

Local Government Survey

Post-Covid Return to Office Working



Briefing 22-34
August 2022

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About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK’s largest research programmes in local government policy and frontline service delivery matters.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about rapid changes to working practices. Out of necessity and to follow Government guidance from across the UK administrations, where possible workers and therefore employers, were forced to adopt to new ways of working and in many cases, this effectively meant home working. For many in local government however those providing frontline services or involved in the management and delivery of frontline services, effectively continued to work within depots or offices.

With the relaxation of social distancing guidance and the 'work from home' messaging from UK administrations changing a number of APSE member councils have raised queries as to what other councils are doing with regard to returning to the office environment. They have also questioned how other councils plan to support their workforce but ensure that productivity is maintained, and adapt policies to suit new and emerging needs.

APSE therefore conducted a short survey and undertook to share the results of the survey and further analysis with its' member councils and survey respondents. Over 50 local authorities are represented in the survey sample from across the UK and as such the survey results and analysis provide a robust assessment of the emerging issues. The analysis is drawn not only from the text responses that survey respondents were able to provide to enhance the survey results but other data sources and reports that have emerged post-pandemic.

Survey Results

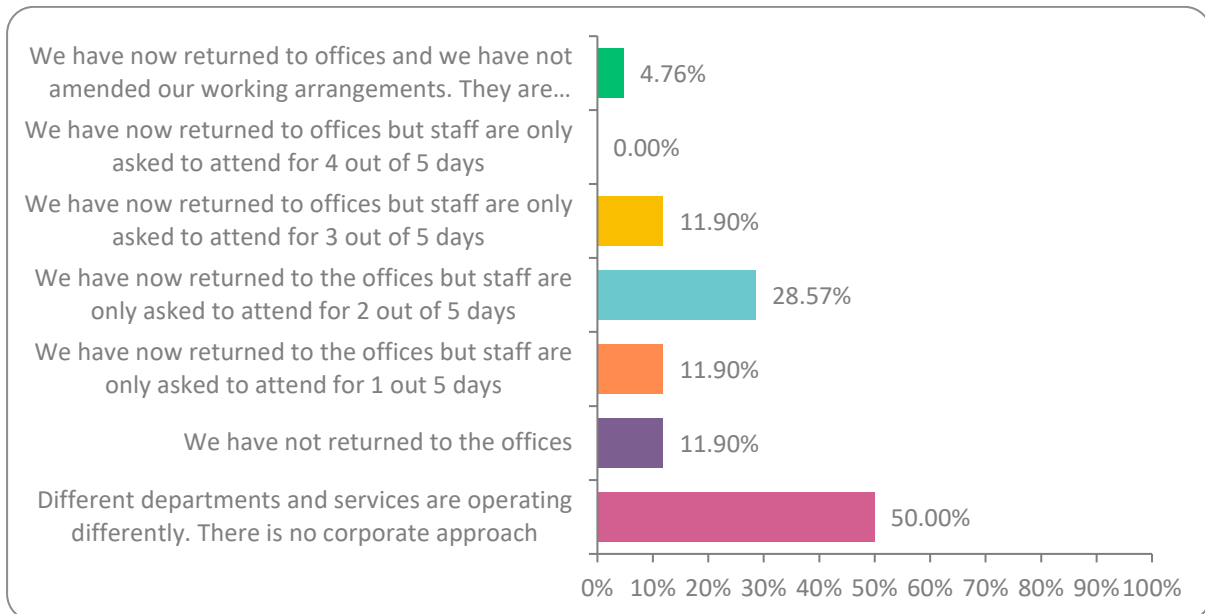
1 Current (post-Covid) ways of working

We asked '*Thinking about staff who pre-COVID worked mainly from the office environment how would you describe the current ways of working?*' Respondents were able to tick all the responses that applied to them.

Interestingly over half of all respondents reported that policies towards office returns or the continuation of home-working practices was left to departmental discretion rather than through the operation of a corporate policy. This creates a slight concern as issues such as fair access to different working arrangements may be challengeable if it cannot be justified on objective grounds. Near to one third have been asked to return for 2 out of every 5 days but equally near to 12% are working either 1 day out of 5 or 3 days out of every 5. Less than 5% have returned to pre-pandemic working practices without amendment and in the majority of cases there is a requirement for some in-person attendance within the workplace.

In terms of factors influencing in-person working in some cases this is determined by office capacity and ongoing reductions in available workspaces. Some commented that they had initially operated voluntary returns but slow take-up has led to some discussions to move towards mandatory 'days-in'. In other cases, 'Team Agreements' have been developed, to ensure office cover is provided from across teams on specific days. There appears to be some local determination by managers in terms of what works in what areas. However relatively few have a fully thought-out policy though in one respondent area they have attached descriptors to staff to determine their working arrangements with 'frontline' expected to be in the office every day with others able to work on a hybrid basis providing service needs are met.

Q.1 Thinking about staff who pre-COVID worked mainly from the office environment how would you describe the current ways of working?



In some cases, a much more detailed approach to new ways of working has emerged corporately through change programmes. For example, in the case of Buckinghamshire they have developed a new change programme called 'Work Smart'. The vision for this new programme starts with a statement *"We will provide our staff with the right spaces, tools and skills so they can work in the best location for their role, be collaborative and achieve a good work life balance, making Buckinghamshire Council successful in delivering its services and a great place to work."*

There are three work streams within Work Smart and within each, key deliverables have been identified that are critical to the success of delivering Work Smart.

- **Workstyles** which focus on staff, looking at employee wellbeing, training and development, digital skills and capabilities, employment policies and contractual changes, induction, health and safety and communication and collaboration mechanisms.
- **Workspaces** which aim to create the right spaces including the estates strategy, workspace designs, storage and car parking.
- **Worktools** Which aims to provide solutions to help everyone work effectively, designed around the needs of services and staff. This includes ensuring the availability of the right technology for different roles, the right meeting and collaboration spaces, printing, receiving and sending post, information governance and the councils carbon footprint.

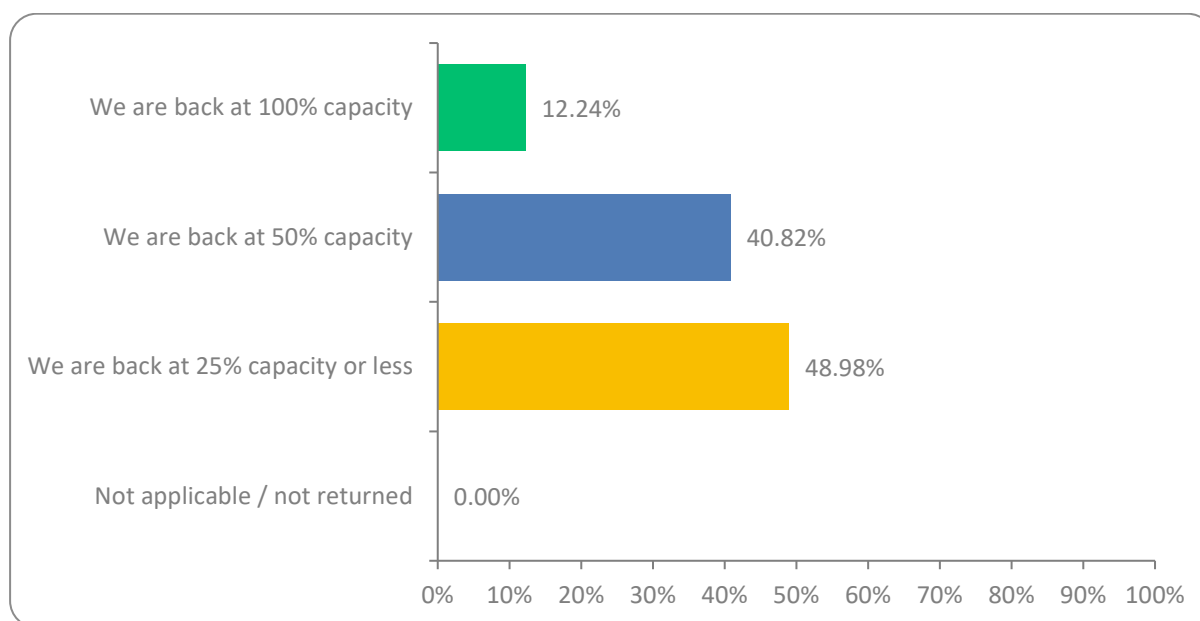
In other councils whilst even where staff are able to work autonomously there is still an expectation that they attend the office to ensure they continue to collaborate with colleagues with many citing the benefits of informal interactions and sharing of intelligence to aid services and service delivery.

Frontline managers and supervisors in areas such as Street Scene, Refuse and Recycling stated that they never effectively left their office environment as they could not, as one put it *'hide at home, when our staff were out daily in the public domain'*. This is an important dynamic when considering access to hybrid working and issues of fairness in terms of what arrangements are available to which groups of staff.

2 Office or building capacity post-Covid

Given a number of councils have reported downsizing their property portfolio, as a means of saving money and generating capital, we wanted to know what the impact of such approaches is having on capacity levels for returning to the office. We therefore asked *'What would you regard as the average capacity in your buildings / office post-Covid'*

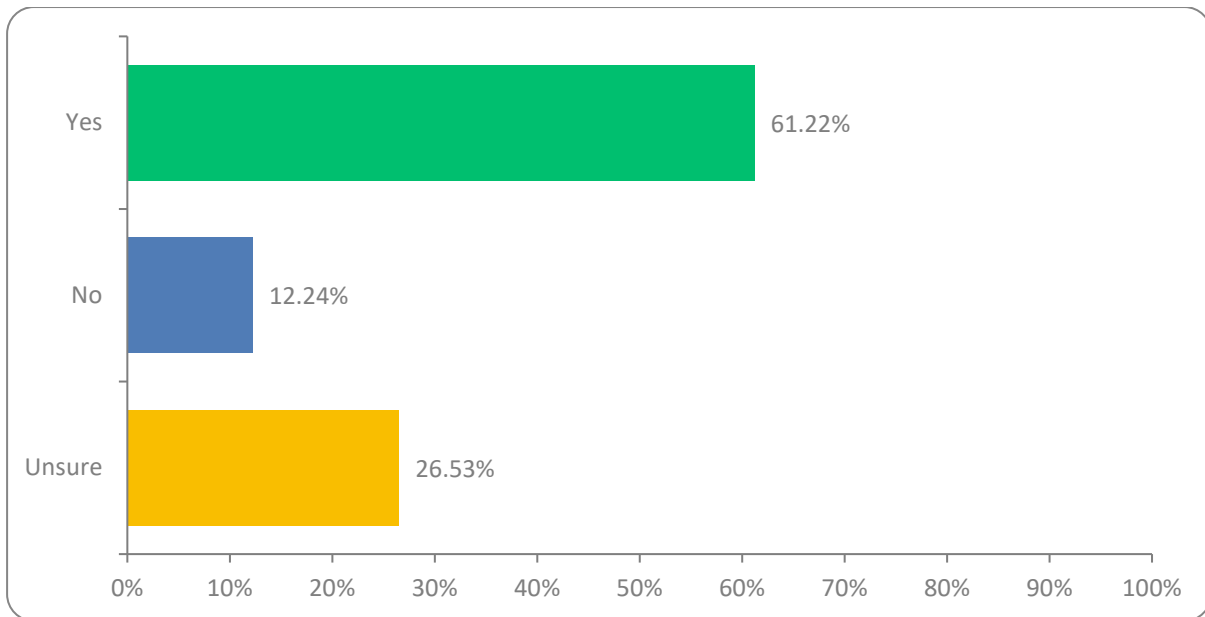
Near to half report that they are at 25% or less of capacity but 63% confirm that they are at 50% to 100% of capacity post-Covid.



In terms of responses to this issue of capacity some report that the return to office working is about using space differently; for example, where desk capacity is as before the pandemic in many cases the plan is to reduce overall desk capacity, whilst creating better spaces for collaboration. Reliance on hot-desking looks set to increase alongside use of facilities to pre-book desks. There are concerns about 'wasted space' if desks remain unused but equally in discussions around APSE's strategic forums some have raised legitimate concerns as to whether current working from home arrangements, will be sustained over the winter. This is driven by concerns that the workforce will experience record increases in home heating and energy costs which may make working from home a less attractive option for many.

3 Rationalisation of office space

As with 2 above many press reports have suggested that across both the public and private sector there are plans to rationalise office space. Whilst over 61% suggest that this will be the case it would be unhelpful for property values and the returns on sales if neighbouring councils were to all flood the local market with vacant premises. In some cases, some innovative solutions are being considered or were indeed in place pre-pandemic. This includes sites becoming residential developments to enhance city centre living options and in other cases to develop a longer-term plan to include walking and cycling routes within developments by enhancing public offices into more hub style places.

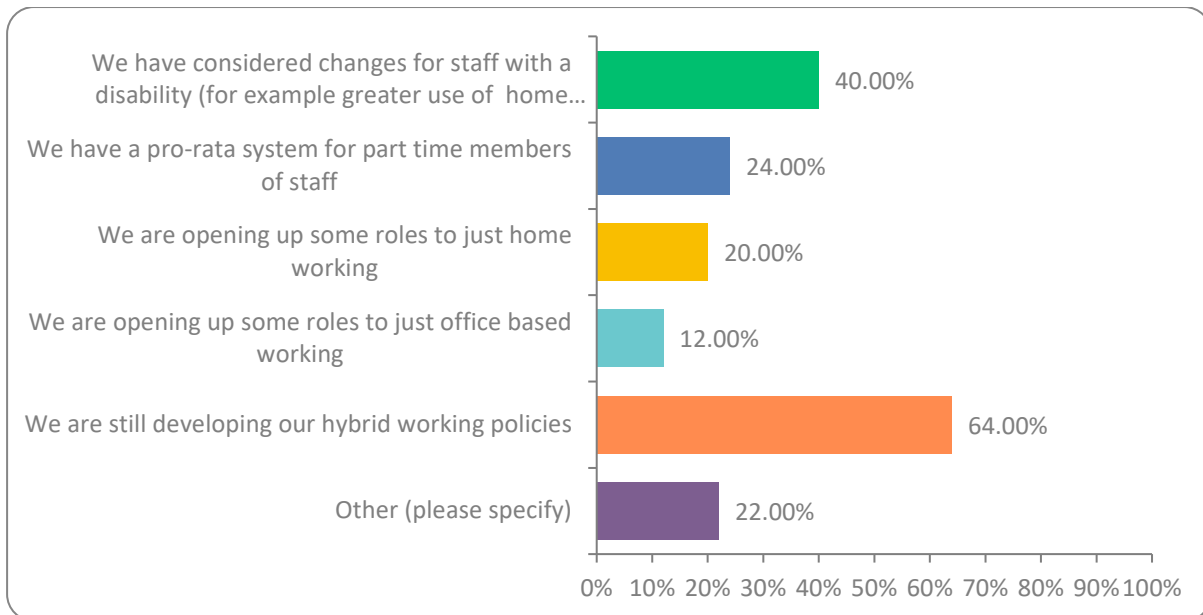


4 Considerations of job roles and delineation of worker ‘types’

As many APSE member councils have appreciated in many ways discussions around the future workforce and hybrid working have clearly identified that ‘one size does not fit all’ and we therefore wanted to establish what factors had been considered in looking at greater use or otherwise of home working. Interestingly 40% of respondents have considered what further changes could be made when considering staff with a disability. In many cases again the view was that this needs to be centred around the individual whereby for some workers with a disability not having to travel as much to a place of work may be seen as advantageous, if it can be accommodated within the needs of the service, but equally in some cases better workplace ergonomics, social interactions and support networks were considered to be a benefit of attending a designated workspace.

There has also been much discussion about the attractiveness of opening up some roles, particularly new roles to just home-working. This does not appear currently to be a major feature within the cohort of survey respondents with 20% considering this option currently, which might be less than expected. Conversely a lesser response of 12% suggest that they would have some roles that are purely office-based roles.

It may well be that many public sector jobs views as ‘front facing’ are considered less adaptability to hybrid or home working; for example, call centre work where a worker is dealing with a highly personal welfare or benefits matter, may be considered differently to a call centre dealing with washing machine repairs. In other words, the bar may be set higher in terms of security and concerns as to service delivery.



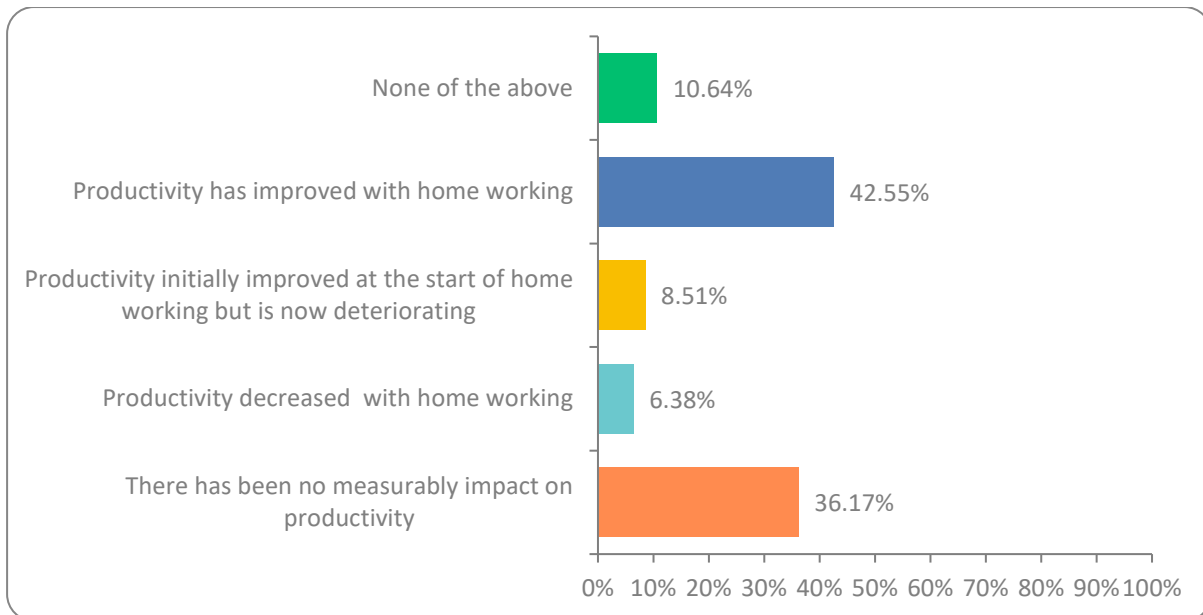
5 Issues of Productivity

Whilst some would claim productivity gains from home working others suggest that measurable gains are less so and therefore, we asked '*Thinking about productivity. Which of the following applies? You may tick as many boxes as applies.*'

Whilst just over 42% suggest productivity has improved 8.5% suggest that productivity initially peaked during initial home working and the emergency response phase of the pandemic response but is now deteriorating. One respondent suggested that "initially we were only looking at delivering emergency services, when the need to offer wider non responsive services, the home working model has meant efficiencies have slipped". Others suggested that they had not formally measured productivity of that this was applied differently across departments and in some areas was difficult to measure.

A theme to emerge is that productivity is highly variable. Some reported that there was a decrease in productivity for some services due to home working, but in other areas productivity continued at the same level or increased. Some suggested that hybrid working might bring about the 'best of both worlds'. One respondent reported that when returning to the office for some of the week – 3-4 days based in the office – the home working day(s) were more productive; this was attributed to more consciousness of work deadlines, tasks and performance targets, when returning to 'normal' service.

In a further reference to 'Teams Agreements' it was suggested that this is a way of managing productivity – with Teams being aware of what is expected of them in terms of the flexibilities of home working in ensuring that productivity does not deteriorate. Again a clear theme to emerge is that managers are aware – wherever their staff are working from – as to what tasks they are engaged on and ensuring that the services are delivered.

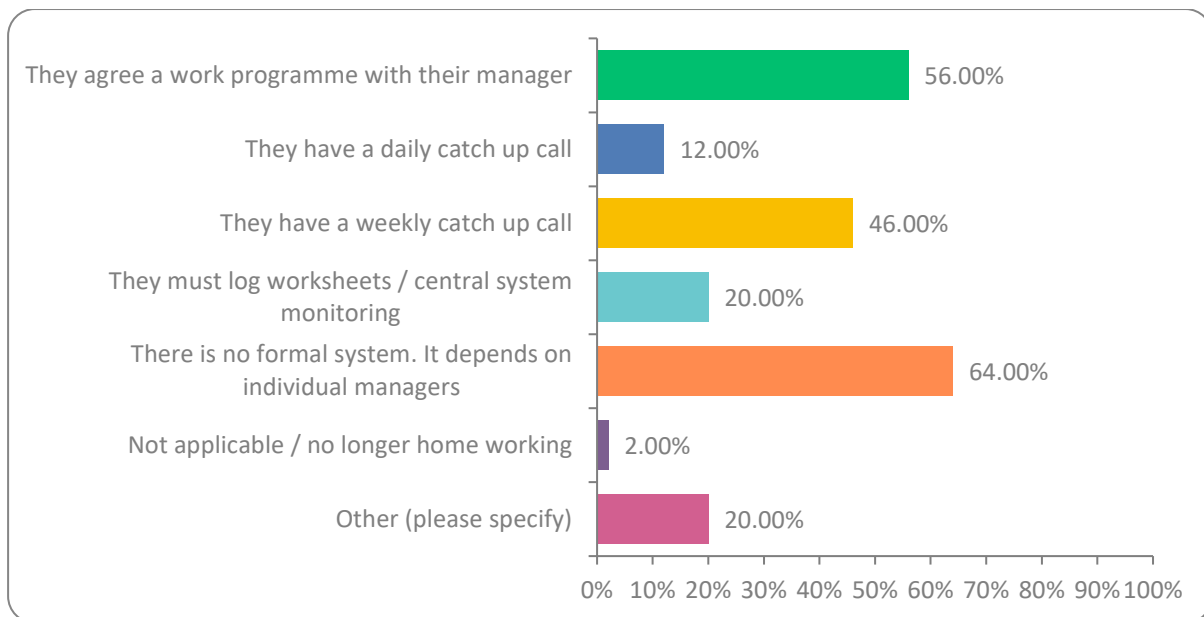


6 Support and Supervision of remote working staff

A common theme during APSE's own Covid networks during the pandemic was the supervision and management of remote working staff. Whilst many frontline service managers remained in depots and workplaces and continued face to face supervision and management in some areas, where work could be carried out at home, managers and supervisors had to consider remote supervision and management. We therefore asked '*How do you support, supervise and manage remote working staff? Please tick as many as applies*'

Surprisingly given over two years has emerged since the rapid expansion of home working 64% suggested that there is no formal system in place and this is very much down to individual managers. This is a potential cause for concern. Whilst clearly managers need some scope and flexibility to deal with work expectations, in the most effective and appropriate way, a lack of common systems could give rise to claims of differential or unfair treatment – for example if a member of staff feels micromanaged compared to a more laissez faire approach in other cases. More encouragingly 56% state that work programmes are agreed with their managers, which suggest mutual trust in simply 'getting on with the work'. 12% make use of a daily catch up and 20% make use of logs and worksheets and central monitoring systems.

Further 'best practice' measures shared in the text responses suggest that individual teams will agree what is needed in terms of contact but as an absolute standard outlook calendars must be kept up to date and where staff are working from and apportionments or Teams calls – even if from home – must be in the calendar so time is managed appropriately and managers are aware of what an individual is working on. One respondent reported that they had expanded core hours to allow flexibility to sign off later in the day (though in services it is important staff are available during core time to meet customer needs). Many have implemented a minimum of one meeting per month that must be face to face and appraisals must be face to face. Some respondents reported that they are looking to access training on the topic of 'managing remotely'.



7 Collaborative spaces in the office environment

As many employers across different spheres in both the public and private sector learn from the pandemic experience a key finding in many studies is that whilst home-working provided advantages to some, and allowed businesses and services to continue, many found a loss of collaboration, team working and learning through the informal workplace networks. We asked *'Have you created any new collaborative spaces in your office environment? For example to allow staff to socialise, meet or network when they are in the office?'*

46% of respondents said that they had created new social spaces or collaborative spaces within their offices. Whilst 18% answered 'not yet' combined with the 20% of 'other' responses there appears to be a significant shift towards this type of facility. In terms of types of spaces newly created or being rolled out on the return to the office respondents reported that they have a range of facilities including: -

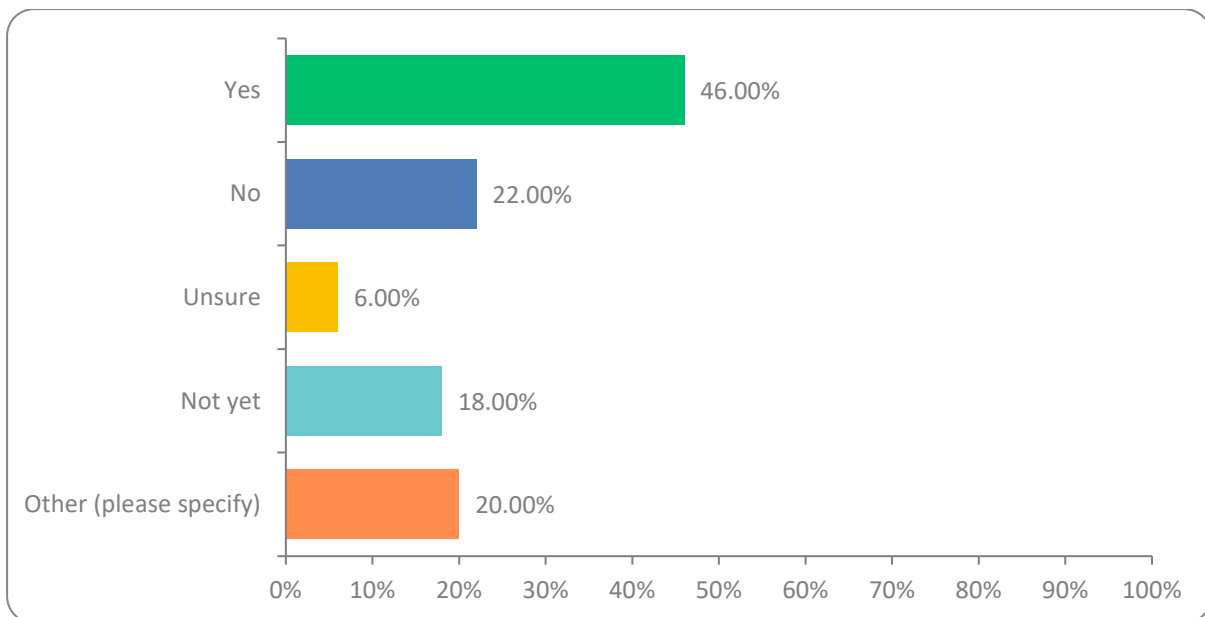
- Pods for quiet working
- Larger tables for meetings or group discussions
- Large pods which can be booked out for small group meetings
- Confidential space meeting rooms for managers or topics of a confidential nature

One reported that some services have a 'locked' office space so that no-one from outside their team can enter without permission, for example in areas like Childrens' services. However, some have argued that everyone could make a 'special case' to be treated differently and not work across open plan or shared facilities and hot desks.

There have been many studies on the benefits of informal collaborative spaces and conversations within the office environment and indeed during the covid pandemic some companies experimented with virtual water cooler conversations of kitchen chats.

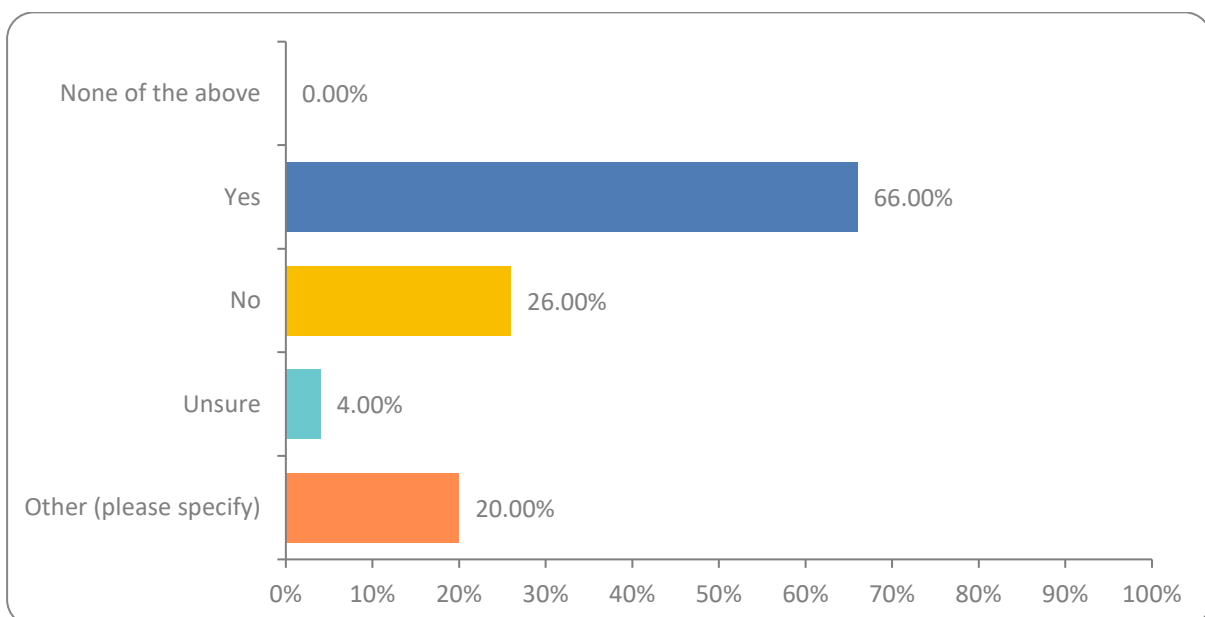
Some of the reported benefits of 'water cooler talk' is the opening up of informal communications between different layers of employees – an equalising and humanising effect where day to day conversations cut across 'rank' or 'status' within an organisation. This it is argued is empowering and creates a corporate culture of trust and transparency. Whilst Schultz's Theory of 'Human

Capital' focused on formal education and training increasingly studies have identified that learning from peers within the workplace is crucially important and whilst informal workplace learning spans age groups and roles, it is a key driver of performance amongst younger or newer workers.



8 Office layout and accommodation changes

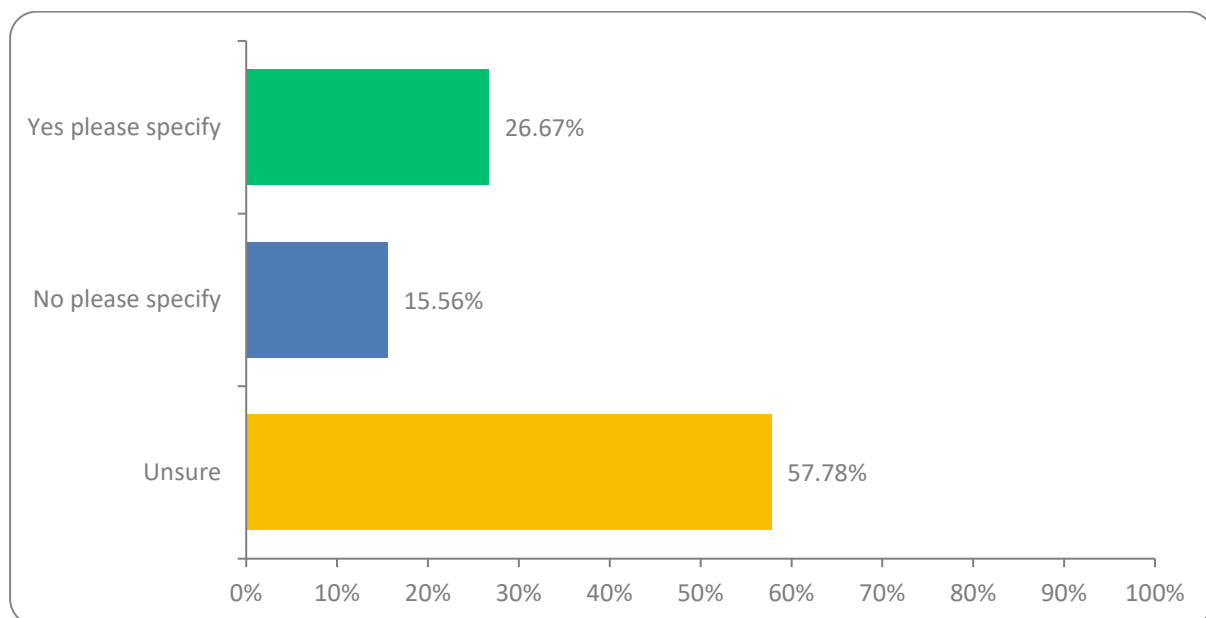
Given social distancing measures put in place we wanted to assess if changes have now been made to accommodate post-Covid working. A majority of 66% stated that changes had been made to layout – such as increased spacing - but based on reduced numbers within offices. In other cases, the limited numbers working together on one day has meant that more permanent changes have not been justifiable on cost grounds. Some have temporarily retained screens put in place during covid but what not envisage this to be long-term.



9 A two-tier culture between staff in job roles able to work from home and those unable to work from home

As observed during the pandemic many workers were considered 'key workers' and in spite of restrictions and social distancing, they were expected to turn up to their normal place of work and with adjustments, and added safeguards, continue in their job roles. This included job roles such as social care, refuse loaders and drivers, street-scene teams, gas inspections and emergency repairs in social housing, and in areas in support of other key workers in the NHS, such as the provision of school meals to key-worker children.

We therefore wanted to establish if, in reviewing the ability for on-going or extended hybrid working arrangements, the issue of a two-tier culture has been considered or addressed. We asked **'Have you tackled the issue of a two-tier culture / them and us where some staff are able to work remotely and others because of job role are unable to work in this way?'**. This was the largest response of 'unsure' across the survey at near to 58%



In terms of additional responses to this question many suggested that the route that they had adopted is based upon clarity as to what job roles are available for hybrid working; so, for example in areas like parks, facilities management and street scene teams, it is clear that the workforce must be out on site / report to a depot. However, some are starting to look at further adaptations to this including introducing flexi-time working and compressed hours such as five days worked over four days, where possible.

With an awareness of the potential creation (and negative impact on staff unable to work from home) some respondents report staff surveys are being undertaken to seek views and opinions on what additional flexibilities could be arrived for staff unable to work under a hybrid or homeworking arrangement. In some cases, agile working policies have already been introduced in consultation with trade unions.

It would appear that in most cases the issue of clarity as to which roles are open for hybrid working or available for home working has been through defining the overall job roles and supporting managers in explaining these issues to staff. In many cases managers themselves have adopted a more visible approach to being 'in the office' with their teams below adopting a more flexible hybrid approach.

Some respondents suggested that there is an awareness of the issues that a two-tier culture could raise but that they are currently working on how to respond rather than having a firm policy in place. Others suggest that at least some days in the office, for example two days per week, has started to ameliorate some of the perceptions of some staff 'hiding at home', which had been cited by some frontline staff unable to work at home.

10 Support for staff

An issue to emerge given the lengthy lockdowns was that of isolation and loneliness, amongst staff forced to work at home, against their choices. We asked how are staff supported, particularly in areas where ongoing home working is being encouraged.

The role of managers was a reoccurring theme in terms of supporting staff and colleagues.



Many respondents suggested that the issues of lockdown isolation had diminished as post-Covid many staff who had felt isolated were able to socialise outside of work; whereas in lockdown many felt confined to home with no socialisation opportunities.

On an on-going basis lessons from the pandemic have generally continued with the use of team conference calling, with some staff joining in from home and others from offices, and the option for staff to work from the office whenever they so choose; in other words, no one reported that staff are now 'forced to work from home' – so that issue of choice now allows staff to better manage their own needs.

New agile working policies have also taken into consideration the types of support available to employees such as support from managers and occupational health teams, and the setting up in some cases of well-being teams and allocation of resources to staff well-being. Others have encouraged or trained managers to have an awareness of staff well-being issues when staff are working remotely. There appears to be positive use of video calls rather than just telephone calls as a means to ensure staff are well, providing more personalised interactions, though it is noted some staff may equally feel uncomfortable with video calls. In one case they are using the LGBTQ staff group to ensure regular liaison, as it is recognised that support networks accessed by staff, may be more limited outside of the traditional workplace.

11 Staff motivation

We asked if any respondents had looked at any specific ways to motivate and engage staff who are not in an office environment. Regular communication emerged as the chief motivational factor.

Call social office meetings team meetings good team weekly
Regular manager communication leaders work groups Staff

The forms of communication do however vary from regular weekly team meetings to cascading staff newsletters. Many have adopted an 'in-person' fortnightly or monthly meeting to ensure that everyone receives the same core messages and provides an opportunity to be in the same room. Informal motivations are through WhatsApp groups and social events such as team quizzes, both online and in social settings. Use of new collaboration spaces is also noted as is the role of managers in identifying and any deterioration in performance and supporting employees to re-engage. Again, training of managers in managing remote or hybrid workers is a feature in many responses as is the need for good communications with individuals and groups. This includes regular 'elevenses' as well as using MS Teams groups for business and separate channels for general chat as "that would have previously happened in the main office space".

One or two respondents did however report that the issue of motivation is often overlooked and there is too much reliance on individual managers rather than a more corporately driven approach.

12 What other matters have been considered in developing new working policies

All employers have a duty of care to employees and employees must also make reasonable endeavours to ensure their own safety at work. However, home working raises different risks to that of the traditional office or depot setting, where risk can be more readily identified and removed or limited.

We therefore sort to establish the types of risks that have been considered in a home working environment such as risk of domestic violence, ergonomics of the work station, parental or carer burdens, workers in poor quality or unsuitable housing such as HMOs where they may not have a private workspace, and security or privacy risks to information.

Perhaps unsurprisingly near to three quarters of respondents have considered information or privacy risks in terms of home-workers and near to 66% have considered the work station such as risk or injury and ergonomic design. This is likely to be as a result of these risk assessments already being a feature within an office environment, such as the regular self-assessments by staff using VDUs.

Over 57% of respondents reported that they had considered childcare or parental issues for home-workers. During the pandemic the Office for National Statistics found that women carried out significantly more daily childcare duties than men during lockdown, for an average of more than three hours a day compared with two hours for men. Whilst those statistics applied to households with children under the age of 18, and schools are now reopened post-pandemic, statistically women are more likely than men to take on unpaid child care. There is however global evidence that the burden of childcare, post pandemic continues to fall disproportionately on women, and this is further exacerbated by both cost and shortages in childcare provision. From an employer perspective consideration should therefore be given to both supporting parents with childcare

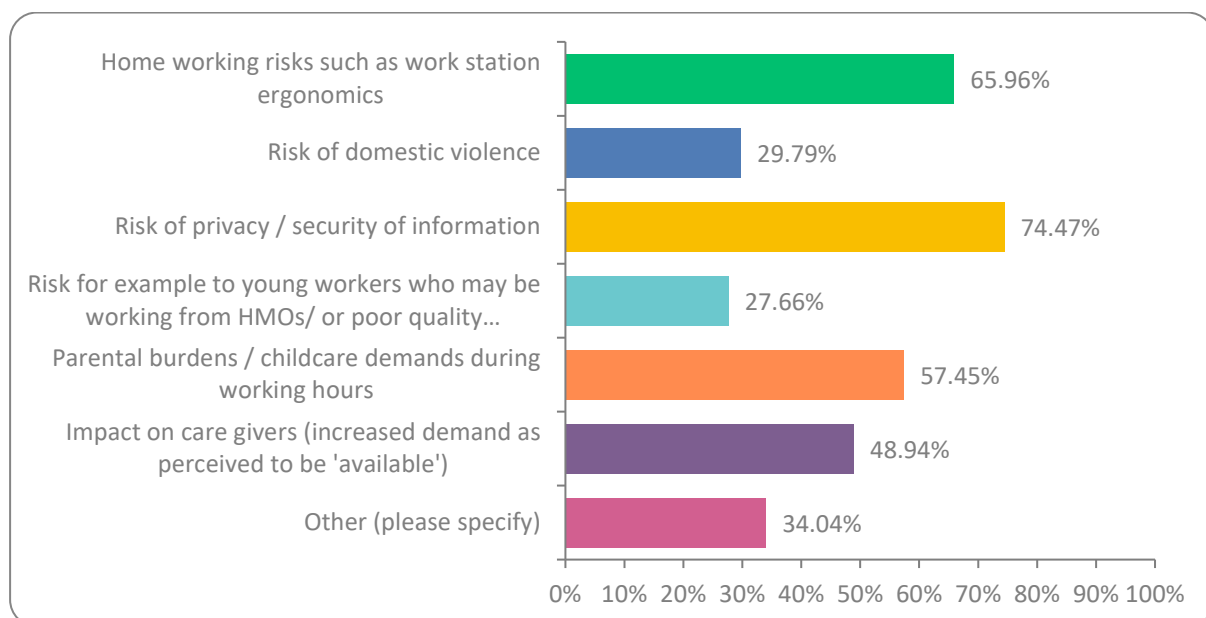
needs but to also ensuring that those working at home are not expected to cope with childcare demands during working hours.

There is a similar case for care givers whereby adaptability to provide care may be seen as an advantage but equally where the absence of a 'place of work' can create additional calls on care-givers, with the perceptions of 'not really being in work' when home-working. This should form part of assessment processes.

Finally, less than a third of respondents had considered the risk of domestic violence. The ONS data release 'Domestic abuse in England and Wales overview: November 2021' found an increase in domestic violence during lockdown of over 6%, and such cases made up 18% of all recorded crimes in the year to March 2021, much of which occurred during the strictest periods of lockdown where homeworking was most prevalent. Again, employers should be considering this in terms of both risk assessments and support; it is a particular consideration when there is no obligation to work at all in an office environment, which could create vulnerabilities for those in isolated domestic abuse situations being discouraged or actually prevented from attending the workplace.

More positively many reports HR teams and line managers are actively developing more holistic approaches to ensure hybrid working policies are fit for purpose and that there are escalation channels where risk or concerns are raised. This also includes more proactive approaches to training managers with a greater awareness of issues and equalities impact assessments taking place.

Many are keen to stress that in their own processes and policies if staff wish to work in a physical environment this will be provided. This is a core distinction which maintains the office or other workplace is considered to be the 'place of work' with homeworking an optional not compulsory feature.



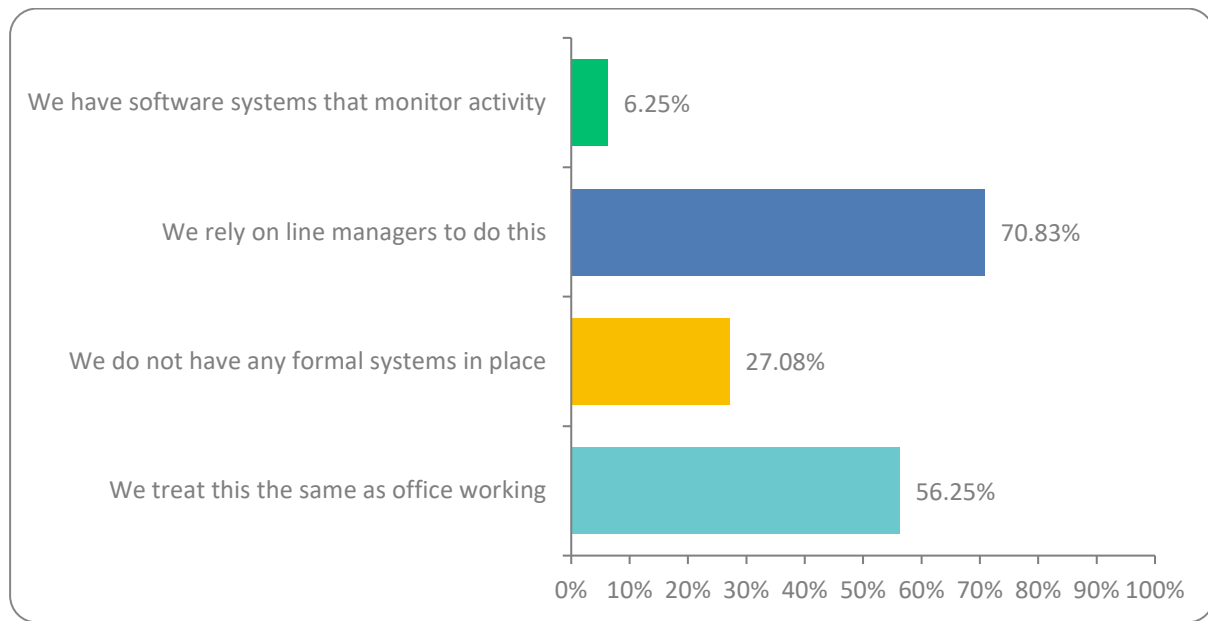
13 Performance monitoring

When asked about the measurement and monitoring of performance on hybrid working staff over 70% rely upon direct line managers to monitor performance of hybrid workers, whilst 56% suggest that they do not distinguish between monitoring the performance of office-based workers to hybrid or remote workers. Just over a quarter however suggest that they do not have any formal

systems in place with only 6% or so relying on software systems.

A few respondents point to overall team performance measurements rather than individuals however this in turn flags to managers any issues of under-performance.

It may well be too early to consider performance issues given, in many services, the changes necessary to deal with the pandemic created service backlogs and 'normal' service levels may still not have resumed. This may be an area which in the future needs further consideration.



14 Conclusions and APSE Comment

The ONS release, using data and analysis from the 2021 Census 'Is hybrid working here to stay?' provides some useful analysis of emerging working patterns. As Local Government struggles in many areas to recruit and retain staff it is worthwhile considering its overall perception as a progressive employer and what other industries, with which it competes as a sector, offers its' workforce.

The data finds that the proportion of people hybrid working has risen in 2022 based on survey responses collected from the 27 April to 8 May 2022, when guidance to work from home because of the pandemic was no longer in place in Great Britain, 38% of working adults reported having worked from home at some point over the past seven days. Pre-pandemic this figure was just 12%. However, whilst this is a large and fundamental shift to hybrid work patterns 46% of workers reported that travelling to work exclusively was their most common working pattern, and based on interviews conducted in late April and early May 2022. This reflects many within local government where frontline job roles are simply not available for home working or hybrid work patterns.

It is reasonable to assume however that hybrid or homeworking patterns are here to stay in many areas of work. However, what may influence or impact upon the future drivers for hybrid or homeworking?

First of all, the UK faces a cost-of-living crisis that is likely to hit hardest in the colder winter months. Some previous analysis of spend patterns found that whilst homeworkers reduce their spend on

car parking fuel and public transport costs 86% reported that spending commonly increased on utility bills with this increasing to 92% for those living in rented accommodation. For homeworkers with dependent children the statistical analysis also suggests that they are slightly more likely to report increased spending on food (39%), utilities (89%), and internet access (27%) than those without dependent children.

In the public sector pay rises continue to lag well behind the private sector according to latest figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Released in August 2022 the data set looks at earnings between April and June 2022 and finds that while average annual total pay growth for the private sector was 5.9% in April to June 2022 it was only 1.8% for the public sector. This level of gap will fuel demands for larger public sector increases and at the same time could threaten the recruitment of new staff into local government. It may well yet see a winter impact on working arrangements with either demands for office-based working increasing, due to home heating costs, or conversely a demand for greater flexible working to decrease travel costs, with fuel prices remaining high and public transport costs rising as a result of inflationary pressures. In real terms, once adjusted for inflation, average weekly earnings fell by a record 3% during April to June 2022; this level of fall in earnings was last recorded in 2009 at 4.5% during the height of the global financial crash.

The impact of new working patterns on younger workers should also be considered. For many younger workers during lockdown home working was not a good experience; aside from the lack of social interactions many younger people find that they are locked out of traditional housing markets due to cost. It is not uncommon for young people to live in HMOs (Houses in Multiple Occupation) which as a source of housing represents over 497,000 people from the overall 4.7 million people in social housing and of which 38% are classed as young people. It may be that to allow greater flexibility the use of localised work-hubs – allowing more localised access to work places would be beneficial particularly for younger workers.

Finally, there remains much uncertainty about the post-Covid world of work. Whilst expectations and experiences have changed the training and skills in managing the workforce differently appear to have lagged behind those changes. There is also arguably a need for some ongoing analysis on what the wider changes in work patterns may mean for local economies. For example, in rural areas large swathes of workers choosing to stay at home could have a detrimental impact on the viability of public transport needed for other workers who are unable to work at home such as health and social workers or construction workers.

Equally consideration should be given as to how councils utilise their own property and assets to support not just their own workforce but others within the community to access suitable work hubs at a locality level. This was a matter considered in APSE's recent publication with CIPFA which can be downloaded [here](#).

This report will be discussed at the APSE Annual Seminar 2022 in Swansea. [For details see this link.](#)

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