had significantly more time now through not having to travel to work and back every day. One participant described living only 10 minutes' drive from the office and yet they save nearly 1.5 hours per day through not having to sit in rush hour traffic. They felt they had experienced significant wellbeing benefits from gaining that extra time for themselves and their family. Others reiterated the improvement in quality of life owing to not commuting:

"[I had a] 10 mile journey, only 20 minutes, but it's also the preparation before the journey, it all takes time. I feel like I have two to two-and-a-half hours per day extra now. I've done things at night that I wouldn't ordinarily do in the evening."

"Even with what was a nice commute before, it is still a saving; I can exercise for longer and get into the garden at the end of the day."

The wellbeing benefits were much broader – people reported improvements in sleep and diet through not commuting:

"I'm sleeping better because I'm not having to get up as early....I'm eating better as I have time to cook and prepare meals."

Although issues relating to childcare are discussed in Section 2.4, it is worthy of note here that people with childcare responsibilities especially benefited from not commuting. For example, one person reported having a 1.5 hour commute and said

"Mornings are less stressful, not having to get the kids out the door and get to work, and coming home is much less stressful."

This is well-documented as a long-term health risk particularly for working parents, and the reduction in stress levels brought by not having this complex commute and childcare combination offers significant benefits to individuals and organisations in terms of worker wellbeing and therefore job satisfaction and productivity, as well as longer term physical health benefits.

Some said that they worked longer hours because they simply worked in the time they would have spent commuting, and that they did not resent doing extra hours now that they were not having to commute.

Despite the challenges of home/work boundary issues, most felt that the benefits of not commuting every day did outweigh the costs. A majority of participants, particularly those who lived with others, felt that quality of life had improved through this aspect of working from home.



2.3.5 Productivity

Many people reported being able to be more productive at home; for some, being at home meant there were fewer distractions than in the office (although this was rarely the case for those with childcare responsibilities):

"You can read and take in more information, there's too much flying about in the office – you can be more thorough at home, as normally you're at everyone's beck and call in the office – there is less 'can you just....?'"

People said that because it was easier to focus at home, a heavy task that at work might take four hours may only take two hours at home. Many managers also confirmed that they had seen an apparent increase in productivity within their teams; one confirmed "People are less distracted by others in the office and can work when it suits them."

However, this was dependent on skills and needs of individual members of staff; whilst some benefitted from working in this way, it was reported that others benefitted from "steering". For those individuals, managers tended to believe they were more productive in the office. This issue, and how it could be tackled, is discussed in Section 2.5 when we explore the need for individualised approaches to remote management.

Some participants felt certain that efficiency had improved in relation to the reduced need to attend meetings, freeing up the time previously surrounding travel to meetings. Some reported this as beneficial for their client group as they consequently have more frequent contact with more people and achieve more in less time. However, this must be viewed with caution as these benefits sit alongside challenges and risks associated with increased work intensity, as discussed in Section 2.2.

2.3.6 Cost Savings

For many participants, the cost savings for mileage, public transport or parking were significant. The cost savings to the individual beyond commuting included savings on childcare arrangements, not spending as much on lunches, coffees and shopping in central business districts, and not needing to spend as much money on clothes for work.

However, for some participants these savings appeared to be offset by the increased costs associated with being at home all day, every day, including energy costs, internet access and bandwidth and office equipment costs, and not everyone had made savings associated with commuting, childcare and subsistence. There were concerns raised about how these issues would be managed in the winter when energy use is higher. Some groups also expressed resentment that a financial contribution had not been made to help with the adjustment to home working – despite working from home, some individuals had reportedly been told “you are not home-based” – which would normally have been the trigger for financial support or help with desk furniture and other provisions.

There were many comments around internet usage and the use of personal mobile phones and other equipment. For example, one participant said they had received an email saying that they were using too much data on their work SIM cards, but the view was “Why should I use my own WiFi?”.

The issue of personal costs of remote working and how these will be met are an important area of consideration for organisations.

There were also concerns raised that, despite environmental benefits of reduced commuting, there are now double energy costs, with some people working from home, whilst office spaces are still open, fully lit and heated. A further big picture consideration is the impact on town centres, with fewer workers spending their money within the local economy. To balance this, there was a comment that many people working from home may ‘shop local’ more often.

In terms of organisational costs, there were some benefits identified in terms of cost savings and process efficiency; people reported not hitting ‘print’ as often; meanwhile, many forms had been quickly moved to electronic sign-off which saved money and speeded up previously delayed processes. Time will be needed in order to examine the full cost implications of remote working.



2.3.7 Benefits for Introverts?



Whilst the serious risk of social isolation has been discussed, there were some who found that being away from an office environment was highly beneficial for their mental health in terms of energy levels and reduced social anxieties. Many participants recognised that for some people it suits them not to be around people all of the time. For example, one participant said, "I quite like being at home and being away from people", whilst another explained "I can get 'peopled-out' and need to just shut off, and being at home I can take that 10 minutes". However, there may be a risk that some people may indulge in isolation to the extent that it may affect their social skills and confidence.

This again raises issues of personality type and interaction preferences, although it may be slightly simplistic to look at it as being an issue of Introversion and Extraversion – it is likely a much more complex picture.

For example, there were many occasions where more introverted people said how much they valued their time in the office because it is the main source of social interaction in their lives. Similarly, there were others who appeared more extraverted who felt that through not using energy socialising at work, they had more energy for interactions with family and friends.

Future exploration of responses to remote working that also enables comparison with personality data may offer some fascinating opportunities to explore what works best for different personality types, and could provide highly useful insights to assist early risk identification and targeted training, support, management planning and decision-making.

2.4 Caring for Others

Overview

Caring for others, particularly childcare, but also caring for adults, emerged as a multidimensional issue of importance across all of the groups. The issue is not just of relevance to those that have caring responsibilities, but also to those who work with and manage them. The key issues highlighted by participants are outlined below.

2.4.1 Childcare

Flexibility made life easier

Although many people experienced significant challenges in balancing childcare and home-schooling with work, many participants also felt that flexibility had enabled a greater balance between work and home life, and some felt that despite childcare challenges they were still able to be more productive at home. People reported finding it much less stressful being able to take their children to school and collect them, and many were saving money on breakfast and after-school clubs. Having the flexibility to be able to work at the beginning and end of the day was of particular value to those with younger children, and there was a view that the organisation then benefits from this too, as they are more efficient and productive when they do work. There are also perceived benefits in managing childcare during school holidays; one participant explained:

"Now I know I can work like this there's no panic about child care in the summer holidays – we are a generation that relies on grandparents a lot."

Work-family conflict

The issues of separating work and home and of the impact of work on home life (work-to-family conflict) and home life on work (family-to-work conflict) were introduced in Section 2.2. These issues were of particular relevance to people with childcare responsibilities, especially for those who had to work in communal family spaces such as kitchens, living rooms and dining rooms. This gave rise to feelings of guilt, irrespective of how they juggled their multiple responsibilities; one participant talked about the "guilt" they felt for "not giving my full self to either my work or my family". Another said:

"I don't feel I can give enough to either work or my children and I feel guilty, thinking 'am I giving enough to my work?' but then the guilt spills over and I become agitated and short tempered with my family."

Working at home with children in the background was also described as difficult by many participants because of the nature of some of the conversations they needed to have. Many were sensitive topics that were not appropriate for the home environment. There were also concerns about any potential impact that having such conversations within the earshot of others could be potentially damaging or disturbing for others in the household. Normal forms of confidentiality were difficult to maintain for those attempting to juggle working at home with childcare and other family members in the house.

This was a source of realistic concern for participants and is an important consideration in the event of future possible lockdowns, when there is no option but to have children in the home during working hours. Incorporating consideration of this into a risk assessment for working from home may be a helpful step.

Issues of fairness in flexibility

Whilst the majority of participants were understanding of the added pressure on those with childcare responsibilities, there was a small number of occasions where concern was raised by participants relating to the impact of childcare responsibilities on wider teams. Some participants who did not have children felt that they had had to pick up work that those with children had been less able to undertake. Whilst those participants did understand how hard lockdown had been for those with children, they also said that they had found it difficult not to feel there is a certain degree of injustice when their workload increases.

People who do not have children occasionally felt that there are expectations placed upon them because of this, although this was described as "not a new problem"; there was a view amongst some participants that historically people with children have been afforded greater flexibility in the workplace than those without children. This was perceived by some as unfair, not just by those without children but also by some who did themselves have children.

When this topic was raised in groups, participants appeared to feel that to ensure positive team relationships and a sense of fairness and equity across teams, all staff should be afforded flexibility regardless of their personal circumstances. Where this was not the case, they felt that resentments did tend to develop, however much they tried not to feel that way. Consequently, this perceived injustice was having a negative impact on some individuals and team relationships. There are no easy answers here, but it may be helpful for recovery and forward planning teams to be aware of these threats to team cohesion and morale.

2.4.2 Caring for Other Adults

Whilst the most widely reported aspect of caring for others was experiences relating to childcare, there were also many participants who had caring responsibilities for other adults, such as partners or family members with illnesses or disabilities, and elderly parents or grandparents. People reported that flexibility in terms of hours and place of work had made caring responsibilities for other adults less stressful, more manageable, and had therefore improved wellbeing and work/life balance. Conversely, some participants with caring responsibilities with adults reported that working from home was a particular challenge, with more distractions and fewer opportunities to go out, see other people, and have some respite from their caring role.

2.4.3 Recognising Personal Circumstances

Participants pointed out that it was important to recognise that some people have difficult home circumstances, and that for them, going to work may offer a break from the home stress. This related to a range of caring responsibilities including for adults and children. People who were single parents, and those without other family support, or with partners who had to go out to work or work shifts, found managing childcare alongside work to be particularly difficult.



2.5 Management, Communications & Relationships

Overview

Key topics of discussion in the focus groups included managing people and being managed, internal and external communications, team relationships, and the interactions between all of these aspects within the context of wide-scale remote working. In using the word 'communications', we mean this in the broadest sense of the word, meaning everything from one-to-one interactions and emails to organisational guidelines and policy. The themes that emerged in relation to these issues are explored here, considering challenges, benefits and possible future considerations.

The section first explores specific issues relating to management and the ways in which managers communicate with their teams.

Team communications are then considered, conceptualised as 'Informal' communications (for example, adhoc supportive conversations, small talk, banter, and other aspects of face-to-face interactions that are of social value), and 'Structured', meaning those team interactions that are planned, diarised or are facilitated by management.

Several other broader aspects of relevance to organisational management and communications are also explored here, including senior management communications, human resource issues, external relationships, and potential guidelines to support healthy working practices in the future.



2.5.1 Management Communications

This section focuses on some of the aspects of managing and being managed that were raised as issues of importance by participants across the sample. However, it is first useful to consider some of the specific challenges raised by managers themselves in the process of adaptation to remote working and remote management.

Difficulties managing remotely

The following points represent the major issues highlighted by managers across the groups:

- 1) Managers reported that the time needed for staff management increased significantly. This was due to a number of factors, including an increase in meetings with staff in order to check-in where otherwise they would have seen them regularly in the office, and the increased need for support when working remotely; one manager said "You have to work very hard at maintaining relationships".
- 2) Some managers said that they found it hard to manage their team's workload remotely and that it was not always clear when people are overdoing hours. Worryingly several participants said they had significantly under-reported their hours to avoid scrutiny.
- 3) Motivating staff virtually was noted as particularly difficult. For example, one said "as a manager of 19 people, motivation has been quite hard – there is always someone having a good day and someone having a bad day" and as a manager "you need to get around all of them at the right point."
- 4) Managers found conversations about productivity much harder at a distance – particularly when staff have caring responsibilities or home circumstances that are not conducive to safe and healthy home working – managers were unsure how to achieve a balance of fairness and flexibility in teams and some reported finding it difficult to manage resentment between staff who had children and those who did not, particularly where imbalances in workload and productivity emerged. Dealing with this complexity will be an important area for management support.
- 5) Managers found it difficult to provide the less formal and more adhoc feedback that occurs organically when working in an office. Across several groups, managers and teams said that they were used to being able to deal quickly with small issues as they arose when office-based. When working remotely, managers noted that many smaller issues are not being dealt with because "to schedule a meeting to discuss a very minor thing feels wrong."
- 6) Different levels of willingness and comfort in engaging with IT amongst teams was a source of challenge in managing teams.

Individualised management

One of the most consistent and pervasive findings was the critical role of the line manager as a key enabler or barrier to successful and efficient homeworking, in particular the suitability of the manager's style to individual needs. The central factor was that managers need to recognise that everybody is different and encourage open conversations about what individuals need for support when working remotely. It was raised that, as a manager, people want and need different things from you – "some want to talk, others don't want to answer the phone. Sometimes you felt guilty that you weren't there for them." Managers noted that it was harder to read people remotely and easier for people to hide if there is a problem. One manager said that they asked themselves "Am I motivating them enough? Are they ok? Are they really struggling?" and said that trying to get this balance right sometimes felt a bit "overwhelming". The practical challenge of providing the right support provisions for people working different hours was also noted.

As detailed in Section 2.3, remote working frequently brought a welcome increase in flexibility, choice and autonomy. However, some managers commented that where individuals were more used to micro-management, the increased levels of autonomy were difficult to cope with. This could negatively impact motivation and productivity if not well managed. Managers also had to exercise caution in being too 'hands-off'.

Some staff whose managers had taken a more hands-off approach reported feeling unsupported, and the absence of human interaction and empathy was felt more keenly when working remotely; one participant said "sometimes the only real contact with my manager is 'I want this now' – there's no checking in on you". These perspectives highlight the need for managers to work with individuals to identify their preferred ways of working and respond appropriately.

Regular one-to-one meetings

A specific aspect of individualised management is one-to-one sessions with team members. It was noted frequently that these were critical in supporting staff but were inconsistent across teams – some were receiving one-to-one management time and others were not. For example, one manager reported that the introduction of their regular one-to-ones on an informal basis had been really important to give reassurance, but commented that not all managers were making themselves available.

One participant noted "It was 16 weeks in before my manager had a conversation about how I was coping working from home". Although the participant did appreciate that the priority in their line of work was the families and children they were supporting, they felt someone should have been asking how they were feeling much sooner:

"It was only when I was on my knees that my manager got involved and asked what they could put in place to help...You don't always want to be the one saying you're not coping; there was a perception of 'you're at home, you're coping, just get on with it.'"

However, one group reported a lack of team meetings in favour of one-to-one contact, which they felt was to the team's detriment, so it seems there is a balance to be had between one-to-one and team interactions to maintain individual and team wellbeing and functioning when working remotely.

Trust & acceptance of remote working

Across all LAs, participants noted that they valued flexibility, autonomy and trust afforded by their manager. A manager's attitude towards remote working and approach to managing staff emerged as strongly linked to the degree (or lack) of trust they demonstrated towards their team.

One participant noted "Prior [to lockdown] I felt that people didn't trust us enough to work from home". There was also an observation that managers who historically had preferred to 'micro-manage' had been finding it difficult to monitor and manage productivity. Participants suggested that some were struggling to trust members of staff – but this was critical if working remotely was going to be effective and motivational.

One individual described having previously worked for another local authority where leadership/management styles there had enabled them to work in a more agile and productive way.

In their current role they felt that management practices were holding them back; they believed their manager did not trust them to work in a self-managed way and was too prescriptive in the way they worked. The group then agreed that without trust and empowerment from managers, remote working cannot make people more efficient.

It is also worthy of note that this mistrust was not limited to managers; one participant described that in their team it was administrative staff who were previously suspicious of homeworking. Many groups spoke of a general belief prior to the pandemic that those in the office were working harder than those at home, and there was a hope across the groups that the recent changes have altered this trend towards presenteeism. In one group, all participants reached a shared agreement that trust was key in making it work, adding "we're professional adults – we can be trusted to make the decision as to whether a particular day is more productively spent in the office or at home".

Across most groups there was a clear message that the pandemic scenario had successfully convinced managers and colleagues that staff could be productive, efficient and effective when working remotely. It was felt that the previous "suspicion around homeworking" had lifted. One participant noted that, although they had called themselves flexible as a local authority, there was some perception of "look, they're sliding off early" if they went to pick their children up from school. However, improvements were noted, with many participants across the focus groups reporting feeling trusted and trusting.

Modelling healthy working practices

As outlined above, participants felt that managers had a key role to play in setting up healthy working practices and encouraging a good work/life balance. For example, one participant noted:

"Having permission to work more flexibly made a big difference...hearing your manager say it was ok to take a couple of hours off in the afternoon to be with your children – and then log on again in an evening, or log on earlier or later to suit – made a difference in how you felt about everything."

As mentioned in Section 2.2, it was suggested in a number of groups that managers should be role models for staff, demonstrating healthy working practices such as good break behaviours. One manager said they began doing this very early on in lockdown as their staff were really stressed. People felt that empowerment is the key, "feeling you have the support of your manager and that they know you do the hours". It was suggested that managers should support and normalise regular breaks to help alleviate the feelings of guilt which staff experience about taking breaks. However, managers reported finding it difficult to monitor when people were not taking enough breaks and when people were taking too many.

What managers need

There were a number of things raised by managers and staff in terms of the support that would be useful in developing remote management practices moving forwards. Managers felt that they need to be able to give clear guidance about what equipment and support is coming for their teams, and that timely updates around this issue from colleagues in other services such as IT are really crucial.

Some managers felt there was a lack of clarity in organisational messages, which put many managers under significant strain; one manager described feeling "as though I was having to make some things up as I was going along" whilst another said "I feel like I'm in the dark having to play catch up". It was mentioned that remote working had made it difficult to get an answer to questions when they had a challenge, and this issue was exacerbated by the constant change. However, there was recognition that these issues were largely due to the crisis situation and symptomatic of unprecedented times, and that everybody was just doing the best that they could in the situation.

Managers and staff made comments that suggested there is a broader need to update management skills, practices and training to suit the new world of work, e.g. the previously noted example of training managers how to deal with smaller and more frequent issues remotely.

2.5.2 Team Communications: Informal

We categorised team communications into 'Informal' and 'Structured' communications, where structured refers to organised or planned communications such as team meetings and regular updates, whereas informal refers to that which occurs through and with work but which is not a formalised part of carrying out a job. Informal communications may be work related or non-work related, and it is important to note the value of both forms of informal communication in building constructive and supportive relationships with colleagues.

There was a general view across the groups that these two types of communication were notably changed when working remotely, and that both were very difficult to replicate digitally. Over a prolonged period, if face-to-face interpersonal communications remain low, there may be significant effects on aspects of peer relationships, in particular team cohesion, sense of community, empathy and supportiveness. In this section, we highlight some examples of the experiences of participants relating to these losses, and also discuss some issues relating to the use of WhatsApp to facilitate both types of informal communications remotely.

Non-work related

When working alongside one another in an office environment, there are many aspects to peer relationships described as being of great value to individuals in their success, effectiveness, coping and enjoyment at work. For example, informal, non-work related small-talk, conversation and banter had a strong impact on people's sense of belonging at work. For some individuals, social interaction at work was the main source of daily social interaction in their lives and without it, their mental health was at risk. Participants felt strongly that it was very important for teams to schedule time for non-work related conversation to supplement the team and social interaction lost through remote working, although there was still a sense that this did not replace the need for face-to-face relationship building and supportive conversations.

Work-related

Informal support opportunities such as debriefing, 'bouncing off' one another, and help-seeking from more experienced colleagues were also frequently described as highly important aspects of work. All of these had been negatively impacted by the lack of face-to-face interaction and there was a general sense that these forms of informal interaction simply cannot be replicated sufficiently in remote working.

Debriefing

One of the biggest losses highlighted in focus groups when working remotely was opportunities for debriefing. This usually took the form of an informal chat with a colleague over a cup of tea following particularly difficult interactions. These were of particular relevance to those in roles requiring home visits and customer contact, but most participants had elements of their job that could involve challenging interactions and this informal debriefing opportunity was seen as a crucial part of coping with this stressor as well as an important part of relationship-building within teams:

"I don't think we will ever go back to the way we were, but I also don't think I want to, I like flexibility, but, I will miss the debrief with colleagues, it is so important to build these relationships."

People had attempted to do this via Teams, Skype or by phone instead but they generally felt that "it's not the same" as face-to-face informal debriefing, and said that it was not always easy to know who to approach when needing the support digitally. One participant explained "Sometimes you feel as though you are disturbing people; in an office you can see if someone is open to a conversation", whilst another said "After a difficult session I come back home and scan to see if anyone is on green so I can have a debrief remotely". It is important to recognise that this requires a more proactive seeking of support, which some may find difficult. Working remotely also made it difficult to spot a colleague in need of support after a difficult meeting who may not immediately recognise that they do need some time out.

Furthermore, these current informal debriefings are based on working remotely from those with whom we have existing relationships, relationships that were initially developed in-person. It may be much harder for new members of staff to develop these important supportive relationships.

Knowledge sharing and help seeking

People commented that there is more need now to actively find out what is going on within teams, because they have lost the informal, natural engagement. For example, one participant explained, "There's a lot of interaction you miss...You don't notice other people's stress as much, or ask 'Are you OK?'". Learning opportunities through short and informal catch-ups around the work environment also emerged as important in aiding the spread of information and knowledge-sharing within and between teams. There were challenges with colleagues understanding the bigger picture through not being in the same office, and concerns that teams were "working in silos". Despite the communication channels being open, there were aspects of the work being undertaken within and across teams of which people would be generally aware had they been in the same office; when working remotely, the informal opportunities for knowledge sharing were lacking. Participants were generally of the view that this had a negative impact on the effectiveness of wider teams.

Although MS Teams was viewed as an excellent resource, there was a view that it was suited to structured meetings and catch-ups, and people had experienced some challenges over the need for more adhoc or casual work-related communications, such as “when you just want to pick someone’s brain on something” and “times when you would normally walk around the office and catch up with anyone who was in a particularly team if you needed some general help or advice”. It was felt that these kinds of conversations help people to feel more confident in their decision-making and that this was another aspect of informal communications that had not been successfully replicated for most teams.

Understanding and empathy

It was a consistent view across focus groups that communication can be more open, honest and wholesome when people are in a room together, and that the lack of face-to-face interaction had led to problems with communication within and across teams such as unnecessary escalation and conflict through miscommunication and misinterpretation. For example:

“Sometimes it’s difficult to pick up the nuances in email communication – a lot of my team are sarcastic which, if you don’t know them, sometimes doesn’t translate well online.”

Another participant explained that the lack of face-to-face interaction had reduced the understanding and empathy which team members had for one another, leading to increased levels of conflict:

“[there’s a lot of] playing email tennis with one another, a lot of conflict where it may not otherwise have been there; everyone feels busier than everyone else and because they are not in the same office, they cannot sense the pressure that everyone else is under.”

WhatsApp to facilitate informal communications

WhatsApp was raised with frequency in the focus groups, with many teams across all four LAs utilising it for informal communications within teams. Some groups used this for work-related communications, whereas other groups said that their teams had ‘no work’ rules in their WhatsApp groups, or “No work after 5pm on a Friday” rules.

However, there were a number of concerns raised by participants around the use of WhatsApp in work teams. These included the risk of intrusion into personal time; the 'politics' of WhatsApp – specifically people's anxieties over contributing, not contributing and choosing to mute or leave WhatsApp groups and how these behaviours were interpreted by colleagues; the establishment of 'cliques' through WhatsApp groups that had led to some team members feeling left out and isolated; data protection, information security and confidentiality concerns, when used for work purposes.

In general, there appears to be an organisational challenge around WhatsApp in the workplace because its use for informal communications means that boundaries become blurred. What is considered 'appropriate' forms of communication can be difficult for individuals to define and understand, and peer pressure can increase.

For some people, anxieties around WhatsApp can present a risk to their mental health. Although it was not mentioned in focus groups, WhatsApp can also be a source of risk for organisations regarding complaints of bullying, harassment and discrimination. It is also difficult for users to differentiate between work-related groups and personal social groups during the working day, meaning that when someone is utilising WhatsApp for communications with work colleagues, personal communications may become a distraction.

Despite these risks and challenges, many participants specifically reported that WhatsApp had been a useful and important tool for informal conversations, banter, and for daily check-ins with one-another when working remotely.



2.5.3 Team Communications: Structured

Frequency of team meetings

Team meetings were discussed in every group, and there was a consistent view that regular team meetings were supportive to wellbeing and conducive to positive relationships when working remotely. Some participants said that their teams had daily check-ins at the start of lockdown such as between 10–30 minutes in the morning and they felt that this supported people's mental health. People felt that these regular, short team meetings where it was permitted to speak about work or non-work topics had been used particularly in an attempt to replace the social aspect of being in an office somewhat, and that these had been especially useful where team members did not know one another.

In many groups, team meetings were also scheduled in order to facilitate non-work related communications; for example, one participant said that their team has two catch-ups per week – one work catch-up early in the week, and one social catch-up each Friday where all work conversations are banned, and this model was perceived as supportive and positive for team relations. Another individual talked of having a team "topic of the day" – this could be anything from boardgames to how colleagues were finding working from home, and they felt this had helped keep team spirits up during lockdown. This would be particularly important for those who work from home full-time, or in the event of further lockdown circumstances.

Participants highlighted that for those who are involved in projects and customer or service-user focused work, that brings meetings. But, those who are not involved in that kind of work can feel quite isolated.

They felt that they do not receive the regular check-ins that others might be experiencing. One participant said that they had no reason to talk to anyone when working remotely and consequently they felt lost. Participants who had not had regular team meetings frequently described communication within teams as "poor"; even when managers had taken steps to maintain regular communication via other methods such as texting, it was felt something was lacking without team meetings. Participants pointed out that it is important for teams to work together to ensure no one is isolated, but also to ensure that there is a balance between social interaction and the risk of added time pressure through too many meetings. For example, a participant described how their team used to have monthly meetings and this has now become a weekly meeting, but they felt that this was starting to feel a bit awkward, with some colleagues not really wanting to contribute or attend anymore.

Some teams had started to re-instate face-to-face communication through organising outdoor team meetings in parks or gardens or walking meetings and this seemed to be perceived as a welcome experience by those who had so far engaged in meetings like this. This highlighted the creativity some had employed to maintain team connection and morale, but also shows the variety of ways that work tasks can be effectively carried out.

Improved internal communications

For some participants, there was a view that internal communications had actually improved through working remotely. It was reportedly easier in some cases for whole teams to get together digitally than when they were all either in the office or out on visits, and meetings felt less pressured for that reason. It was frequently raised in the focus groups that there was a sense of unity and community that arose specifically from the COVID-19 situation and resulting changes at work. There was a "general belief that everyone pulled together for the same goal – and this united everyone." It was described as "a sense of being in the same boat" and "in it together" especially during the initial lockdown:

"As a council we are working better together within depts and across depts, supporting each other, working on cases together."

Some managers said that they felt more able to support and safeguard their teams through remote working because communication had improved and they knew the whereabouts of all of their team. One said "I'm speaking to my team more as I'm making more of a conscious effort to do it – which means I know more about them now", whilst another explained:

"I dedicate a whole day to catch-ups with my team now to make sure they happen and to stop it eating into the rest of the week."

A number of participants commented that MS Teams had allowed people to see others with whom they had only previously had telephone conversations and it had been nice to put faces to names in this way, build rapport and get to know their wider teams better. They felt that cross-department working and collaboration had improved as a result, with an enhanced team spirit. For example:

"There's people I've been speaking to on a day basis previously that I didn't know what they looked like and now MS Teams has opened that up for me."

Gaps re-emerging

There were also some concerns voiced about internal relationships as lockdown eased and visits started up again. In one group, there was discussion around the danger of a gap opening up between public-facing and office-based roles – whilst there was recognition there had always been a "divide" between front and back office staff, people noted this seemed to disappear earlier in lockdown, with the sense of "everyone in the same boat". However, as lockdown eased and public places started to reopen, participants felt a "sense of separation" was emerging again between front and back office. They felt there was a bubbling resentment from those on the front line, with a perception "... we're having to go out and interact with people...it's all right for you in the office, you can just continue to work from home".

2.5.4 Senior Management Communications

There were occasional mentions of senior management communications within the groups, worth outlining here. Some participants, particularly those in customer facing and service user-focused roles, felt that decisions had been taken at a senior management level that deeply affected staff but believed there had been a lack of consultation with those most affected by the changes. There were several mentions of a “disconnect” between senior management and staff “on the front line”, although this was not a universal view; many participants spoke very positively of the increase in communications from senior leaders following lockdown. For example, participants from one LA discussed how much they valued the Live Q&As with the Chief Executive during lockdown. The view was that it gave them a sense of how other people were getting on and how people were feeling. They described finding it comforting to know that other people were experiencing the same problems and/or benefits as they were.

They described them as “quite informal” which they found refreshing; “there was a realisation that ‘They’re actually human’ and it was nice to see them speaking normally and being relaxed”. Furthermore, there was recognition of the challenges senior management had faced to maintain and support service delivery.

In relation to the earlier point in Section 2.5.1, managers need to be good role models for healthy working practices and in doing so give staff ‘permission’ to take breaks sensibly. This also applies to senior management, and there were several comments that messages about healthy remote working practices from senior management were very helpful in setting a more positive culture.



2.5.5 External Communications & Relationships

Customer services

There was a general view that remote working and the new digital technologies now in place had, in many cases, a positive impact on relationships with external stakeholders. For example, one individual involved in a customer service role believed “the council offers a better service now because of how we are working” – highlighting that the council was more accessible because they were available outside of 9–5 hours. In one group it was reported that live meetings had been “brilliant for maintaining town hall public meetings”, with high attendance and improved inclusion. In one case, over 600 people attended a live Q&A session.

Children and families

Some participants also felt that MS Teams and WhatsApp had helped in communication with external partners and families who were all able to download and use the software. Barriers to attendance for service users such as costs, time, and childcare issues had been removed through remote working, and those involved in group work with families believed that this had been particularly beneficial for their client groups. However, it should be noted that the use of WhatsApp for external communications should be carefully considered, due to data security challenges.

Partner organisations

In some cases it was felt that lockdown had helped to build better relationships with partner organisations– one team noted how they had got so much closer to people in the voluntary sector as an example, having been “forced to unite and work together in an agile way for the greater good.” There was a view that it had removed red tape and there was a new attitude of “if it needs doing and this works – let’s do it!”. Some also reported sharing resources and buildings with other partnering organisations. There was a perception that this had spread a better culture as a result – “we were learning from others and others were learning from us” – it was about “getting the job done” in the best way possible, which had created a unified spirit and more collaborative and creative partnerships.

2.5.6 Etiquette

The new working practices brought with them new behaviours and habits, many of which have already been highlighted in Sections 2.2 and 2.3. When analysing the data, we developed one particular theme which we titled 'Etiquette' that was a good fit within the Management, Communications and Relationships category. Although to a large extent the skills to make remote working healthy rely on self-management, many staff struggled with guilt around breaks and time away from screens; many were constantly second-guessing the expectations of others and trying to live up to unrealistic ideals in the new world of work. The project team noted that an issue worthy of consideration here is the fact that for many years staff have been advised that emails and IT communications should only be used for work purposes and that it can be a disciplinary offence if this is abused.

Yet now organisations are reliant on IT communications to pick up the informal communications. It is important for organisations to recognise the potential conflict and uncertainty that staff may experience around understanding appropriate behaviour and etiquette around these communications.

This short section outlines two specific areas of emergent behaviours in remote working that may benefit from further work in understanding what works best for people, and the development of clear published 'etiquette' guidance around healthy and safe behaviours expected and permitted amongst staff.



Availability & Skype monitoring

Many managers reported the introduction of regular one-to-ones, the importance of which has already been discussed. However, there was a view that not all managers were making themselves available:

"On Skype you can see who is video free and look at who is green - management have not always been available and often you can't reach your manager."

Of course, the other dimension to this, also discussed already, was the challenge of always needing to be available, which was felt by both staff and managers to be a significant health risk.

Finding balance here, and setting reasonable expectations, will be important. Although it was raised that staff can sometimes find it difficult to get hold of people, some managers were struggling with feeling guilty about stepping away from the machine. It would be beneficial to dig into this specific issue further and collaborate with staff and managers to develop practices that enable staff to communicate their availability to one another digitally, so that people are aware of suitable times for asking adhoc questions, and managers feel able to take time away from their screens.

One interesting effect of visible online availability is that some staff feel watched: "Skype feels like Big Brother... it shows when you've been away from your computer". Some reported feeling paranoid about what others would think if they were not online.

When people had to be out on visits for example and did not log on, they felt as though people would think they were not working.

A supportive policy, clear local arrangements and open dialogue would be beneficial in alleviating feelings of guilt and paranoia.

Conversely, positive aspects to this visibility were reported by participants; one mentioned that managers were challenging availability positively to protect wellbeing - "what are you doing online at this time?". Staff felt that they were keeping a protective eye on them, although this was only experienced positively where a good working relationship was already in place.

Skype monitoring also enabled some teams to notice changes in personal patterns; in one case, this had prompted a conversation when a colleague was struggling and finding it difficult to get the balance right. The resulting conversation had been beneficial for the individual, the manager and the wider team. Intervention around experiences of online tracking of availability may be beneficial moving forwards, as would the development of more nuanced ways of communicating whereabouts, working hours and activities with one another within and across teams. This may help staff and managers to feel more in control of their working hours, more trusted and their pressures better understood by their team when working remotely.

Diary management

Linked to this issue was the challenge of back-to-back team meetings, discussed in the challenges section. Patterns described included the fact that meetings were booked in without the usual travel break between them, leaving very little downtime, and previous conversations that may have lasted 10 minutes now being booked into diaries as half hour meetings, adding pressure and intensity to workloads for managers. Participants described a specific type of exhaustion associated with relentless virtual meetings and a lack of breaks. If left unchecked, this could pose significant risks to health. The following examples illustrate this challenge:

"Before, working from home was a really focused day, but now meetings have eroded what could be focused working time. You log out of one call and go straight into another. Everyone has become more accessible."

"People are booking meetings for everything and you are just jumping from meeting to meeting. There is no conversation, distraction, no time to gather your thoughts. No one seems to have that quiet day with no meetings anymore."

Participants said that they would have benefitted from wider support about intrusions into calendars and how to respect others' diaries. For example, they suggested "When 'busy' don't ring; don't ring just because someone has seen your [MS]Teams message, it doesn't mean they are working on it immediately".

There was a view that managers need to find ways of developing a holding pattern with incoming work requests. They also felt that etiquette needs to be fair and people need to feel okay to decline meeting requests if they are fully booked, "We need to be brave enough to decline and send a substitute". Not all managers have control over their own diaries, so brief guidance around meeting etiquette may be beneficial at the team level or organisation-wide, to protect middle managers in particular, and encourage healthy practices. For example, trying to ensure a break between meetings, or a break every couple, and protected lunch breaks for those in high demand. It may also be advisable to encourage managers in particular to protect chunks of time each week from meetings, although this may be beneficial to all staff. Using Outlook diaries to block out time for specific tasks can be a useful way to protect time and communicate availability for remote teams. Microsoft Teams also has a feature that enables users to schedule focus time in their diary, putting an automatic 'do not disturb' on so that MS Teams notifications do not pop up. There is also the ability to put overrides on for specific people, and the focus time can be moved or deleted at the user's preference.

2.5.7 Human Resources

Recruitment and onboarding

There were a number of reports of concerns around recruitment and onboarding. Recruitment was particularly tricky where interviews were concerned, as not all candidates had the skills and equipment to be able to undertake digital interviews, and for some roles it may not be fair to expect those skills. However, some participants felt that from a talent management point of view remote working may offer improved recruitment opportunities for LAs in areas where it can be difficult to recruit high-skilled workers.

In almost every focus group there was a mention of concerns around new starters. Participants were concerned about the impact on them of working remotely in terms of the integration into teams, sense of being part of a community and learning how the team and the wider organisation operates, difficulties with induction and with learning the job remotely. Zoom or MS Teams training has been one way in which this has been tackled, but usually most new starters would require shadowing opportunities which relies on being physically present. People often lack the confidence in a new post to learn to do things by themselves, and this was perceived as being a particularly difficult issue to manage in remote working. In terms of forward planning, on-boarding processes will need to be particularly supportive and structured for roles which are completely or predominantly remote. This process would benefit from special attention to well-defined mentoring activities and opportunities for informal networking.

Learning & development

Despite the problems experienced with onboarding and inducting new starters, some new starters reported positive experiences with training. Structured training using MS Teams for short but frequent training sessions followed by periods of independent practice were described as particularly helpful. The chat facility in MS Teams was used for asking adhoc questions of their trainer, and was very useful. The provision of detailed practice notes also made this process easier. For one participant who started their job just before lockdown, it had been helpful to have another new starter join at the same time as they were able to develop together and support one another.

Reduced sickness absence

A number of participants across the LAs informed us that sickness absence rates had decreased – it would be interesting at the future quantitative data collection stage to include analysis of sickness absence data and similar measures alongside responses to the survey tool. There was a view that people were less likely to take time off for lower-level illness when working from home, and that people were not catching viruses such as colds as frequently because they were not sharing the same office space. In particular, attitudes around presenteeism in the case of common colds were raised as unhelpful in the past; “People used to tough it out” and did not take time off for colds because of concern about sickness absence, but remote working makes that more manageable. It is also important however for organisations to work to encourage staff to take appropriate leave if they are unwell, even when working from home.

2.6 Digital Transformation

Overview

Technology was frequently reported as one of the most important enablers but simultaneously and often a significant barrier. Although the LAs had started to move towards agile working, some were further along with this journey than others. In some LAs, most people had the equipment needed to work remotely, and there was a general sense that culture supported agile working. In others, some teams had agile technologies whilst others did not, and within some teams that had the technologies, management and team resistance to working in different ways often meant that people were taking the agile technologies and plugging them in in the office. In this section, we explore some of the experiences described by participants regarding the shift in culture towards embracing remote working, and specific challenges and benefits relating to ICT hardware, software and connectivity.

2.6.1 Culture Change

There was a view, particularly amongst ICT people who had been trying to shift culture towards agile working for some time, that COVID-19 has forced a massive culture shift. One individual noted how the situation had forced them to learn new technologies and systems – “I had not even heard of MS Teams previously – and now I am using it all the time”.

As previously mentioned, decisions were taken much faster than they ordinarily could have been, and they had to take risks through transforming the ways services were being delivered because there was simply no alternative but to try. Many people, managers and staff alike, who previously were not wholly accepting of remote working practices, described how they had to embrace it and had now warmed to the idea, or had even become complete converts. As has already been discussed, trust was a key factor in this; people on the whole felt that the changes to working practices had provided the opportunity to trial and demonstrate how effective remote working could be, and a majority of people now felt trusted and able to trust.

There were concerns raised that LAs now need to take stock, consider the drain on ICT resources, and ensure that ICT departments are appropriately resourced to maintain service delivery at the current levels. This is discussed in more detail in the Working Practice Profiles.



2.6.2 IT Provisions

On the whole, the vast majority of participants reported very positive experiences with the ICT services provided by their ICT teams. There were many, many positive and supportive comments regarding the pace of change and the ways in which ICT teams stepped up to the challenge and simply made it work, for example:

"ICT couriered hardware out to people, chairs and desks were delivered; they completed a form to see if there was anything they needed. The council has supported people to be agile".

Others said "ICT have been brilliant" and "ICT Stepped up very quickly". It was recognised that ICT teams had rolled out in two months what had been scheduled to take at least a year.

Hardware

Many teams were told "take whatever you need from the office". Some participants said that in the pre-COVID-19 world, requests for new mobiles or headsets took a long time to action; now they happen almost instantaneously. There seemed to be a new view that they must give people the tools they needed to do the job, no quibbles. Some people required additional monitors, headsets, laptops and in many cases these were provided.

However, not all teams were provided with the equipment they felt they needed to do their jobs. It seemed from participant feedback that that distribution of equipment was prioritised in specific areas.

For example, those who were working with children reported receiving smartphones quickly to enable them to communicate in ways that suited the children, whereas social workers in adult social care had not always received the same mobile phone provisions. However, this may have been a consequence of the different rules associated with external communication with specific groups. The extent to which this imbalance was a challenge for social workers and indeed other staff, can be better understood through the collection of quantitative survey data.

Those working in LAs that were further on in their 'agile' journeys were generally better prepared and equipped for the changes to working practices than the LAs for whom agile working was still in its infancy. In cases where people did not have sufficient digital resources to do their job, many had found workarounds, often at their own expense, and for many this was a source of dissatisfaction. However, it must be noted that on the whole a majority of participants were very impressed with what had been provided to them in such a short space of time.

Software

The rollout and training of MS Teams was noted as a key enabler. The fact that MS Teams had enabled everyone to have meetings, mini meetings, share screens, files and chat outside of email was described as “immense” in one group – and everyone in that group agreed that the earlier rollout of Teams training had made a big difference to peoples’ confidence in using the technology. Many people reported finding the group chats and instant messaging functions very effective. MS Teams had also helped in communication with external partners and families who were all able to download and use the software.

However, there were reports that the use of both Zoom and Teams had caused alienation challenges between partner organisations particularly at the start of lockdown, whereby some people using Zoom were unable to join Teams meetings and vice versa. This problem appeared to be felt more keenly by those whose roles involved communication with the voluntary and community sector (who were primarily using Zoom). This had left some people feeling that they had been excluded when they were not being “let into meetings” when it was simply a technology issue.



Many participants shared a view that meetings via MS Teams are more structured and purposeful than face-to-face meetings may have been; “I feel like meetings are much clearer and on point...you don’t get caught up in other things....I don’t spend what could have been two hours in a meeting....I can get it all done in 45 minutes”. Another noted “It’s easier to get hold of people now”. However, in considering these benefits of digital resources, we must also consider the challenges they bring – the lessening of informal communication and the need to be always available have been highlighted as particular risks associated with MS Teams and Skype.

Connectivity issues

A number of participants described experiencing issues with connectivity that became a source of frustration and a barrier in working remotely. People described finding it embarrassing “dropping in and out of calls” and there was concern that some individuals miss out significantly because of the frequency with which they experienced problems when trying to attend virtual meetings. Connectivity appeared to be a particular problem for those living in more rural areas; “Broadband is a real killer particularly if you live remotely...I live very remotely and my WiFi will not support me working from home”.

Having teenagers at home or other household members who simultaneously needed to use the internet for work also caused problems for many participants. Many found that they had to upgrade their packages to get more bandwidth, but there was concern voiced that the extra expense may be a challenge for a lot of people. People who had connectivity issues started to attend meetings with cameras off to make it less problematic, but it was noted that this impacted relationships and created an interpersonal barrier, meaning that teams couldn't see how people were, and support one another quite so easily.

People whose roles involved working in community settings also experienced problems:

“An internet dongle would've been really helpful, you can't always get signal if working out in a communities/family setting. We currently only have one stick for the team to share, but it is difficult to share with social distancing and no common office space to handover. Most families are fine [have internet], but sometimes we have had to use personal phone hotspots. It can be a barrier and there's social conflict if they don't want to let you have the WiFi code.”

Security

There were brief mentions by some participants of concerns around IT security and confidentiality. There were also concerns raised about the future possibility of micro-surveillance of employee activity, particularly problematic and potentially intrusive when people are working on home networks and in flexible ways. This seemed to be an area of particular concern for those who know and understand in some depth the risks around IT security and privacy; most people appeared relatively unconcerned about this issue. There was, however, some concern from those who undertake highly confidential work that there were added risks involved with working from home. Whilst it is important to briefly mention these issues, exploring these aspects more fully was outside the expertise of the researchers, and may be a worthwhile topic of future research within organisations.

2.7 Hopes for the Future

"We have the tools, we have the skills... we need a mindset change."

Overview

Home-based working during lockdown has provided a wealth of experience to guide future work design, with thousands of workers adapting to new technologies and developing new working practices. Careful consideration of the benefits and challenges experienced by LA workers over the previous six months will support evidence-based decision making and underpin new working practices which mitigate and control risks to work and wellbeing, as well as capitalising on the benefits. However, an important part of shaping future work design is incorporating a positive vision of what the best future might look like. To this end, participants in each focus group were asked to outline their hopes for the future. Overwhelmingly, responses to this revealed very strong themes characterised by blended working, choice and opportunities for face-to-face team collaboration.

2.7.1 Blended Working

As outlined, working from home resulted in a broad range of challenges and benefits. In recognition of this, the majority of participants hoped for a future work pattern including a blend of both remote working and working in the office, with few stating a preference for full-time home-based working or full-time office work. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that many of the challenges of working from home would be offset, or even eliminated, by a balance. Consider the social isolation, reduced opportunity for collaboration and loss of social learning associated with full time remote working; these risks could be dramatically controlled by work patterns balanced between home and office.

This really does provide an opportunity to have the 'best of both worlds', which was effectively summarised by one participant who said:

"[I] would like to keep some sort of home working – but with a degree of overlap with colleagues in the office to maintain team spirit, collaborative working."

The idea of blended or agile working is of course not new. Many pockets within the partner LAs have been successfully driving this new way of working for a number of years. What is new, however, is the sheer number of LA workers who have successfully trialled working from home, many of whom initially reported reluctance but, having tried it, are keen to maintain the unmistakable advantages it brings for productivity and the broad range of wider benefits. Furthermore, thanks to the widespread availability of supportive technologies, the practicalities of agile working are tremendously enhanced.

However, the value of this blended approach will only be realised if, as emphasised by the previous quote, time in the office effectively facilitates quality team interaction. This will also require that managers are equipped to manage teams which are potentially hybrid, with some members working in the one co-located place while others work remotely. Processes that enable, rather than control, will be an important feature of best practice.



2.7.2 Social Interaction and Collaborative Workspace

Social interaction is a basic human need and, as frequently stated throughout this report, this was an important theme in all focus groups and hopes for the future. Face-to-face interaction was typically high on the list of priorities. Alongside this was a redesigned space which facilitates interaction and collaboration.

"Accommodation restructure will be the key to returning to work and future work design. [This will involve] good and sufficient accommodation to support interactive working."

Transitioning to this way of working was already underway in parts of the LAs. Current plans for agile working propose far fewer people working in the office, with office space utilised as an asset for people to come together to co-create and collaborate. However, the events surrounding the pandemic have undeniably intensified the appetite for these changes and made the necessary resources more available.

There was clear and realistic recognition of the practical, financial and logistical difficulties that this would bring, such as booking of spaces between teams and the integration of part-time schedules within teams. Furthermore, this was agreed to be unsuited to some roles. Nonetheless, a work pattern with opportunities for face-to-face interaction and a work space with collaborative team-working was a central feature of the collective hopes for the future.

2.7.3 Culture of Flexibility, Choice and Trust

Aligned with blended working and collaboration was the desire to broaden the cultural shift towards flexibility, choice and trust. As many participants reported widespread improvements in productivity during lockdown, people felt they had proven they can and will do their job effectively from home. They wanted to be trusted to be professional and motivated, and afforded appropriate flexibility and discretion over their work schedule. As previously stated, not all participants were keen to continue working from home. In fact, some expressed concerns about creating a future where people felt they had to work from home. However, overall, participants highlighted flexibility and choice in their hopes for the future. Given the importance of 'control' as a healthy aspect of work characteristics, and a well-known buffer for stress, a shift towards a more flexible and trusting culture is likely to bring many positive benefits to wellbeing, productivity, engagement and organisational commitment. However, the importance of developing appropriate systems and policies which support this cultural shift was not underestimated by participants.

2.7.4 Systems, Policies & Approaches

In particular, participants' hopes for the future were characterised by fairness in systems, policies and provisions. Many participants reflected on inequities within and between groups, hoping for the development of systems which enhance fairness. Under lockdown conditions these inequalities often referred to different availability of homeworking provisions between teams, with some teams reporting less adequate technology provisions than others. Going forward, consistency in approaches towards working from home will be particularly important for creating a working environment that is perceived as fair.

A further important aspect of hopes for the future was strong guidance from senior leadership teams about how to work from home. It was proposed that this will be important in building the confidence of those working at home that they are working in healthy ways that are consistent with organisational expectations, and providing sufficient equity within hybrid teams.

2.7.5 Environment

One final though important point was the bigger picture of environmental effects of working from home. As outlined above, this was considered to be a major widespread benefit of reduced commuting and general work-travel. One participant highlighted this as their main hope for the future, stating that they want the organisation to seize this opportunity and "commit to being carbon neutral so that we can really make a positive impact".





03. Implications

Next Steps & Recommendations

Whilst the findings of this report offer a useful and broad insight into the experiences of staff and managers across four LAs, the next logical step before taking any decisions about where to go next is to collect quantitative data in order to now generate generalisable findings. Accompanying and arising out of this report is the bespoke survey tool, which takes the current UK best practice approach to measuring occupational stress risk and refines it to make it contextually specific – to LAs and remote/home-based working. The findings from the survey can then be used to understand priority areas for intervention and future work design.

However, recovery plans would benefit from multi-level support to minimise the risks associated with remote working; based on the qualitative findings there are some areas that may benefit from a swift response:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">1) To boost morale and engagement, acknowledge the key themes of choice, flexibility and trust raised by participants as being valid and important as an organisation.2) Where possible, avoid making decisions about whether staff should return to the office full time or not until the quantitative data, and therefore a thorough understanding of stress risks, is available.3) Prioritise boosting management skills so that they can effectively manage and support hybrid and/or remote teams in a way that enables equity, without harm to themselves, in a way that suits individual needs within their teams, and that fosters mutual trust and flexibility.4) Where possible, most roles would benefit from the option to incorporate some face-to-face interaction that could maintain existing relationships, minimise social isolation and provide opportunities for new team members to develop these important relationships. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">5) The importance of informal communications within teams should be recognised, and mechanisms which support remote 'debriefing' should be prioritised in roles where regular face-to-face interaction is not a feature of the working pattern. Feedback from the focus groups suggests that this opportunity to debrief is important for a wide range of roles, but may be particularly critical for roles where the work is emotionally demanding.6) Begin to develop guidance around remote/home-based working 'etiquette' as raised in Section 2.5.6, and flexible working policies to support agile/choice-based working. This might consider issues such as healthy diary management, break-taking, and flexible working within teams. This may also need to include guidance around etiquette during virtual meetings, training and workshops, such as advice for keeping staff engaged and motivated, and strategies for encouraging contributions and conversation. It is worth considering whether aspects of virtual meetings such as muting and hand-raising actually hinder the natural flow and momentum of conversations and discourage contributions. |
|--|--|

- 7) Consider future investigations into the impact of changes to working practices for groups whose voices were not heard during this work, such as those whose roles did not change as significantly due to COVID-19. This work may also consider equality, diversity and inclusion – for example, considering whether there may have been any specific impacts for people with long term health conditions or disabilities. Evaluating the wider impact of changes on relationships with partner organisations is also a worthwhile consideration.
- 8) Harness this opportunity to boost morale by maintaining momentum on the transformation and culture change journey, ensuring staff are well supported, well resourced, and their views, preferences and wellbeing are at the heart of future decisions around working practices.



Limitations

Qualitative research is by its very nature subjective and offers an interpretive approach to the subject matter. It is a form of inductive empirical research whereby data are not numbers, instead offering exploration of phenomena through a bottom-up approach whereby participant views and experiences guide the next stages of inquiry. However, as highlighted above, it is important to note that the findings presented within this report are not generalisable; to understand the prevalence of the issues raised, quantitative data collection is required.

The researchers offer a psychosocial perspective, with a background in occupational psychology, within which there is a vast body of literature, tools, and several theories around work-related stress. This discipline therefore colours the lens through which they not only interpret the qualitative data, but also through which they designed the research and facilitated discussions.

However, recognising this as both an unavoidable bias and yet as the value that these specific researchers bring to the work makes this aspect a strength rather than a limitation of qualitative research.

It is also useful to note that this study was undertaken during late summer, which is likely to have had an impact on a range of issues relating to wellbeing, for example, the extent to which people were spending time outdoors and using energy in the home (and the associated costs). It was undertaken at a point when England was no longer in 'lockdown' and many restrictions (but not all) had been lifted. At the time of writing, England has entered a 3-tiered system of restrictions, and the region in question is in Tier 1 (the lowest of the three tiers). It is likely that as winter approaches, employee experiences associated with working from home and with the uncertainty around COVID-19 restrictions will have an impact on employee wellbeing.



Final Thoughts

This work represents an innovative and evidence-based approach to informing future work design that acknowledges the fundamental importance of staff experience. Findings suggest that individual differences must always be considered, line managers and ICT provisions can be key enablers or barriers, and that the unexpected digital transformation brought about by the changes to working practices in response to COVID-19 have enabled culture change that has both surprised and excited many LA employees. Findings also illustrate that there is clear social value in working in a shared office space and most employees do want to retain this to some degree. They also want to maintain the flexibility, choice and trust that has emerged from this unprecedented situation. Where LAs successfully navigate the coming months and years by minimising risks, managing challenges and maximising opportunity and benefits, and placing staff wellbeing at the forefront of decision-making, truly agile, innovative and efficient workplaces of the future can emerge.

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We would like to acknowledge the crucial contribution of all of the participants across the 32 focus groups. Despite significant workloads and a clash with the annual leave season, participants made time for this valuable work within their calendar and attended sessions with enthusiasm and a willingness to openly discuss their personal experiences. We hope that this report adequately represents the views participants kindly shared with us as holistically as possible, and that the findings and subsequent survey and quantitative data contributes to the establishment of longer term future working practices that build healthy, happy workplaces of the future.

Appendices

Appendix A.

Working Practice Profiles

Working Practice Profiles

01 Home Visits

This group consisted of those whose usual roles involve undertaking home visits. Examples include social workers (adult, children, disability, fostering, adoption); family co-ordinators; housing; rents; fostering and adoption service; welfare visits.

Home Visits – The Context

Only emergency visits were allowed during the early days of lockdown. Social workers reported an initial drop in workload due to the reduced visits, but then video meetings with families became possible.

As much as possible, emergency visits were 'doorstep visits' with PPE. Some roles did only virtual client/site visits initially, progressing later to doorstep visits.

In order to identify which families required home visits, safeguarding risk assessments were put into place with families graded according to risk. Social Workers also conducted COVID risk assessments for their caseloads. Within the context of the current report, we have assumed the following meanings:

Unexpected Consequence of Lockdown: Empowering People

One participant who was a manager noted that the COVID crisis had meant some of the families they have been supporting have been a little more "cut off" – not just from their interventions but from others too – whilst some of these families, left a bit more to their own devices, have thrived:

"when they've been left and not had the pressure of everyone on their backs, they've pulled together as a family"

This had made the manager question whether sometimes taking a step back might help some families a little more and led to reflection about how they and their team could best help some people moving forward.

As visits were resuming, this manager was encouraging their team to think about how the momentum that some families have experienced over the last 6 months can be maintained, rather than "going back and throwing lots of services on them".

Some departments have also found that some service users who previously received face-to-face visits have managed well without them. They have found that many service users have been able to take responsibility for things that they previously would have received help with. This leaves more time to focus on those cases where help is really needed.

Efficiency & Engagement Benefits

The care act assessment was condensed in initial lockdown and emergency paperwork was produced – participants described how this has actually speeded things up and made things a lot better for people

There was logic and benefit in reducing the number of meetings that they needed to travel for – allowing them to keep the right time free for the critical face to face meetings that still needed to take place.

Many teams felt that remote working had pushed teams to be more efficient and effective. For example, being able to type up notes at home, and use other venues as needed.

More multiagency groups able to 'attend' teams meetings, health visitors couldn't attend before and now can – much more efficient to do these meetings by teams .

Some participants have found that teenagers who would not engage on the telephone will engage extensively on WhatsApp.

"It has been interesting for carers and those we support to see us as human and see children popping up in the background..."

Value of Face-to-Face Contact

Those in service user-focused roles talked about how they had come into their role because they enjoy people-focused work and they felt that had been taken away from them because of the changes to working practices. Some felt strongly that they wanted to return to the same volume of face-to-face interactions that they were having prior to COVID.

Commitment

"This crisis has truly shown to me the passion that people have for the job they do".

An example was given by a manager whose team member had moved out of their family home for a couple of weeks, as their partner was shielding, so they could continue to support a family.

Challenges

Workload

Participants had initially expected that working from home and doing video calls instead of visits would give them time to catch up on reports. However, this was not the case. In fact, the work was reported to be more intense, with adjustments to changes to their work practices and increased demand from clients.

Some described feeling 'management pressure' to be more productive due to not having the travel time between client visits

Debriefing & Decompressing

Mentioned in the main report is the importance of debriefing; this was of particular relevance to roles in the Home Visits category. Participants emphasised how much they valued being able to informally talk to colleagues following difficult visits, and that this was important for their wellbeing.

Some also spoke of missing the 'decompression' time that travelling in the car gave them between visits. When conducting sessions remotely, they found it harder to effectively do this, which may have an impact on their health.

Staff Wellbeing

For many workers with responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of service users, there was a view that the number one priority was service users, but that this had meant workers had often neglected their own wellbeing in the process.

Intrusion of Work into Private Space

Also mentioned in the main report, but of particular relevance to those working with families is the impact of interactions with service users being undertaken within the worker's home environment, especially when dealing with particularly challenging cases. For example, one participant described their work with families, explaining that sometimes the work can involve dealing with very distressed individuals, and this is brought into the home environment; the emotions are experienced within the home environment. This means that it is family members who are there to see the immediate impact of such work experiences.

Privacy & Confidentiality

When visits ceased, everything had to be done over the telephone or via video calls. For many workers, this was difficult when they were sharing their home with others, as the work intruded on their family and often involved sensitive content that was not appropriate for the home environment.

Some participants were concerned about data protection issues – one said they felt vulnerable keeping confidential documents about sensitive family cases in their home, and felt a lot of responsibility for this paperwork.

Procedures

Those whose roles involve home visits across large areas were concerned about the impact of new COVID-19 desk access arrangements. For example, one participant described how half of their week can be taken up with driving and because hot-desking is now reduced they cannot work between visits. They described sitting in their car to eat lunch, unable to hot desk because it will be restricted to people who already working those buildings. Participants explained that notes need to be written when fresh in the mind, and resource and facility provisions need to enable this.

Technology

The quality of video calls was a problem for some. One described it as feeling 'tokenistic' and felt that video calls were not sufficient for communicating with children with complex needs.

Fairness of provision was a recurring theme. Some roles requiring home visits and/or interaction with families reported not having access to work mobile phones, so they had to use personal phones. Similarly, some participants described receiving '£5 phones' and having to buy headsets themselves, whereas others had them bought for them.

Those with concerns about confidentiality, security and confidential document storage at home said they needed laptops and phones which 'lock' properly. They had to store documents about foster carers and vulnerable children in their home during lockdown and were worried about how secure the paperwork was in their house.

Not all service users have access to the necessary technologies to facilitate doing the work that needs to be done with them, and participants were concerned that in some cases, clients or service-users had to cover the costs of calls in order to interact with the LA.

Access to resources

PPE was a problem; Those still undertaking home visits were required to wear face masks, goggles or visors, gloves, aprons, and use gel, but not all of this equipment was always available. There were periods of time when staff had to go out to do visits without access to PPE as it had run out.

There was concern about the wellbeing of informal carers when daycentres closed. One participant said 'Carer stress really skyrocketed' and there was concern that cared-for persons were in difficult situations as a result.

There was concern about long-term arrangements around mileage for those undertaking home visits if homeworking remains. A policy that feels fair to staff will be necessary.

Administrators have been put under a lot of pressure – one team described how they have 30–40 social workers all asking administrative staff to do things for them because they are not in the office – it was suggested that if they are to work at home in the future, more enabling technology and processes will be necessary – they need to be able to send out packs, forms, collect signatures etc. and said 'we need to get better at this'.

Challenges with Communication & Information Gathering

Participants who had to undertake phone assessments were concerned that they could not always get a sense of what was going on over the telephone. Participants reported that there is a tendency for people to say on the phone that things are fine, but dynamic assessments with a person face-to-face in their home are essential.

It was also described as difficult to get a sense of family dynamics within foster homes when only meeting virtually.

There was concern from a number of participants that those living with abusive partners could not be spoken to with the confidence that their partner was not present, listening, and having some impact on their answers and responses.

Working with people who have, for example, learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, dementia, can mean that if you are not with them to complete paperwork, it does not get completed properly and therefore things take longer. A lot of people completing this paperwork are already in crisis. LA staff also have to evaluate whether they are appropriate individuals to manage their own care budget and this also needs to be done face-to-face.

Some roles are required to work within hospitals which was then not possible in the initial lockdown period. This meant that they could no longer directly engage with clients. Where they would normally work face-to-face, they suddenly had to make important decisions on the basis of information provided by others. This posed challenges because the individual completing the paperwork did not always have the same approach as those who would usually be gathering the information.

Engaging with children virtually was very difficult for some participants; this was somewhat dependent on the age of the child, many of whom were too young to engage appropriately with remote contact. In-person contact was also impacted, and was described as 'scary' for the children when the visitor was wearing PPE.

Without connection in person, rapport was difficult to establish online, particularly with children.

In youth services, there is concern that some service users get 'Zoomed out' and are really appreciative of face-to-face interaction.

Some roles found contacting people by phone instead of face-to-face during lockdown difficult because people were so wary of scams that it was difficult to gather the necessary information from people.

There was a view that Child Protection Conferences should not be conducted remotely in the future. It was described as "too informal, very serious and not being there in person gives families the wrong impression".

There was a view that statutory visits should be undertaken in person – whilst there was recognition that they could usefully be supported by online intermediate visits, there was a strong belief that it was crucial to see person's home in order to really understand the situation.

Working Practice Profiles

02 Business to Business

This group consisted of people who worked in regulation and enforcement services, such as environmental health and trading standards; services to schools such as finance and admissions; waste management; commissioning; care brokerage; flood risk; partnership delivery; and licensing.

Working Practices in Regulatory Areas During COVID

Inspection visits to traders were not allowed during lockdown, but at the time of the focus groups they were just looking to re-commence routine visits. Initially they were dealing with traders by telephone and were then arranging a visit which was a marked change in the delivery of these services.

Regulatory teams were involved in making telephone calls to businesses from the beginning of lockdown, advising which businesses had to close, then providing advice on how they could safely re-open.

Food standards employees explained that the biggest challenge was the interaction lost internally and externally.

Environmental health work changed from being proactive to reactive due to coronavirus restrictions; initially some environmental health team members reported being limited by resources but eventually they did receive the things they needed.

There were challenges dealing with complaints in licensing. An example was given regarding a business about which a complaint had been received. The person with whom they needed to liaise did not have access to MS Teams and instead wanted to use WhatsApp to discuss the issue. Staff members would only have been able to do this via personal mobiles and they did not feel comfortable doing this. It was noted that, in work that involves the public, MS Teams is not always appropriate for communication, and it is even more of a barrier in situations where someone is in trouble and may not be 'motivated' to join the call.

The number of complaints to regulatory areas were reported to have initially dropped significantly, and they were only just starting to pick up again at the time of the focus groups. It was highlighted that where there were challenging conversations to be had, for example in compliance roles such as relating to complaints, licensing and environmental health, it was reportedly very difficult to have authority and to assert and enforce rules when working remotely.

School Finance

Some members of these teams had seen greater connectivity since everyone has been working from home, but the focus groups took place whilst schools were still shut. Staff were concerned this would not be as positive once the schools went back in and people returned to schools. They would like to continue to deliver the service remotely and save staff and travel time, if it is possible and workable.

Working Practices in Regulatory Roles: Hopes for the Future

"There has been a lot of discussion about this. The question has been asked of all staff... most seem to want a blend of working from home and attending the office. This should not be a major problem for our wider team as some colleagues, especially those from the food hygiene team, typically start at home, attend a couple of premises for an inspection, then return home. They would only come into the office to catch up on office duties and scan paperwork. This seems to work for qualified officers who understand their inspection duties and do not need to consult with colleagues too often. However, from a Trading Standards point of view, the interaction and discussion of complaints and different considerations and solutions is very important. As the remit of the department is so wide, with limited staff, the use of colleagues as sounding boards is necessary."

Working Practice Profiles

03 Leisure Services

This group consisted of people working in a range of public facilities and leisure services including: Events venues and events-related; libraries; parks and gardens; nature reserves; galleries; creative arts and culture.

Reserves

The reserves said that the sites have limited capacity and have witnessed unprecedented numbers of people visiting. Staff have been buoyed to see this and said that the numbers of people visiting nature reserves suggests that more people have reconnected with the Natural World.

The team on the reserves usually meets once per month – since lockdown they have been meeting remotely once per week which has brought them closer and meant that they are more in touch, which they perceive to be beneficial. They are a small team and they rely on each other; management has been very helpful for them.

Opening Public Places

At the time of the focus groups, things were just starting to reopen.

The challenge of opening up public places (i.e. parks / gardens) when staff had been used to working there without members of the general public had caused some anxiety amongst staff members initially – they reported a concerns about trying to do too much too soon.

Staff felt concern over the perceived challenge of helping members of the public to understand the seriousness of the situation and follow the COVID guidelines that staff had been adhering to.

Opportunities for Creativity and Innovation

Many participants felt they had become more creative in the situation brought about by COVID, coming up with work-arounds and solutions to get things done. Physical barriers, such as the fact that galleries and museums were shut to the public, forced creative thinking and workarounds to try and maintain the accessibility of the resources to the public – digital platforms were used to maintain public engagement, such as Facebook pages and virtual tours. One participant said “This has put in place some foundations and shown us we can do it”. A similar example was the creation of a “shielding hour” in early mornings in the parks and gardens to allow members of the general public who were shielding time to enjoy nature outside of the larger crowds – this was well received by the public.

Leisure Centres, Community Facilities, Events

There were concerns raised by staff who worked in leisure centres and other public facilities. For example, one participant said "The phones aren't good enough, web booking doesn't work". There were also concerns raised that demand on facilities would not return and that restructuring would lead to another round of job losses.

Staff returning to leisure centres reported finding it a difficult process. One participant said that their team seemed to have lost confidence. A manager said that they wanted to help with those who were shielding or who had family members who were shielding but it was difficult to get them back onto site. The manager reported having to drive them harder and said they believe that the barrier for them was concern about getting things right and making sure they follow the government advice.

Staff from leisure centres, community facilities and events centres were hopeful that they would be able to make the public welcome again, saying "We want people to come and see us...we hope we can make them welcome again".

Some staff did have to continue working on sites throughout lockdown because the facilities needed maintaining. This had made things difficult for some who had colleagues working at home. Due to the responsibilities surrounding building maintenance, they were often moving around the buildings or sites and not always available digitally. They were feeling isolated in the empty buildings, and also felt that their colleagues expected them to be available on MS Teams all of the time.

Funding – Events & Creative Sector

A funding manager for the creative sector raised concerns about clients who had been very hard hit by COVID, and the additional pressure this was putting on staff:

"Our clients are people who don't have income or support and now the funding for their work has gone – they are more emotional and need support."

However, people who were involved in events funding had found that working from home had enabled them to cast their net wider and attend or engage with more things digitally that they were able to in person.

Working Practice Profiles

04 Community Outreach

The views included within this working practice grouping are those that were specific to roles of, for example, Teachers/Adult Education; Community Outreach; Family Support; Children's Centres; Youth Community Development workers; and Road Safety.

Context

Some of these roles had been officially office-based prior to lockdown, but their day-to-day roles saw them working across various sites and customer premises. Some had occasional time at home within this mix. Some felt that they had already been "smart working" or "agile working" prior to lockdown and felt that how they worked was more "up to us".

Since lockdown some of the roles in this group had been mostly based from home. In some cases site/client visits continued in some capacity whilst maintaining social distancing. These visits have been increasing over time alongside some office based activities.

Challenges

For some of these roles, 80% of their normal workload vanished; normal channels of community engagement disappeared overnight and teaching responsibilities collapsed. This was a difficult time for the individuals in these roles.

There was concern that engaging digitally did not encourage the same levels of engagement in certain community hubs such as Children's Centres:

"It's not the same as them coming through the doors".

There was concern among participants about new Mums who previously relied on groups to meet people. Some work with babies was described as particularly difficult:

"Babies would normally come to their Centre, and you can't do this work remotely – it doesn't provide sufficient opportunity to build rapport with families or children."

One participant was concerned about the conflict between previously promoted attitudes to technology, and what was now being asked of people in order to engage with services:

"We promote the 'Get off technology' culture and now we encourage families and children to use this to engage with us; it is not consistent with [our ethos]."

Benefits

Family Links courses have been delivered virtually and people have found that it has worked better virtually than in person. For example, it has helped people cope with childcare issues when attending the courses, and not having to worry about travelling. People have been responsive and thankful that the service has been running and have had sufficient access to technologies to be able to participate.

Google Classroom has worked well for Live online teaching for adult education and young people.

WhatsApp has provided some opportunity to engage with those families who do not have other technologies; It has also been used to setup support networks for families.

There was a view from some group facilitators that group work is easier when done from home.

The Future

Participants were very concerned about uncertainty in terms of service provisions and roles. The lack of clarity made it difficult to plan and they really wanted to see some more definitive answers about how things will progress:

"We want to know when the child care centres will open. It is difficult to think about the future; we want some clarity, there currently aren't any answers, we can't plan ahead and we have nothing to work towards – if leisure centres can open then why not us?"

Working Practice Profiles

05 Customer Contact

This group consisted of those whose usual roles involve some form of direct customer contact with members of the public, such as: call centres; debt management; tax; bereavement; waste management; electoral services; neighbourhood nuisance; collections.

Any issues relating to specific roles within this group are included here, but the majority of content unique to these ways of working is from those working in Customer Contact Centres.

Increase in Workload

Some teams with responsibilities for supporting the general public had seen a big increase in workload and were dealing with an increasing backlog of work going forward – some believed that they were “hugely understaffed” and described people being at breaking point and in crisis. Identification of areas experiencing this will be possible using the quantitative survey, so that interventions can be swiftly delivered.

Supporting Communities

Teams with responsibilities for managing neighbourhood nuisance issues found it very difficult to manage during lockdown as they were not always able to respond in the way they usually would. Staff found it difficult knowing that this had an impact on members on the public, which was upsetting for them.

Debt Collecting

Teams with responsibilities for recovering money found it very difficult to do so without the threat of the court system (at the point of the focus groups, courts were still closed). Motivating people to pay debts without court action was very difficult; as a result the workload for individuals with this type of role had drastically decreased during lockdown, but they were expecting “an avalanche of work to drop” as soon as the courts reopened. They were concerned about the imminent drastic **changes to workload** that would be coming through – without being able to do anything to mitigate that at the present time. One staff member said “When the storm comes, I worry I won’t be able to cope.” This individual explained they usually handled around 16 cases per month – but had sent out in the region of 3000 debt recovery letters recently.

Customer Contact Centres

Councils had to deliver customer services remotely almost overnight. Some experienced changes in shift patterns overnight. Teams who had previously worked 9-5 in central locations were now working remotely and covering shifts throughout weekdays, evenings and weekends. This had an impact on the workers and their families, where routines had been disrupted.

Technical & Procedural Challenges

A lot of things did not work to begin with; systems were not in place for contact centre workers to work from home. However, LAs mobilised resources quickly to make this work.

There were initial challenges with the phone systems that meant that calls were being put through to the wrong teams or individuals.

At the time of the focus groups this was still happening occasionally. Calls were regularly directed to the wrong place – for example, family teams received calls about building regulations and council tax.

Transfers from one department to another were really difficult and finding extension numbers on a laptop was not easy. Staff found it daunting knowing how to find the right people.

These issues were attributed to the volume of people who were brought in to support the phone lines with minimal training.

The Nature of Calls

Those involved in taking calls from members of the general public said they had felt “more involved” with them during the lockdown period.

However, in the early days of lockdown, Customer Contact Centres received a large volume of “random” queries. Participants felt that some members of the public did not understand the ramifications of lockdown being in place.

Participants noted that the nature of many calls was very intense; for example, some people would not eat if they could not get food parcels, examples were given of an elderly lady who had fallen over and had no-one to help, a man who called saying he had no money for food, and many calls regarding safeguarding issues relating to children.

Meanwhile, there were members of the public calling to complain that they had not received their caddy bin liners. Some members of the public got angry during telephone calls and staff found this difficult to manage alongside the many other challenges.

Demands & Control

There was an emotional impact for staff through dealing with the high volume and wide range of calls.

The work was described as "relentless", with 40 seconds to write notes before the next call. The time is managed and staff have to inform somebody if they go to the toilet, if they have to do administration; they described feeling like they are being constantly analysed. One said "I'm tearing my hair out" and said they need more staff and more training.

Participants recognised that it must have been especially hard for people who had children.

Peer Support

Not being with colleagues meant they were more isolated and there was less support with finding answers or handling difficult situations.

Usually they would ask colleagues about things they were not sure about; but they cannot do that now. Reassurance and knowing that they could quickly turn around to ask a colleague question was helpful. Participants described self-doubt and second-guessing themselves when working on their own at home.

Participants said that because they often have to deal with aggression, they need time to offload. There was discussion around how "being abused verbally in your own home" felt like much more of an invasion than when in the office.

Some individuals noted how it was easier to "share the experience" with colleagues when they were in the office - at home it was more difficult to switch off, especially when a call had been difficult.

Management Support

Customer Contact Centres found it very difficult to have team meetings due to shift patterns and people working from home.

People from Customer Contact Centres described feeling like part of a bigger team now because several contact centres were now working collaboratively to deliver the service, and they all communicate with one another. This had been a positive experience for staff and they had made new connections.

Management support in Customer Contact Centres was described by a number of participants in different groups as "very, very, very good and supportive". Participants said that their managers had been accessible, and they had been supported and encouraged to take breathers when needed.

Future Hopes

One group of participants from an LA Customer Contact Centre said they would like senior managers to recognise what they do more, and be more aware of the impact their decisions have upon the lives of staff.

Some Customer Contact Centre teams are still working from home at this stage and they did not think that there were plans to go back into the office. They find not knowing very difficult.

One group of participants from Customer Contact environments believed that it will not be possible for them to have choice between home and office working – they do not have the physical resources to make this possible – in particular, computers. The whole team will have to choose to work either in the office or at home.

Some individuals were really keen to get back to their face-to-face customer roles:

"I can't wait to get back to seeing customers, I've really missed them...I want this to remain a huge part of the work, working from home wouldn't be enough. I prefer to be at work."

Working Practice Profiles

06 Business Support: Office Based

This WPP includes any content raised in focus groups that related to specific aspects of roles in departments where the majority of the work before lockdown was office-based. Those considered within this grouping are: Human Resources (HR); Learning & Development (L&D); Payroll; Finance; Marketing; Communications; Public Relations (PR); Policy; Recruitment; Procurement; Legal (corporate); Business Intelligence. These roles were predominantly 100% office-based, or to some extent office based and home-based (where agile/smart working was already in place).

Team Identity & Office Working

Most teams within this group were working completely remotely at the time of the focus groups, and there was concern raised by some that they would “lose the team identity” if this continued in the longer term. They felt it was important to foster a team culture, have a collective understanding, and feel like part of something bigger, and remote working could be a barrier to this.

Some people feel like there is “no point going in” to the workplace in future if they are not with their team, and would like to see any future plans for work to be based around facilitating positive team cultures.

Participants in these groups were concerned about the possibility of hotdesking because some had previous experience of teams struggling to sit together in hotdesking scenarios. They raised concern that “desk-booking systems are probably not going to work”.

Flexitime

One team reported that their flexitime stopped when lockdown started, so they could not accrue hours – normally they were allowed to accrue up to two days per month. This had made it harder to manage things like medical appointments and caring for elderly relatives. They explained that “the team were concerned about redundancies and knew that the organisation is millions of pounds in debt and is worried about a lot of people accruing leave.” The issue raised seemed to be most linked to perceived fairness across organisations – some teams were still allowed flexitime, some were still allowed it but it was “not looked upon favourably”, and others were not allowed it at all.

Training

Training staff was reportedly very difficult remotely and some people reported preferring one-to-one training.

Those whose roles related specifically to training duties saw their work dry up during lockdown which had an impact on morale. –No access to computers

Communications and Marketing

These teams felt that they were generally able to adapt well to the situation brought about by COVID because of the nature of their work. They reported that “working practices translated easily to the online environment”.

Recruitment

Participants reported that interviewing online had been very difficult because candidates have different technological provisions and some have had problems connecting. It was suggested that a standardised approach would be beneficial, and provision of guidance for candidates around using digital resources.

Shared Service Issues

There were some challenges for organisations with shared services where things were being done differently in different organisations, and this made it harder to adapt to the new working practices.

People & Culture

There comments from people working within these teams about the value they placed on the fact that their usual roles were very much people-facing. People working within this area were used to having a lot of interactions with others, so they felt the isolation of homeworking keenly.

People were concerned that working remotely as a team had led them to lose the feeling of being part of wider People and Culture teams. For example:

“There is a really big team in People and Culture, and I feel that we’ve lost that wider team because there is no reason to bring all of us together”.

Investigations and Disciplinary Hearings

Participants described problems trying to do disciplinary hearings and investigations digitally:

"When you do a disciplinary hearing you really need to be able to see somebody face-to-face".

They also felt that it was difficult to support people around disciplinaries when working remotely:

"It is really difficult after serious disciplinaries, there is no real support, it can be really difficult"

HR Business Partners had to go into the offices during lockdown to do HR investigations, for example to create the packs of evidence, and to do hearings. They reported that it had been difficult getting documents out to people and reiterated that in this aspect of their work face-to-face is crucial.

Carrying out investigations with staff was also very difficult when frontline staff do not have computers at home:

"Many frontline workers do not have the resources at home and/or are not comfortable with IT...It can make what is already an uncomfortable interaction really problematic."

In the case of investigations they described it as difficult to portray empathy over MS Teams. They felt that it was important to be able to build some rapport with a person before going into a room, offer to have tea and such like. Digitally it was harder to manage these uncomfortable situations for all involved.

Working Practice Profiles

07 Business Support: Facilities Based

This group consisted of those whose usual roles involve undertaking work that requires them to be on site in council buildings, such as ICT; Business Change; Business Analytics; Facilities Management and Building Control; Projects; and Safety. Many of these individuals did still have to go into buildings during lockdown to keep things running, or were among the first to return to offices. Those working in ICT and business change were heavily involved in the process of making remote working possible across the councils. Because of their centrality to this process, there were many ICT staff included within the focus groups, and therefore the majority of the content in this WPP relates to ICT teams specifically.

Responsibilities for Health & Safety

Some participants were involved in the process of the provision of PPE and furniture, coordinating signage and cleaning. With PPE, there were significant challenges because suppliers changed prices from minute to minute and they struggled to get access to the required equipment as a result. They were not able to pre-order more than was needed because they did not have the storage space for the equipment, but then when they tried to re-order, things were not available, there were delays or price-hikes. This was a difficult time for the staff involved in this, as they were also aware of the problems this caused for other staff members who were in need of this PPE to undertake their jobs safely.

Participants spoke about the need to make staff feel safe again and okay in the office. This required them to go against the grain after being told nowhere is safe. Teams had worked hard to understand and adhere to guidance and put excellent cleaning systems in place.

ICT Teams: Context

In the week before lockdown it was clear that home working would be become necessary and ICT teams were already beginning to prepare. There was a particularly challenging period for ICT teams that lasted around 12 weeks.

Some ICT, project and business change staff felt that LAs were unprepared for what happened and were slow in reacting to a difficult situation:

| "Business continuity plans were not suitable."

| "Initially, the workload was very high and chaotic – it felt like we were very ill prepared in terms of a disaster recovery plan."

| "There was very little proactive action initially."

However, some areas had already done a lot of work to become agile/smart and this meant that they felt well-prepared for home-working.

ICT Teams: Demands & Pressure

ICT departments across all four LAs experienced a huge increase in workload as they were central to adaptation to home working across LAs. They experienced a large increase in meetings and interactions; many felt that they were bombarded with communications from too many different channels, and were struggling to manage this. They were in constant demand and many reported finding it difficult to switch off at the end of the day.

Some staff reported difficulty scheduling getting into the office to collect equipment for staff – they were being pulled in a lot of different directions and felt under a lot of pressure.

They were also largely working from home themselves and adapting to this way of working. ICT highlighted the same issues as in other parts of the organisations, including difficulties with managing people remotely, challenges for new starters, lack of breaks between virtual meetings, getting called much more frequently, conversations turn into meetings. Some reported feeling isolated and struggling with connection with their teams.

ICT teams reported anxiety and guilt about being away from their desk, team members from one LA described feeling that they "have no explanation for not being instantly responsive". ICT specialists from another LA said there was "an expectation that you are always available, I used to get a coffee, but I don't feel I can do that at home – I feel I need to explain if I'm not immediately responsive". They reported that people are feeling more mentally drained due to the situation.

Improvements in Wellbeing

Despite the increased demands and challenges faced by ICT teams, many reported simultaneous benefits through home-working. For example, feeling "a lot less tired and physically drained" when working from home rather than on sites because they were "not running around". They were "more energised".

Those who had been working in the office during the lockdown period had found that it has been a very different office space to what they had been used to; "it has been a very quiet environment."

One participant described how going into the office give them a good structured start to the day; another said they quite like the structure and having the break between work and home life. However, ICT staff agreed that returning to an office where they were as in-demand as they were before COVID would not be a positive experience; for example, one said: "going back to the office, if it's as busy before, fills me with dread". They said they had found their reactive job "very stressful" before but felt very relaxed going into the building more recently.

Benefits

Despite the pressure and challenge faced by ICT teams, there was a great deal of positivity from ICT teams, and a broad range of benefits were discussed.

It was felt that whilst ICT teams had been developing 'agile' or 'smart' working resources for some time, not all staff had accepted it as a way of working. They were excited about what had been achieved in such a short period of time, and came across as proud of their teams and organisations.

ICT and change management teams could see the benefits of flexibility of pace and location. They believed that reduced travel times had increased efficiency and thought that there had, in general, been a big increase in efficiency and focus – particularly in communications, but they were wary that they had lost interpersonal connection.

COVID has given them "The opportunity to get things done really quickly, the space and time to really press on and use it to accelerate things...skip procedural red tape" and it had enabled them to get things moving forwards.

The accelerated roll out of MS Teams meant that people could carry on working and delivering essential services.

They believe that now that they have got the uptake, user perception has changed, productivity has increased, and "It felt suddenly that we were outcomes-focused which has been beneficial".

ICT and change participants were excited that COVID had speeded up the process of "transitioning from a workplace-based organisation to work being something you do, not somewhere you go to".

They wondered "Why did it take COVID for that to happen?", and suggested that it was partly because COVID had enabled them to take risks that they were not previously able to take as an organisation. COVID saw an increased willingness all round to "give things a go", which drastically increased the speed of progress.

"It is easier to beg forgiveness after making mistakes and taking risks in the COVID climate, so we were able to make sensible decisions that we couldn't have made before."

Planning for the Future

ICT and Business Change teams were innovative, hopeful, and forward-thinking in the focus groups. They shared their hopes and ideas about where the organisations have been, and where they hope they will go next:

"We have realised resources and got to a better place – adrenaline got us to where we needed to be and we have come through the storm."

However, the increase in use – "more people, more technology, more frequently" – means that they "cannot sustain this level of pace with the current staffing levels". They highlighted that there has been a lot of work to do in the COVID response, and sometimes they feel that that is not recognised:

"The organisational expectations have not taken account of the fact that you need people to achieve things – the change to working practices, the change in demand, plus all the 'business as usual' stuff; they have progressed very quickly and organisationally did build an expectation of change, but they haven't got the resource to match expectation, and pressure is building – they are becoming more fragmented."

Returning to Desks and Offices

They were keen to point out that the space that LAs need now is something different to what they left on the 26th of March, and were hopeful that this would bring about long-term cultural change:

"Where are we going with it now? Councils will expect far fewer people to work in the office. We need to use workspaces as assets for people to come together to co-create and collaborate...plan to bring people together...The way we use technology and space will be different; there will be an expectation that you do not come to work to sit at a desk and instead it will be about planned social contact...it is important to give people choice and not instruction and let them exercise that choice; understand what the workforce need before leaping to significant change...going back to desk space feels inefficient"

Working Practice Profiles

08 Court-related & Legal Processes

This group consisted of roles working within or including: Registrar & Bereavement; Coroners Court; Magistrates Court; Independent Reviewing Officers; Court Enforcement; those working in the Homeless Service were also included within this group.

New Procedures

The courts initially stopped altogether but then some started taking place virtually. In some cases there was a view that this has worked well, and there have been indications from the courts that they will continue on a virtual basis.

All inquests at the Coroner's office stopped. They are now doing 'Table Top' inquests – using IT solutions and video conferencing. They reported that they expect that this will now become routine due to the potential efficiency gains.

Agencies needed to find new ways of doing things and frequently the new procedures were seen as more efficient and less bureaucratic – for example, government changes meant that deaths could be registered over the phone and certificates could be issued following this. It is hoped that they will be able to retain this option. Other new systems are much easier for registration – births and marriages also have fewer restrictions – participants felt that things were much better now and hoped this would continue.

Local Authorities have reported a lot of very strong support from a range of other organisations including British Red Cross, Age UK and Navigo. This was valued and considered to be mutually beneficial. Mechanisms which further facilitate these collaborations will be worthwhile.

Challenges

Some areas experienced a big increase in workload and there were concerns that they will be dealing with an increasing backlog of work going forward. Some of these areas were perceived to be "hugely understaffed" and it was reported that there were "People at breaking point and in crisis".

A major challenge is the clash of multi-agency systems, they do not 'talk' to each other, so there is a lot of double-entering of data. This results in discrete information sets, with no single view of the customer. One solution reportedly trialled was using excel spreadsheets so that information could be entered into multiple incompatible systems – data teams "have been amazing at cross-referencing informatics".

Homeless Team

Homeless teams reported major difficulties – The homeless service had to get everyone indoors so they were under a lot of pressure during Lockdown. They were also 95% homeworking whilst doing so. The team were feeling very distressed and stretched, and reported only just holding it all together due to the pressures placed upon them. They used to see clients in central locations, but now will travel from home to community locations – safety concerns were raised about this. There had been a huge increase in demand due to changes around homeless regulations, night shelters not being open, violent offenders/arsonists were particularly difficult to place, things had become much more challenging and at times staff reported finding it “scary”.

Communication with Client Groups

Dealing with client group that often do not have phones and emails was particularly difficult during lockdown and when working remotely. Further, limited resources were a problem for some staff involved with the courts:

“I don’t have a work phone, and right now, I don’t feel particularly comfortable ringing defendants from my personal number.”

Document Security

Some participants who have had to work from home were quite concerned about data protection and confidentiality issues – one said they felt vulnerable keeping confidential documents about sensitive family cases in their home, and felt a lot of responsibility for this paperwork. This issue was also raised by others in the ‘Home Visits’ group.

Working Practice Profiles

09 Covid Hubs

This group consisted of those who had worked in COVID Response teams; there were only a small number of participants from this group within the focus groups, but their views offer insights into the challenges and benefits of working in these crucial units.

Experiences of Working in the COVID Hubs

Experiences of Working in the COVID Hubs

People described having been "Pulled off your own work on your own team at very short notice to go to the COVID hub".

Many calls on the COVID helplines were with vulnerable people; sometimes the calls were very emotional and difficult. The staff had short "clerical" breaks – that is 80 seconds break between call to do the notes from the call, so the work was described as "intense" and "stressful".

Despite the pressures, participants generally described very positive experiences in the COVID hubs. They reported:

- Feeling a renewed sense of purpose;
- Making new connections and building new relationships;
- Feeling like it had brought people together;
- Developing a sense of community;
- Feeling part of something;
- Valuing the opportunity to help;
- Enjoying the variety of the work.

External voluntary support groups were described as having been great; they provided contacts that the local authority staff will be able to take back into their pre-COVID roles.

Some found it difficult to adjust when returning back to their usual team as they had enjoyed the work in the hub. Some found they were able to progress in their previous role due to the experience and confidence gained working in the COVID Hub.

"Working in contact centre brought us together, it was challenging but lovely team, which worked across the organisation and felt less like silos. We met lots of people and there was no gossiping and negativity."

"Taking on the new roles required by COVID gave me confidence. Before that I had the same job for 15 years but I now realise I could do other things, there was lots of kindness and I built really good relationships."

Appendix B. The Tool

Remote Working Stress Risk Assessment Tool



Section A

The following questionnaire asks about you and your working conditions. This information will inform and guide future work improvements and help to monitor any effects.

Tick Here

a. Thinking about my home circumstances... (Please tick all that apply)	I live alone	
	I live with a partner / spouse	
	I live with preschool or primary aged child/ren	
	I live with secondary school child/ren	
	I live with adult children	
	I have caring responsibilities	
	Other	
b. My current working pattern is...	Full time	
	Part time	
	Other	
c. Which of the following best describe your role prior to any COVID-related changes to your working practices? (Please tick all that apply)	Office	
	Worksite-based	
	Homeworking	
	Other	
d. What proportion of your working time do you currently work from home?	Not at all	
	Less than 20%	
	20-40%	
	41-60%	
	61-80%	
	81-100%	
e. When working away from the home environment, what other types of workplaces are a regular part of your current working pattern? (Tick all that apply)	Office	
	Worksite-based	
	None – I only work from home	
	Other	

Section B

The following questions ask you to think about your work generally, reflecting on recent months. Please read each statement and circle the response that best describes how you feel about your work.

Thinking about my work generally...

1. I am clear what is expected of me at work	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
2. I can decide when to take a break	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
3. Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
4. I know how to go about getting my job done	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
5. I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
6. I have unachievable deadlines	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
7. If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
8. I am given supportive feedback on the work I do	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
9. I have to work very intensively	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
10. I have a say in my own work speed	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
11. I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
12. I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1

Thinking about my work generally (cont)...

13. I am clear about the goals and objectives for my department	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
14. There is friction or anger between colleagues	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
15. I have a choice in deciding how I do my work	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
16. I am unable to take sufficient breaks	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
17. I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
18. I am pressured to work long hours	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
19. I have a choice in deciding what I do at work	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
20. I have to work very fast	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
21. I am subject to bullying at work	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
22. I have unrealistic time pressures	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
23. I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5

Thinking about my work generally (cont)...

24. I get help and support I need from colleagues	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
25. I have some say over the way I work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
26. I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
27. I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
28. Staff are always consulted about change at work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
29. I can talk to my line manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
30. My working time can be flexible	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
31. My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
32. When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
33. I am supported through emotionally demanding work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
34. Relationships at work are strained	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
35. My line manager encourages me at work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5

Section C

Thinking about my work experiences as a whole...

36. I can effectively manage the balance between home and work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
37. I have a choice in deciding the extent to which I work remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
38. My team are compassionate and accepting of individual circumstances	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
39. My line manager makes time for regular one-to-one interactions with me	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
40. The distinction between my home and work is clear	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5

Section D

Thinking specifically about working from home...

41. I can 'bounce ideas' off my colleagues when working remotely	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
42. My line manager tries to create fairness in the remote team*	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
43. I am clear what is expected of me when working remotely	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
44. I experience friction and frustration in my remote working relationships	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 1
45. When I am working remotely, changes that affect me are well communicated	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
46. Systems are put in place to support effective remote delivery during periods of change	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5
47. Changes that affect my remote working are well thought out	Never <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Seldom <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Often <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Always <input type="checkbox"/> 5

Thinking specifically about working from home...

48. When working remotely, I feel the need to be constantly available	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
49. I have control over my schedule when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
50. I have sufficient remote interaction with colleagues to feel part of the team	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
51. My line manager facilitates positive remote team interactions	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
52. Conflict with colleagues is more difficult to resolve when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
53. Our team is able to effectively respond to changes when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
54. I have access to effective training and learning opportunities when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
55. I have sufficient interaction with colleagues to effectively deliver my work remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
56. My line manager encourages me to look after my wellbeing when I am working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
57. I have a healthy and safe workstation at home	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
58. I am able to build new relationships remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
59. Remote interaction with colleagues is effective in supporting me through emotionally difficult work	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
60. Working remotely feels monotonous	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1

Thinking specifically about working from home (cont)...

61. I feel trusted by my line manager to make good decisions about my remote working practices	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
62. My line manager contacts me remotely to check on my wellbeing	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
63. I have access to digital systems that support effective informal communications with remote colleagues	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
64. I find it difficult to keep up with the volume of digital communication	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
65. I have suitable mechanisms to reach out to colleagues remotely, if I need support	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
66. I find it difficult to maintain healthy limits on my work hours when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
67. I am concerned about being closely monitored when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
68. I have sufficient opportunities for informal interaction with my colleagues when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
69. My line manager models positive and healthy remote working behaviours	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
70. My workload feels more intense when I am working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 5	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 1
71. Working remotely gives me more freedom of choice	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
72. Our remote team meetings are sufficiently frequent	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
73. I feel that my line manager recognises and values the work I do remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5

Thinking specifically about working from home (cont)...

74. I feel connected to the change decision makers when working remotely	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
75. Our remote team meetings provide a good opportunity for peer support	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5
76. Remote access to meetings has facilitated wider attendance	Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 1	Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> 2	Neutral <input type="checkbox"/> 3	Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 4	Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> 5

***Team** refers to the group of colleagues you **most closely align with**. This can be a group of peers, or a team you manage.

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Appendix C.

The Tool Guidance

Remote Working Stress Risk Assessment Tool Guidance



Introduction

This document presents and explains a stress risk assessment tool for remote working. This tool was developed at the University of Hull as part of the Future Work Design project, funded by MHCLG, in collaboration with four Local Authorities (LAs), East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Hull City Council, North East Lincolnshire & North Lincolnshire. The tool was developed following a large-scale qualitative study of 32 focus groups. Participants were a diverse range of Local Authority workers, many of whom were required to work from home during the first COVID lockdown (March – July 2020).

The data from this study was analysed into themes, which are described in full in the project report ([link](#)). From this qualitative data, a set of stress risk items were generated, which were consistent with the stress risk model of the HSE Management Standards. This set of questions was then piloted with a sample of 51 LA workers to review the items and the psychometric properties of the tool. This development work has resulted in attached tool.

The aim of the tool is to provide a mechanism for Local Authorities to explore and assess the stress risks associated with remote working. It can be used alongside the full report, to provide quantitative data to evidence the prevalence and patterns of stress risks in your organisation. The following document outlines the distinct sections of the Stress Risk Assessment Tool and offers guidance on collecting and managing the resulting data.

Dr Fiona Earle, Chartered Occupational Psychologist
Dr Katie Cunnah, Psychologist and Postdoctoral Researcher
Centre for Human Factors, University of Hull

Stress Risk Assessment Tool: Questions

The tool has four sections including A) Demographics and B) the HSE Management Standards Stress Indicator Tool (SIT), which can be completed as a stand-alone instrument by all employees irrespective of their working practices. Sections C and D can be completed alongside the SIT by those who work from home as part of their working pattern.

For All Staff

Section A. Suggested demographics

The demographic questions in Section A were incorporated into the pilot study of this tool. These questions offer a useful starting point for you to develop the bespoke demographic questions which best reflect categories of staff in your organisation.

It will be helpful to consider how your organisation can meaningfully break down the information provided by your staff. For example, whether it is helpful to extract mean scores for different groups, such as levels of seniority, locations, role categories, work pattern, or individual characteristics. If exploring the patterns of stress risks within these different groups is of value, it may be worthwhile adding to the demographic questions. Your resulting risk assessment data should then be suitable to support your understanding of where interventions can be targeted. It is important when establishing staff groupings to ensure that participant anonymity is not breached. We recommend ensuring data summaries are only available for groups consisting of 10 or more respondents.

Section B. Management Standards Stress Indicator Tool

The questions in Section B are the 35 questions from the UK Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards SIT. These questions represent seven important domains of stress risk, each represented by items arranged into the following subscales – Demands, Control, Peer support, Management support, Relationships, Role, and Change. This element of the tool addresses general stress risks that are potentially present in all working environments, and is the HSE's recommended approach to assessing occupational stress risk. All staff, irrespective of role or working pattern, could be invited to complete the questions from the Management Standards Indicator Tool within your organisational survey. Brief scoring guidance is included below (see Table 1). Full guidance for using this tool and interpreting the data is available from the Health and Safety Executive website at <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm>.

For staff who have some aspect of remote working in their working pattern

Section C. Remote working (general)

The questions in Section C address stress risks for staff who have a remote working component to their role, reflecting on their broad and general working patterns and conditions. This may include, for example, reflecting on their practices when working in an office, on-site or community work as part of a blended working mix that includes remote/home-based working.

Section D. Remote working (specific)

The questions in Section D address stress risks for staff who have a remote working component to their role, reflecting specifically on their working patterns and conditions when working remotely/from home.



Considerations for Data Collection

Administration

The tool is presented here as a ready-to-use paper survey, but you may prefer to use an online survey platform to automate the data collection and assist with analysis. To operationalise the survey on a digital platform, load all of the questions into the platform ensuring each question has the correct response category options. It is vital that you don't change or remove any items, as this will undermine the technical properties of the subscales, and it will be difficult to know if you have reliable information. It is also vital to ensure the scores aligned with each response are consistent with the guidance. Following the guidance below will support an accurate interpretation of your findings.

Ethics

Ethical collection of this type of data requires clarity for the respondents in relation to what will happen to their data, i.e. how their data will be processed and used. It is also important that survey respondents are provided with a clear commitment in relation to data storage and security, particularly who will have access to the data, right to withdraw their data and the approach to confidentiality and anonymity. It is crucial that participants know that there will be no negative consequence for them if they complete this survey, and the protection of anonymity is therefore paramount to achieving a good response rate and collecting meaningful data. Further advice on collecting psychological data ethically is provided by the British Psychological Society: <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Human%20Research%20Ethics.pdf>

Using the Remote Working Stress Risk Assessment Tool: Scoring Key

Section A. Demographics

Frequency data should be calculated to provide insight into the characteristics of respondents. Responses to these questions can also be used to compare groups and identify any between-group differences in mean scores. This can be achieved by splitting the data according to the demographic characteristics.

Section B. Management Standards Stress Indicator Tool

Items 1–35 can be reduced to subscale means by averaging the scores for the sets of items detailed in Table 1. This data reduction process will provide seven subscale scores of stress risk. Note that items for the Demands and Relationships subscales are negatively loaded (e.g. “My workload feels more intense when working remotely”). These scores are reversed in the scoring of the tool, so that high scores for all items and subscales consistently reflect positive work characteristics and a low stress risk. Mean scores for individual items are also useful in further exploring specific areas of risk. It is important to note that subscale scores should be compared to benchmarking data, rather than other subscales. Benchmarking data are available as means and as percentile scores. Benchmarking information for this instrument is available from the following academic paper by Webster and Edwards (2012) *Work & Stress*, 26:2, 130–142, doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2012.688554. This document provides normative scores for public and private sector companies and supports meaningful data interpretation.

Table 1. Management Standards SIT subscale reduction

Demands (Reversed)	3, 6, 9, 12, 16, 18, 20, 22
Control	2, 10, 15, 19, 25, 30
Peer support	7, 24, 27, 31
Manager support	8, 23, 29, 33, 35
Relationships (Reversed)	5, 14, 21, 34
Role	1, 4, 11, 13, 17
Change	26, 28, 32

Section C. Remote working (general)

Items 36–40 concern stress risks for staff who have a remote working component to their role, but these initial questions refer to working conditions as a whole, not just the remote elements. High scores on these questions again suggest positive working conditions and low stress risk. These questions should be reviewed as a set of individual item means only, rather than averaged, as they do not represent a coherent subscale.

Section D. Remote working (specific)

Items 41–76 are specific remote working stress risk items that can be grouped as outlined in Table 2. The domains are in line with the seven stress risk domains of the SIT, but with the addition of two new areas of interest, *Remote Digital Enablers* and *Remote Digital Risks*. To reduce the item scores into their subscale means, averages of the seven stress risk domains can be calculated, but items representing the two new domains (*Remote Digital Enablers* and *Remote Digital Risks*) should only be viewed as sets of individual items, as they incorporate a diversity of risks, which may not be meaningfully represented by a mean score.

Table 2. Remote Working Subscale reduction

Remote Demands (Reversed)	48, 60, 66, 70
Remote Control	49, 71
Remote Peer support	41, 50, 55, 59, 65, 68, 72, 75
Remote Manager support	42, 51, 56, 61, 62, 69, 73
Remote Relationships (Reversed)	44, 52
Remote Role	43
Remote Change	45, 46, 47, 53, 74
*Remote Digital Enablers	54, 57, 58, 63, 76
*Remote Digital Risks (Reversed)	64, 67

*do not reduce items to subscale means

A Note on Health Outcomes Data

The items presented above refer specifically to stress risk. Obtaining data in this area will support your understanding of the prevalence and patterns of stress risks within your organisation. However, it is worthy of note that assessing health outcomes alongside this stress risk assessment would offer the opportunity to explore current levels of health and wellbeing. Furthermore, when collected together, stress risk data and health outcome data can be statistically analysed to examine predictive relationships between stress risks and health outcomes. This information may be particularly useful in prioritising interventions for areas where risks are most closely related to negative health outcomes.

Many brief psychometric scales are available, for example, the PHQ4 is a brief 4 item scale for mental health screening: <https://www.midss.org/content/patient-health-questionnaire-4-phq-4>.

Technical Information

A small pilot study of Local Authority workers (N=51) provided data to allow a preliminary analysis of the psychometric properties of the new remote working subscales. Reliability coefficients were high for all but one of the seven standard stress risk subscales (Cronbach alphas: *Demands* $\alpha = 0.75$; *Peer Support* = 0.90; *Manager Support* = 0.92; *Change* = 0.88; *Control* = 0.70). The subscale Relationships did not quite reach the standard accepted alpha level, but this scale had only two items, which inevitably impacted on the scale reliability scores ($\alpha =$ and 0.57). However, the items in all of these domains were judged to be sufficiently cohesive to justify obtaining a mean score. *Role* had only one specific remote working item, so does not need to be reduced. As noted above, psychometric evaluation of the two new digital domains (*Remote Digital Enablers* and *Remote Digital Risks*) did not support scale reduction due to the diversity of the items, but can be usefully viewed as sets of items that contribute to your understanding of digital stress risks in remote working.

There is currently no available benchmarking data for the remote working sections of this tool. The tool has been developed with a strong evidence base in response to rapid changes in working practices. It provides a useful mechanism for organisations to explore emerging challenges relating to remote working. Development for this instrument is ongoing and will include validation and benchmarking. Users of this tool are encouraged to share their anonymised data to support this ongoing development. If you are willing to share your data, please contact humanfactors@hull.ac.uk to discuss.

Appendix D. Methods

Appendix D. Methods

Overview

Data collection via virtual focus groups took place between 11th August to 14th September 2020, with data analysis and reporting then taking place between 15th September and 2nd October 2020. This section explains the approach taken to collect and analyse data and report the findings.

Focus Groups

There were 32 focus groups in total. 31 of these were employee groups, with eight groups at ERYC, HCC and NL, and seven from NEL. Group participants were staff and middle managers from their respective LA with an average of eight participants per group (range 3–12), dependent on participant availability and willingness to participate. The 8th group at NEL was cancelled due to insufficient participant numbers owing to challenges with responding to specific service needs at that time. One final 'Corporate group' made up of senior managers from all four LAs was then undertaken, and one interview with an IT security specialist who had some specific views to share with the researchers.

Participant identification

Maximum variation sampling strategy was recommended by the researchers whereby the aim was for participants across each LA to represent the broad range of roles, departments, services and ways of working as possible. Participants were then identified by teams at each LA with the brief that the group make-up should be representative of major types of work across the LAs.

The LA teams invited participants by email, including content provided by the research team relating to the project background, aims, ethical considerations, consent form and topic guide. Participants were then asked to email the researchers directly if they were willing to participate, offering the opportunity to ask any questions relating to the research, and also confirming their consent to participate.

In some groups, the types of work participants undertake was very similar, such as groups of HR and other people service, or IT and such like, whereas in other groups there was a broad mix of roles and very different ways of working. Some groups consisted of individuals who knew each other well and others were people from different departments who had no prior relationship. This offered the opportunity for both breadth and depth in the exploration of the issues of interest.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the University of Hull Faculty of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary and undertaken on the basis of informed consent, collected digitally via email. All participants received a Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form and Topic Guide by email prior to the session and a debrief email and form after the session.

Although participation took place during working hours meaning participants were being paid whilst they took part, the researchers ensured that it was clear within the participant information provided before and at the start of each group that participants had the right to withdraw without explanation and without consequence at any point prior to or during the focus group. They were also free to have their camera on or off as they preferred, and did not have to contribute to the group if they chose not to. They were asked to notify the researchers after the session if they had any concerns about anything they had said that they would prefer was removed from the data record, or any other concerns about the research.

The anonymity and confidentiality of research participants is of crucial importance; because participants had to be identified and invited to participate by their employers, participants in each group knew who else was in the session, and some groups consisted of five or fewer participants, the researchers have taken the decision not to provide any annotations alongside excerpts identifying which group participants were in.

Further steps to maintain anonymity have also been taken such as the omission of certain information in excerpts which could have identified individuals or organisations, annotated with square brackets. For organisational confidentiality, the researchers also took the decision not to identify which organisation participant excerpts originate from, although local readers may recognise some elements of organisational practices within participant excerpts and researcher descriptions. Therefore, excerpts are reported here with no identifying information or associated participant or group code.

Research Process

All focus groups were undertaken digitally using Microsoft Teams, which had already been rolled out across all four LAs and UoH in the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown (which began in March 2020). The sessions were scheduled to last one hour, but many did extend into another half hour or 45 minutes beyond the initial hour. Sessions were audio-recorded by the researchers with the consent of all participants.

Data analysis

The research data consisted of 32 focus group reports containing researcher field notes and summary bullet points, and the transcripts of the audio-recorded focus groups.

A type of thematic analysis called Template Analysis was used to analyse this data. Template analysis involves generating a framework of a priori themes in the earliest stages of analysis. The a priori themes used in this study consisted of two layers – the first was the WPP groupings – the researchers used the data to identify suitable groupings for the WPPs, checked these with the project lead, then systematically identified any content in the data that related to specific roles and moved this data into the draft WPP documents.

This data was therefore not coded as part of the general analysis. The remaining content was then systematically assigned to the second layer of a priori themes which were based on the focus group topics and prominent subjects discussed in the groups: Challenges; Benefits; Caring for Others; Management, Communication & Relationships; Digital Transformation; and Hopes for the Future. These themes eventually became the core categories presented here as the titles of the findings section. Every remaining segment of data was categorised, and then thematically analysed.

The thematic analysis within the categories was undertaken using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Data was systematically assigned preliminary 'codes' (descriptive labels), with Dr Cunnah and Dr Earle both coding all of the data independently according to the thematic qualities of the content of each data segment (bullet point, paragraph, sentence or excerpt). These codes were then later reviewed and compared by the research team to identify patterns, prominent themes, check for consistency within and suitability of the core categories, and then to develop a final template for the theme names and appropriate sub-themes within each category.

Appendix E.

Focus Group Topic Guide

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Focus Group Topic Guide

The four Local Authorities (ERYC, HCC, NEL, NL) are collaborating with the University of Hull to explore the impact on staff of changes to working practices due to COVID-19, so that this information can support the design of future working practices that maximise productivity, efficiency and wellbeing. The work is funded by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government via the Local Digital COVID-19 Challenge Fund.

As part of this review, we are consulting with a range of different types of staff in a series of discussion groups. The aim of the discussion groups is to seek your perceptions and opinions about the impact of the changes in working practices. We want to explore with you:

- The practices you have adopted to get the job done since the beginning of lockdown
- What you feel the benefits of working in these ways have been, and the challenges you've experienced, personally and professionally
- What you would like to see remain in the future

Timing – the discussion groups will last around one hour

Confidentiality – we want to hear your honest opinions so all views expressed in the groups will not be attributable to any one individual

Information capture – we will record your views and opinions using a combination of note-taking and feeding back to the group summarised perspectives to gain views of general consensus, similarities and differences between groups members

Topic guide

1. Can you describe the ways in which you used to work and how have you been working since lockdown began?
2. Have there been any major challenges to working in this way? (Personally and professionally)
3. Have there been any major benefits?
4. Which support provisions have been A) Enabling B) Disabling C) Challenging D) Lacking, and why?
5. Have you/your team had to be creative in order to get the job done?
6. What strategies have you used for communication (within and between teams) and how successful has it been?
7. What have you needed from a management point of view? What has worked and what has not?
8. What would you like your future working practices to look like? What would be the losses/risks/gains of working in this way? (For yourself and your customers/service users?)
9. Is there anything we have not explored that you think is relevant?

Report contributions

This report contains content from focus group reports written by Helen Roberts. It contains direct quotes from participants, and has been reviewed by project teams at each local authority. To maintain the independence of the research and report, local authority teams were not permitted to make any changes to the overall findings, but feedback and comments were taken into account regarding any concerns about confidentiality of the participants and organisations, and about any potentially sensitive issues that they knew required careful reporting. This final report is therefore a collaborative effort between the UoH and the project teams of the four LAs, and represents the views of the 250+ LA employees who took part in this research.

