Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic: benefits, challenges and considerations for future ways of working

A rapid evidence review and analysis of qualitative research with individuals in Scotland from January 2020- May 2022

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Executive summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world introduced measures to try and reduce the risk of infection. This included advice or requirements for people to work from home, unless they were key workers. This represented a major and sudden change for a large number of people.

The working from home experience is multi-layered. Understanding its effects, at a personal and societal level, requires consideration of how someone's home environment, work related responsibilities and their personal circumstances interact to impact on their experiences. Due to the diversity and complexity of people's experiences, it is not possible to make a nationwide assessment and summary of how people experienced working from home, for Scotland as a whole.

With this in mind, the aim of this research was to explore a range of working from home perceptions and experiences and then set out the advantages and disadvantages. Data was drawn from a rapid review of relevant literature and responses to open-ended questions, included in a survey with members of the public in Scotland in 2022 (see Annex A and B). The report is presented in two main sections to explore why some workers perceived benefits and others struggled.

In summary:

Reported **benefits** of working from home	**Work-life balance** • Additional time gained from not commuting was valued. It enabled some employees to spend more time with family or on leisure activities. Time savings also helped some employees who coordinated their time between work and caring responsibilities. • Some people reported that they had saved money while working from home, mainly due to the reduction in commuting, socialising, childcare and food costs.
	Autonomy and productivity • Perceptions of freedom, independence and flexibility to work at times that suited people's personal schedules played a part in employees' positive feelings of job satisfaction and enhanced productivity levels.

Health and wellbeing

- The home working environment has been beneficial for those at greater risk of COVID-19 (formerly Highest Risk List) as a means of reducing their risk of infection.
- Some workers reported that working from home was better for their health and wellbeing. Examples provided included an improved quality of life generated through financial savings, more leisure time for exercising and a positive change to people's working environments.

Flexibility and accessibility

- Working from home during the pandemic benefited those with health issues who may require regular breaks, need to remain close to medical equipment or those who can have unpredictable flare ups.

Reported **challenges** of working from home	**Loss of social interaction** - A lack of social interaction with work colleagues can make people feel isolated and disconnected. Reduced social support was a challenge - people missed the in-person and often spontaneous encounters with colleagues.
	Conflict and blurred boundaries - Against the backdrop of worry associated with the pandemic, working from home has contributed to feelings of work-family conflict. - An issue that appeared to intensify these feelings, was the fact that working from home has made it harder, for some, to create a sense of separation between their personal and work life.
	Overworking and increased responsibilities - Some employees were working longer, on average, than they did before the pandemic. - The pandemic restricted people's access to formal care services. The combination of trying to juggle work pressures with increased caring responsibilities was challenging for some people.

Physical health and inactivity

- Mandatory working at home was associated with a reduction in physical activity and an increase in food and alcohol intake. Home working has also led to an increased risk of musculoskeletal issues - related to inappropriate homeworking equipment or working environment.

Workspace environment

- Working from home can have a negative impact on employees due to the environment that someone is required to work in. Challenges around the home workspace, insufficient internet access and living in shared housing are all factors that may contribute to how challenging someone may experience working from home.

Conclusion and considerations for **hybrid** ways of working

- The requirement for people to work from home, to reduce the risk of infection from COVID-19, was an extraordinary situation. Understanding the implications of this policy requires an understanding of how contextual and individual factors interact to shape employees perceptions and behaviours.

- The longer-term impact of working from home (and through a pandemic) is unclear and warrants further and more detailed analysis. In particular, the relevance and impact among different professional sectors and people's life or career stage.

- Hybrid working has now been embraced by a number of organisations across the UK. This opposition and interaction of employees experiences should be considered by employers. This is also critical from a business perspective for business resilience and employee retention.

- This report focuses on employees who can work from home. However, it is important to recognise that not everyone can do so. These individuals may therefore not experience some of the health and wellbeing benefits associated with working from home.

Contents

Introduction

Before the pandemic in 2019, there was an estimated 1.7 million people in the UK who said that they work mainly from home. This represented just over 5% of the total workforce.[1] However, opportunities for working from home varied by professional sector. For example, the information and communication sector and professional and scientific sector provided more opportunities for people to work from home than sectors such as transport, hospitality and retail.[2]

In 2020, in order to minimize the risk of spreading the virus, governments required people to work from home, unless they were key workers.[3] However, an important difference between earlier home working and working from home during the pandemic was the fact that, for affected sectors, it was sudden, unplanned and mandatory. This represented a major change for a large number of people.

To understand in the short-term how workers may respond to a new policy, such as working from home, this report draws on a rapid review of relevant literature (from 2020-2022) and responses from an open-ended survey with members of the public in Scotland. This evidence was synthesised and then presented across two main sections, which are: the potential *benefits* and *challenges* of working from home during the pandemic.

Hybrid working (a type of working where an employee splits their time between the workplace and remote working) has now been embraced by a number of organisations across the UK. The Scottish Government encourages employers to facilitate hybrid and flexible working, where it is possible and appropriate, and has developed guidance for businesses and workplaces. Therefore, this work will be used to help inform Scottish Government policy colleagues who are currently developing work exploring the impacts, challenges and opportunities of hybrid working for the wider economy.

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[1] Over the last 5 years, since 2015, the proportion of people who say they work mainly from home has increased. More information, from the ONS here - Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK labour market - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

[2] ONS - Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK labour market - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

[3] A key worker is an employee who is considered to provide an essential service. Such as NHS and social care staff, public service staff, public security, education and childcare workers. For example - Childcare provision for key workers - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Definitions

The term '**working from home'** does not have a single definition and it can be used in various ways. For the purpose of this report, it is used to refer to a situation where an employee performs their work tasks remotely, using information and communication technology (such as a laptop) in a location which is not their default place of work. In most cases, this includes work performed in the home so there is no commute. However, some people may work from another location such as a family member's home.

Hybrid working refers to type of flexible working where the employee splits their time between their workplace (such as an office) and their home.[4] [5]

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[4] This book reviews the impact of working from home - Remote Working: A Research Overview - 1st Edition - Alan Felstead - R (routledge.com)
[5] For definitions from the World Health Organization (WHO) see - Healthy and safe telework: Technical brief (who.int)

What happened?

COVID-19 reshaped the way we live and work. It normalised remote working which led to new and enduring trends in work and worker behaviour, and the economies around them.

In Scotland, the first day of 'lockdown' was on March 24th 2020. People were required to stay at home and only travel to and from work that was deemed to be essential. Employers were requested to make provisions so that people could work from home in Scotland.[6]

As to be expected, in April 2020, there was a large decline in visits to workplaces in the UK, falling by about 70% below pre-pandemic levels.[7] As detailed in Figure 1, visits to workplaces were at their lowest in December 2020 (down by 64%) and December 2022 (down 63%), coinciding with periods of tighter restrictions and high numbers of daily COVID-19 cases.[8]

Figure 1: Visitors to workplaces from February 2020- June 2022 in the United Kingdom [9]

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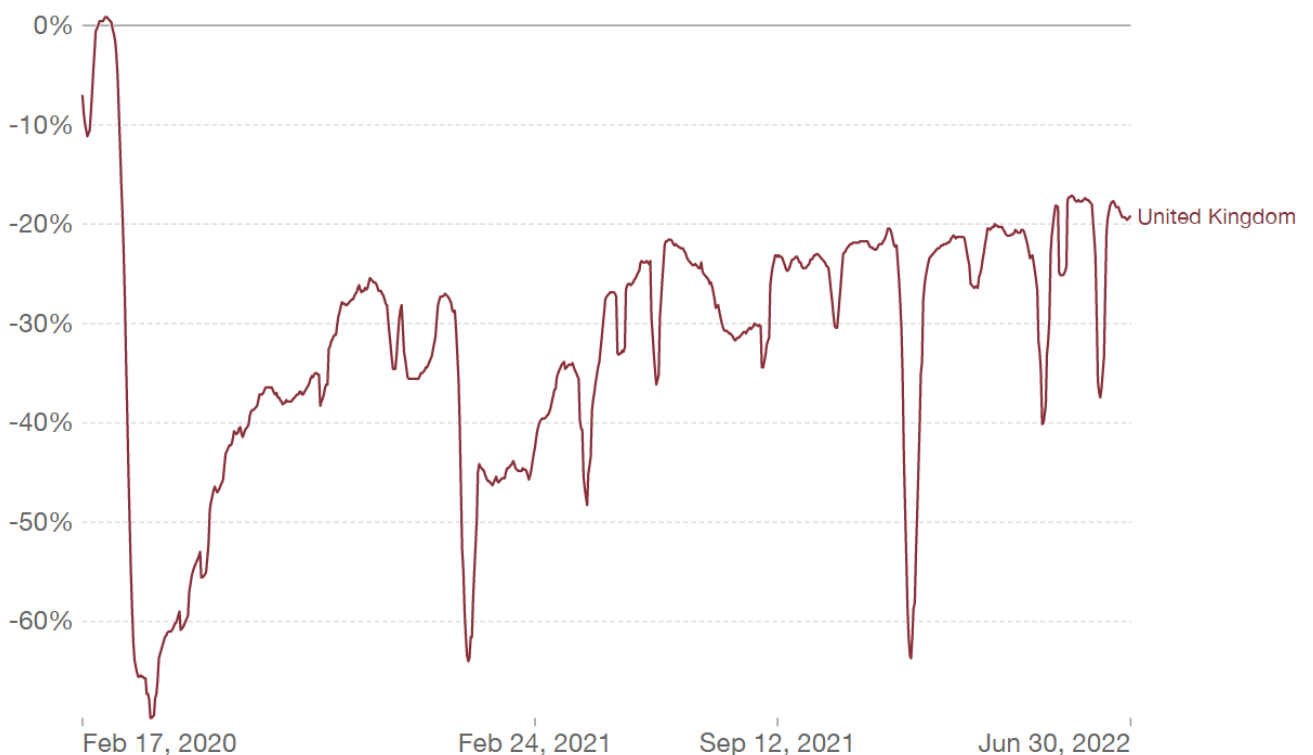
[6] Timeline of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Scotland – SPICe Spotlight | Solas air SPICe (spice-spotlight.scot)

[7] COVID-19: Google Mobility Trends - Our World in Data

[8] Public Health Scotland - COVID-19 Daily Dashboard | Tableau Public

[9] Source: Our World in Data - COVID-19: Google Mobility Trends - Our World in Data

At the beginning of the pandemic, on 31st March- 2nd April 2020, 28% of those not retired were working from home (Figure 2).[10] As detailed in the timeline in Annex C, public health restrictions during 2020 to 2022 impacted on people's ability to work from home or a workplace. For example, from 31 January 2022 – following the vaccination programme and a decreased level of threat from COVID – compared to earlier stages of the pandemic, businesses were advised to prepare for a new situation of hybrid working where possible and appropriate and figures have seen a slight decrease since then.

Figure 2: Self-reported levels of home working (excluding those retired) in Scotland from March 2020- May 2022 [11]
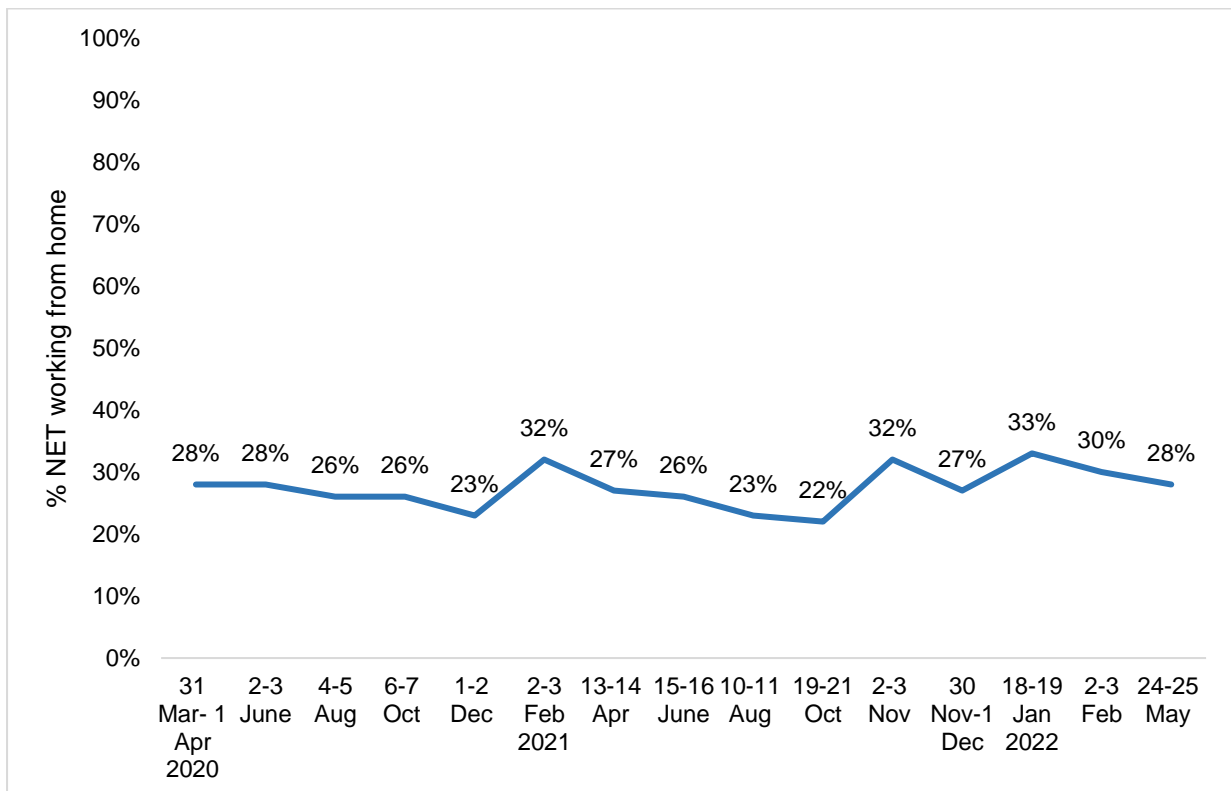
Source: YouGov Scotland Survey: Base: Adults not retired (n=697-747)

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[10] To note, fieldwork usually extends to the morning on the day after the dates shown. For further details, including the full range of data points please see the following link - Public attitudes to coronavirus: tracker - data tables - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)- March 2020-April 2020

[11] Note the change in question format. On 30 March to 1 Apr 2020 working from home options were 'I am working from home and was encouraged to do so by my employer' and 'I am working from home but had to insist on this myself'. From 15-16 June 2020 the second option changed to 'I am working from home but my employer is now trying to get me back to the workplace'. From 2-3 February 2021 this changed to 'I am working from home but my employer is not keen on me doing this'. From 2-3 November 2021, both options for working from home were 'I am working from home all of the time' and 'I am working from home some of the time and going into my workplace some of the time'. Public attitudes to coronavirus: tracker - data tables - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) Feb 2021- Jan 2022

The purpose of this report

This report draws on a range of evidence from surveys, mobility data and qualitative research, to summarise the effects of this change, explore people's working patterns, perceptions and experiences and then set out the advantages and disadvantages of working from home.

Surveys document the proportion of people who are working from home or working from a workplace such as an office. Different surveys record changes over time and note differences by profession, income and other demographic characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity. Survey research also captures levels of loneliness, levels of social contact and employee satisfaction to understand the impact of working from home on topics such as, wellbeing, social isolation and productivity.

Mobility data (gathered when people interact with Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or tagging locations on social media) describes people's movements over time and in different categories of places such as retail, hospitality, parks and workplaces. The data does not provide a direct measure of people's behaviour but it can provide a general impression of how people are moving about a region.

Qualitative research usually involves collecting first-hand accounts to understand opinions or experiences. Using approaches such as interviews or an open text format can provide a more in-depth insight into people's views. This approach helps to gather understanding into why people may feel a certain way and it offers people the chance to describe their experiences in their own words.[12]

Methods

To understand in greater detail what people's experiences and perceptions were of working from home during the pandemic, two main approaches were used (for more information see Annex A and Annex B):

- **A rapid evidence review**: A targeted literature search to identify academic literature and 'grey literature' (for example, materials and reports that are not produced by commercial publishers).

- **Free-text survey**: an online survey was conducted that included open text sections for people to describe their experiences in their own words (see Annex A). Respondents were asked a range of questions about how they currently felt and their views towards the different COVID-19 protection measures, which included working from home. 3162 people completed the

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[12] For a general overview of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research there is information provided by the Social Research Association on this webpage - https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/SRA/Blog/Howdifferentarequalitativeandquantitativeresearch.aspx

survey, of which, the majority (70%) were women. 60% were employed and 8.5% were self-employed. Approximately, a third of respondents provided comments on working from home.

Analysis

The findings from the free-text survey and the literature review (51 articles, reports, books) were combined and presented together within this report. This involved a team of social researchers reading the literature and survey responses in order to identify patterns and initial codes. Preliminary themes were then identified, reviewed and finalised.

In terms of the free-text survey, research questions about working from home were answered during the [Omicron wave of infections](January/February 2022) when Scotland recorded a record high number of cases. For some people, this may have been an anxious and uncertain time and interpretation of the findings should take this into account. This research was also done before most employees had any experience of hybrid working. For a more detailed note on the timing of the research and the implications this may have had on people's perceptions of the benefits and challenges, see Annex B.

Quotes from different respondents were used to illustrate these themes. The quotes that are provided through the report are intended to capture some of the points being made in respondents' own language and terminology. These were selected by the authors for illustrative purposes. Therefore, quotes are not necessarily representative of other respondents' views. The sample was self-selecting and therefore not representative of the wider Scottish population. It is also likely that particular groups did not participate in the survey, for example more disadvantaged groups, meaning their perspectives were not included.

Structure of the report

This report is structured into two sections:

1. The **benefits** of working from home

2. The **challenges** of working from home

See Annex A and B for more details on the methods used to gather and analyse the data, limitations and a full list of all the evidence used in this report.

SECTION ONE: The Benefits of Working From Home

Some people who worked from home during the pandemic perceived a number of benefits, including: a better work-life balance, cost and time savings from not having to commute (and a reduction in travel emissions) and feeling more productive. Working from home has also played a critical role in reducing the risk of infection from COVID-19.[13] As noted in figure 3, four main themes were identified from the literature and free text survey. They were:

Figure 3: Benefits of working from home:

Work life balance

Autonomy and productivity

Health and wellbeing

Flexibility and accessibility

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[13] Scottish Government - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Scotland's Strategic Framework - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Work-life Balance

'Work life balance' refers to the amount and quality of time that someone spends between their work and personal life (which includes leisure activities, eating and sleeping). The ability to effectively combine work, and personal commitments is important for well-being.[14]

In February 2022, a survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that more than three-quarters (78%) of those who worked from home in the UK (in some capacity) said that this way of working gave them an improved work-life balance.[15] As noted in figure 4 below other benefits reported in this survey were related to perceptions of efficiency and improved wellbeing.

Figure 4: Percentage of UK homeworkers reporting advantages February 2022 as measured by ONS (GB sample) [16]

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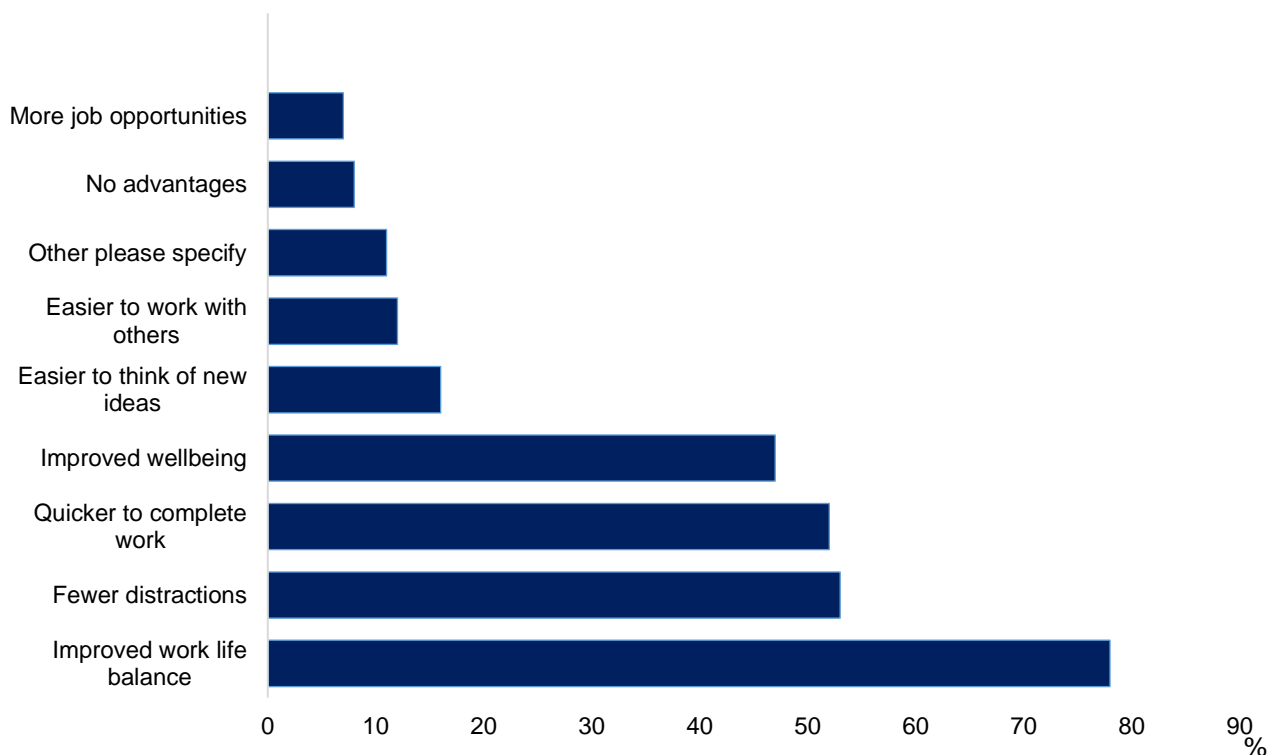
[14] OECD Better Life Index
[15] ONS - Is hybrid working here to stay? - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[16] ONS - Is hybrid working here to stay? - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

Additional time gained from not commuting enabled some workers to spend more time with family, to save money, and to have greater control over their work schedule. It also generated benefits for those who were managing work with caring responsibilities.

A report on the experience of low paid homeworkers in the UK, noted that in September 2021, 73% of all homeworkers and 69% of low paid homeworkers said that working from home is good for their work-life balance. Working from home had created the opportunity for more and better quality time with family. The flexibility helped some workers, who had to coordinate their time between work and caring responsibilities.[17]

Researchers from the Working from Home during the COVID-19 Lockdown project, run by the University of Kent and the University of Birmingham, identified positive aspects of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown, including the ability to take care of children, do housework and spend more time with partners.[18] These positive views were also expressed by respondents within the free-text survey:

> " Working from home has been positive, it offers us more flexibility and the lack of commute means we can spend more time together as a family. Life is generally easier as a result"
> (Female, 35-44)

> " Working from home makes it easier to manage care for children" (Male, 45-54)

Surveys conducted with UK employees found that some people reported that they had saved money while working from home, mainly due to the reduction in commuting, socialising, childcare and food costs.[19] [20] As also reported in the free-text survey:

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[17] The Experience of low paid workers in Britain today Inside-Jobs.pdf (demos.co.uk)
[18] Working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown (University of Kent)
[19] The Experience of low paid workers in Britain today Inside-Jobs.pdf (demos.co.uk)
[20] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html

> **"** Working from home has allowed me to continue to pay my bills, feed my family and heat my house." (Male, 45-54)

Analysis from ONS in January 2022, on how home working has affected people's spending, found almost half of homeworkers in the UK (46%) reported spending less as a result of working from home.[21] However, likely in response to rising energy prices, the majority of homeworkers reported an increase in their spending on utility bills (86%).[22] Nevertheless, half said they spent less on fuel and parking for commuting (50%), and two-fifths said their spending on commuting on public transport had reduced (40%). It has been raised that while some costs may be offset by reduced commuting costs, the longer term considerations of the financial impacts of being at home on a full-time basis may include increased heating and lighting.[23]

Having a designated space to work at home with minimal distractions was also related to employees' adjustment and their improved work-life balance.[24] This is related to the fact that (as will be discussed in section two) the blurring of work and personal boundaries can make it harder for some employees to 'switch off' and stop thinking about work related issues when not working.[25] As described by a respondent from the survey:

> **"** My partner already worked from home and I have adapted to it; we live in an urban area with good amenities (including open spaces); and we have no immediate caring responsibilities"
> (Male, 35-44)

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[21] ONS - Homeworking and spending during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[22] ONS - Homeworking and spending during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[23] A rapid review of mental and physical health effects of working at home: how do we optimise health? | BMC Public Health | Full Text (biomedcentral.com)
[24] Remote Working: A Research Overview - 1st Edition - Alan Felstead - R (routledge.com)
[25] As reported by the World Economic Forum in 2020, based on a survey of over 3500 remote workers from around the world, the top challenge faced by remote workers was "unplugging" from work. Coronavirus: Is working from home working? | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)

Autonomy and productivity

Analysis from the free-text survey highlighted that perceptions of freedom, independence and flexibility to work at times that suited people's personal schedules played a part in workers' job satisfaction and perceived productivity levels. Home working has enabled some workers to adapt their working life around their personal circumstances.[26]

Research conducted before the pandemic, presented by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), has highlighted the link between working remotely (away from an office), worker satisfaction and efficiency due to less commuting or fewer distractions.[27]

> " My quality of life improved (no peripatetic driving/ commute, time to sort domestic chores in breaks, ability to see daylight during working day and able to exercise at lunch and after work because no commute) and more time spent with son" (Female, 45-54).

There are however many different ways to measure productivity.[28] There are large variations across countries, sectors and firms. In general, the choice of productivity measurement depends on the objectives of the organisation, the kind of outcomes and value that workers are creating (if it is public or private, economic or social value), and the availability of data. For example, some studies use methods that could be considered as more objective to determine labour productivity. An analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on productivity, using survey data from UK businesses (2022/2021) concluded that productivity had lowered in the UK private sector, although the authors acknowledge there have been substantial differences across businesses and sectors.[29]

Other studies present evidence of employee productivity based on individual self-report surveys.[30] Work after Lockdown (a partnership of academic and applied researchers from the university, commercial, and social sector in the UK) tracked the experiences and outcomes of pandemic-driven working from home over time. Using a self-reported measure of productivity, they found that at two points in the

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[26] Work After Lockdown (2022) Work+After+Lockdown+no+going+back+report.pdf (squarespace.com)
[27] Productivity gains from teleworking in the post COVID-19 era: How can public policies make it happen? (oecd.org)
[28] Measuring Productivity - OECD Manual
[29] The Impact of Covid-19 on Productivity (nber.org)
[30] Work After Lockdown (2022) Work+After+Lockdown+no+going+back+report.pdf (squarespace.com)

pandemic, nearly two thirds of employees (61.7% in 2020 and 68.9% in 2021) felt they got 'much more' or a 'little more' work done at home compared to when they were in the office. This was related to feeling more focused due to a lack of disruptions, investing commuting time into work time and feeling a new-found sense of ownership and autonomy towards work which then facilitated productivity.

The OECD undertook an online survey, in 2020-2021, among managers and workers in 25 countries about their experience and expectations of working from home, with a particular focus on productivity and well-being.[31] Analysis found that managers and workers had an overall positive assessment of working from home, both for firm performance and for individual well-being. Respondents, on average, also reported that the ideal amount of remote work is around 2-3 days per week, in line with other evidence on the benefits (e.g., less commuting, fewer distractions) and also the costs (e.g., reduced in person communication and knowledge flows).

A literature review, led by Kings College London, explored the concept of productivity, within the context of home working during the pandemic.[32] The review points to a small number of studies that suggest employees may feel more productive working from home during the pandemic (for example, Guler et al., 2021). However, this review also draws attention to the fact that, when considering an individual's subjective perception of their productivity, whether positive or negative, it should be acknowledged that there are a number of influences. These include, for example, the complexity of someone's work, the need for interaction (or not) to complete tasks and someone's home and workspace conditions. Also, while studies may show that someone *feels* more productive than when they were in an office environment, it may not reflect a balanced relationship between outputs and the input. That is, someone may be working longer hours when they are at home than when they were in an office.

Another factor that should be taken into account when thinking about an employee's productivity and performance, when working from home, is the influence of their co-workers. Using data collected before the pandemic, from employees across 9 European countries, a team of researchers explored worker performance where employees and co-workers are working from home. Acknowledging this research was conducted before the pandemic (and so working from home was voluntary) their analysis points to a number of dynamics that will underpin people's perceptions. Such as, how employees influence each other, how they use each other's skills and knowledge, and the role of IT platforms in facilitating interactions with co-workers.[33]

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[31] OECD - The role of telework for productivity during and post-COVID-19 : Results from an OECD survey among managers and workers | OECD Productivity Working Papers | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

[32] Kings College London - how-did-working-from-home-during-the-covid-pandemic-impact-productivity.pdf (kcl.ac.uk)

[33] Co-workers working from home and individual and team performance - Lippe - 2020 - New Technology, Work and Employment - Wiley Online Library

Health and Wellbeing

Several factors positively impacted on people's physical and mental health and sense of wellbeing, while working from home during the pandemic.

Working from home reduced the transmission of COVID-19 by decreasing people's workplace and public transport interactions.[34] The ability to be able to work from home has therefore been beneficial for those at highest risk of becoming severely ill if they caught COVID-19.[35]

> " I quit my job in hospitality after being on furlough for a few months while I found something I could do from home. I work as a telephone interviewer/researcher which will support the degree I am working towards. I am lucky to have technology that allows me to work from home to keep myself safe." (Female, high risk, 25-34)

Polling commissioned by the Royal Society of Public Health (RSPH) in 2020 found that more (45%) UK based workers felt that working from home was better for their health and wellbeing, compared to 29% who said it was worse for their wellbeing.[36]

The majority in the RSPH survey, across all subgroups (e.g., age, living situation, caring responsibilities), felt working from home was having a positive rather than negative impact on mental health, with the exception of those who lived with multiple housemates. In particular, those who were aged 35 plus, were more likely to think that working from home was better for their health and wellbeing compared to 18-34 year-olds (48% vs 34%).

Some home workers from the free-text survey associated home working with an improved quality of life, generated through financial savings, more leisure time and a positive change to their working environment:

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[34] Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects on health, and recommendations: The pandemic and beyond - PMC (nih.gov)

[35] In Scotland, people at greater risk to COVID-19 were on the Higher Risk (formerly Shielding) List, though this ended on 31 May 2022 Coronavirus (COVID-19): advice for people on the Highest Risk List - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[36] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html

" The pandemic has made it possible for me to always work remotely. I've stayed in touch with friends and family via zoom, do socially distanced volunteering, and spend a lot of time outside gardening, hill walking, or walking with friends. The lack of commuting and not having to work in an open plan office have improved my quality of life immeasurably". (Female, 45-54)

" Working from home has improved quality of life. Lost weight, walk every day, saved money and genuinely happier" (Female 45-54).

The fact that some workers perceived that they had more time to exercise links with wider research conducted across Europe (including the UK) that found increases in interest and engagement with physical activity during the beginning of the pandemic. [37] [38] [39]

Another factor that may be beneficial for health is more rest time. In May–July 2020, data was collected with office workers in full-time employment in Sweden. They wore an electronic device that assessed physical behaviour during seven consecutive days. A diary was also used to identify periods of work, leisure and sleep. Days working from home were associated with more time spent sleeping relative to awake. Sedentary, standing and moving behaviours did not change markedly during days working from home compared to days working in an office. [40]

The link between working from home, increased opportunities to exercise and the positive impact this may have in terms of reduced transport emissions was described in the free-text survey:

> " Working from home has been great. I never want to go back to the office. Such better work/life balance. I can cook every day, get my laundry out in the sunshine, fit in exercise classes or medical appointments. I'm saving on petrol and parking every day I'm at home which is better for the environment."
> (Female, 35-44)

However, sleep and rest time is a health related issue where experiences can vary depending on someone's home environment and their personal circumstances. Polling conducted by RSPH noted that 29% of those working from a dedicated home office reported worse sleep, compared to nearly half (47%) of those working from a sofa or bedroom. [41]

[37] Transport Scotland - COVID-19: Scotland's transport and travel trends
[38] The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on perceived physical activity, physical function and mood of older adults in the U.K: A follow-up study (March 2020–June 2021) - ScienceDirect
[39] BMJ (2020) Is the COVID-19 lockdown nudging people to be more active: a big data analysis
[40] Working from home during the COVID-19 outbreak in Sweden: effects on 24-h time-use in office workers | BMC Public Health | Full Text (biomedcentral.com)
[41] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html

Flexibility and accessibility

Working from home can be beneficial for those with health issues who may require regular breaks, need to remain close to medical equipment or those who have unpredictable flare ups.[42] The World Health Organisation endorsed home based working for disabled people during the pandemic. [43] Analysis of pre-COVID data on disability and home based work, from three American surveys, found that workers with disabilities (employees and self-employed) were more likely to work from home. Therefore, there may be benefits here from expanded working from home opportunities.[44]

Some respondents from the free-text survey, who identified as having a physical or mental impairment, illness or disability described their preferences for working from home during the pandemic:

"
I have much preferred working from home. It has meant (due to my sight loss) I work in a truly completely accessible environment and have access to a clean toilet and kitchen facilities which wasn't the case pre-pandemic". (Female, 45-54).

"
Working from home has improved my asthma symptoms so much that I was able to reduce strength of steroid inhaler for first time in over 20 years because I was able to control my own environment and was not exposed to all the seasonal viruses and triggers that exacerbate it when commuting and in the office" (Female, 55-64)

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[42] Telework After COVID: A "Silver Lining" for Workers with Disabilities? | SpringerLink
[43] World Health Organization. Disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak (who.int)
[44] Telework After COVID: A "Silver Lining" for Workers with Disabilities? | SpringerLink

Research conducted in Wales, in 2020 and 2021, to identify employees priorities for future work, identified that flexible work was consistently more likely to be prioritised by those in poorer health. The majority (64%) of those that were not in good health placed it as a priority, compared to 52% of the respondents who identified as being in good health.[45]

Research stemming from the UK based Work After Lockdown project also noted that the ability to work at home had a positive impact in terms of retaining staff who may have otherwise retired on ill health grounds. Employees explained that working from home enabled them to manage conditions such as a migraine or anxiety in a way that would not have been possible in the office.

Similarly, a survey conducted in Australia in 2022, with women who have endometriosis, reported that it was much easier to manage within a home environment than an office-based environment. Workers with this condition felt they were more productive and the key to this was flexibility, with an increased ability to manage their time.[46]

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[45] Questions relating to health were identified using validated questions from the National Survey for Wales (Welsh Government 2021) including a self-reported general health question and presence of limiting pre-existing conditions. Good work in the COVID-19 recovery: priorities and changes for the future (medrxiv.org)
[46] Endometriosis and the workplace: Lessons from Australia's response to COVID-19 - Armour - 2022 - Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology - Wiley Online Library

SECTION TWO: The Challenges of Home Working

The unplanned and rapid requirement to work from home during the pandemic (for affected sectors) was also associated with a number of challenges. In particular, balancing caring responsibilities with home learning and work was demanding. Not having the correct equipment, lacking space to work and feeling isolated and disconnected due to the absence of workplace interactions also had a negative impact on some people. As noted in figure 5, five themes were identified from the literature and free text survey on the challenges of working from home. They were:

Figure 5: Challenges of working from home:

Loss of social interaction

Conflict and blurred boundaries

Overworking and increased responsibilities

Physical health and inactivity

Workspace environment

Loss of social interaction

Loneliness is a personal feeling, experienced when there is a difference between the social relationships we would like to have and those we have.[47] Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, there have been higher than usual levels of reported loneliness amongst people in Scotland. As detailed in Figure 6, before the pandemic in 2019, 21% of respondents reported that they felt lonely at least some of the time in the past week[48] [49]. Public attitudes polling at the start of the pandemic showed a sharp increase in self-reported levels of loneliness. Between 53% to 59% of people reported feeling lonely.[50] This has improved over time but remains higher (at 49%) than the pre-pandemic measure in 2018.[51]

Figure 6: Loneliness in Scotland July 2020- May 2022. Source: SHS, YouGov

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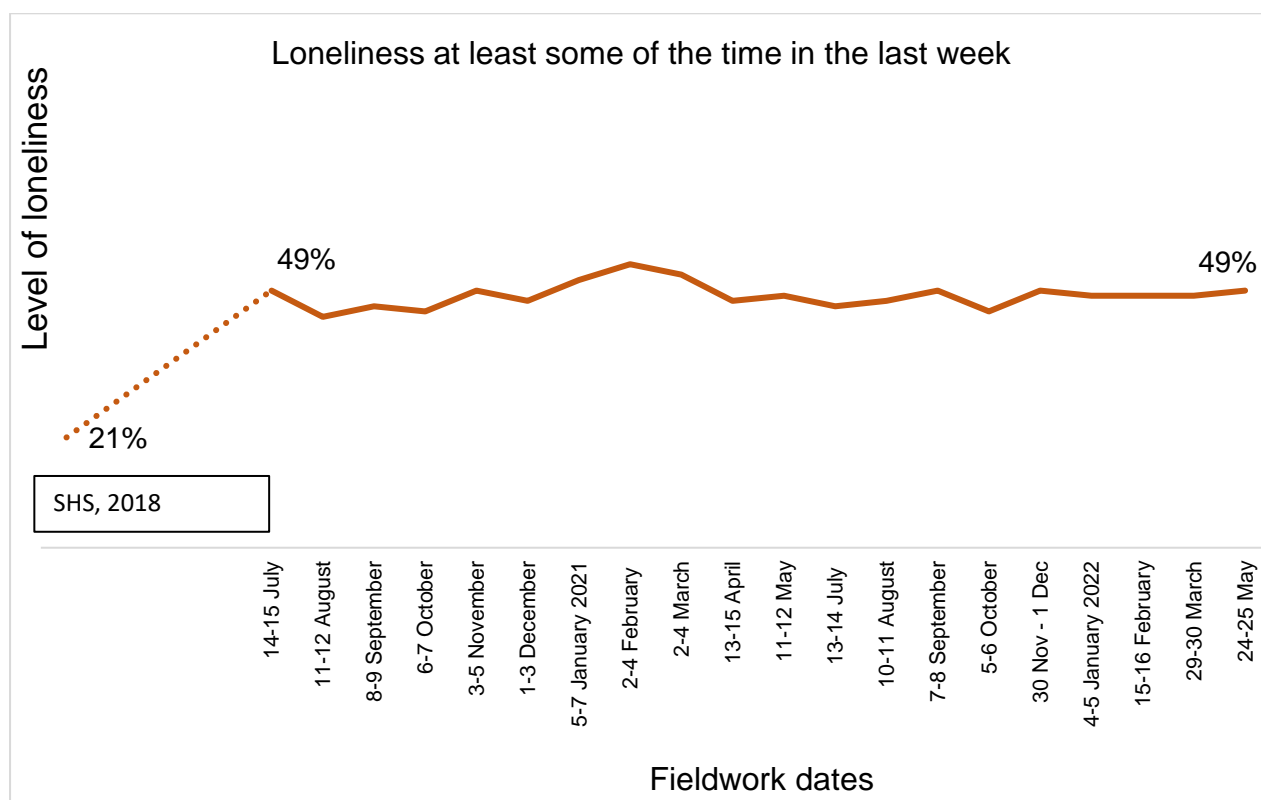
[47] Definitions - A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[48] Scottish Household Survey (SHS) -1 Introduction to the Survey - Scottish household survey 2018: annual report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) loneliness data found in Chapter 4 on Neighbourhoods and Communities (chapter link: 1 Introduction to the Survey - Scottish household survey 2018: annual report - gov.scot (www.gov.scot))

[49] Scottish Government 4 Harms Dashboard Detailed analysis (data.gov.scot)

[50] In Ipsos MORI surveys carried out between May and July 2020, between 53-59% felt lonely some/most/almost all or all of the time. Scottish Government 4 Harms Dashboard : Detailed analysis (data.gov.scot).

[51] Workbooks containing survey data on loneliness measures can be found here Public attitudes to coronavirus, cost of living and Ukraine: tracker - data tables - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

While there are a number of drivers of loneliness, research into the experience of home working in 2020/2021 among the UK population, noted that a lack of social interaction and face to face contact as a result of home working is major area of concern.[52] [53] UK survey research identified that people's mental wellbeing and sense of loneliness worsened in those who could work from home.[54] [55] Qualitative research has identified that employees who were required to work from home during the pandemic missed the in-person and often spontaneous encounters with colleagues.[56]

Adding to this, an online survey conducted by Ipsos MORI with people in Scotland in January 2022, found that those who felt lonely 'most' or 'all of the time' were more likely to report that relationships with colleagues were weaker (36% compared to the 18% average).[57]

It is worth noting that it is not just the absence of the social aspect of work that was challenging for some people. UK based research indicated that working with other people provides a structure and routine to the day that is noticeably absent when homeworking.[58] Respondents from the free-text survey described the challenge of adjusting from a busy office environment to a home environment and their feelings of isolation and loneliness:

> " I was required to work from home and this is very difficult to do when you are used to working in a busy office environment. You then became isolated and not part of a team." (Age/gender not specified)

[52] Evidence for House of Lords COVID-19 Committee submitted by the Working@Home Project- HofL-final_-working-at-home.pdf (workingathome.org.uk)

[53] Challenges and opportunities of remotely working from home during Covid-19 pandemic - ScienceDirect

[54] Exploring the health impacts and inequalities of the new way of working: findings from a cross-sectional study | medRxiv

[55] Felstead A, Reuschke D (2020) Homeworking in the UK: before and during the 2020 lockdown

[56] Exploring layers of context-related work-from-home demands during COVID-19 | Emerald Insight

[57] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on wellbeing - survey findings - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[58] Evidence for House of Lords COVID-19 Committee submitted by the Working@Home Project- HofL-final_-working-at-home.pdf (workingathome.org.uk)

> **"** Work from home has made me isolated and lonely with no division between work and family life*".* (Female, 35-44).

Working from home is associated with fewer in person contacts. Home workers in Scotland had around 2.5 to 3 times fewer interactions with people, than those working outside the home, in January 2022.[59] However, importantly, social isolation and loneliness can be experienced independently from one another.[60] That is, while isolation or periods of being alone may contribute to feelings of loneliness, some people can experience loneliness despite having close connections with other people.

Understanding who may be most affected by experiences of isolation and loneliness when working from home is important. Wider survey data conducted with people in Scotland shows that loneliness is higher amongst young adults, people living alone, those with a mental or physical health conditions, people with lower household income, those living with children and women.[61]

When focusing on the experiences of those who have been working from home during the pandemic there are similar patterns of inequality. Research conducted by the Royal Society of Public Health (RSPH) in 2020, suggests that women who were working at home were more likely to report feelings of isolation than men.[62] This feeling was shared by a respondent from the free-text survey:

> **"** Working from home is not good. As a mother, going to the office was my opportunity to socialise. I've lost it all*"* (Female, 35-44)

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[59] See figure 9 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): modelling the epidemic (issue no.90) - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[60] An overview of systematic reviews on the public health consequences of social isolation and loneliness - ScienceDirect

[61] Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on wellbeing - survey findings - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

[62] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html

A UK based study exploring people's ability to, and preference for working from home, found that younger individuals (under 50 years of age) and those with low mental-wellbeing were also more likely to report negative impacts to their mental well-being and sense of loneliness when working from home.[63]

While home workers may agree that team work can suffer as a result of home working, this may be particularly the case for younger workers who can be more reliant on their peer group for socialisation and interaction.[64] This may then lead to greater negative impacts from the isolation of home working. [65]

The lack of in-person collaboration may also generate negative consequences in terms of younger people's level of professional support, training, networking and career progression in the future.[66] Two respondents from the free-text survey described their frustrations:

" Working from home has been terrible for my job prospects as a young graduate. I have been unable to form social bonds with colleagues" (Male, 25-34)

" I'm sick of working from home - it's made starting a new job harder and takes much longer to do anything as if you need to ask anything then you need to phone someone and ask instead of just speaking to the person next to you" (Female 35-44)

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[63] Exploring the health impacts and inequalities of the new way of working: findings from a cross-sectional study | medRxiv
[64] See chapter on socialization processes over the life course - Rosenberg, M., & Turner, R. H.(1990) Social psychology: Sociological perspectives.
[65] Evidence for House of Lords COVID-19 Committee submitted by the Working@Home project, December 2020
[66] The Covid-19 crisis as a career shock: Implications for careers and vocational behavior - ScienceDirect

Conflict and blurred boundaries

A review of the mental and physical effects of working from home found that working from home has contributed to feelings of conflict for some people.[67] The combination of anxiety associated with the pandemic and issues such as home schooling, living in constant close proximity to other family members, and not having adequate space to work had a negative impact on people's relationships.

Research conducted before the pandemic suggested that working from home can increase levels of conflict between someone's work and family roles – something which is sometimes referred to as 'work-family conflict'.[68] This can be due to people working at times that are scheduled for time with family or people worrying about work outside of work hours.[69]

Qualitative analysis of free-text survey responses with individuals in America, who transitioned to working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, described perceptions of work-family conflict and the associated impact it had on feelings of stress and emotions such as guilt.[70] Participants in this same study, felt it was difficult to set boundaries between work and home due to a lack of necessary support and resources. This had an effect on their working from home experience and their health and well-being.

Respondents from the free-text survey spoke about some of the strains in their own home:

> " My husband and I are probably going to get a divorce this year. There's no doubt that the extra stress of covid, lockdown, home schooling has impacted on our relationship. Working from home has also impacted on it, as we've not had our own space. " (Female, 35-44)

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[67] A rapid review of mental and physical health effects of working at home: how do we optimise health? | BMC Public Health | Full Text (biomedcentral.com)
[68] Sources of conflict between work and family roles. Academy of Management Review. 1985.
[69] Is there a downside to schedule control for the work-family interface? Journal of Family Issues, 2010
[70] Negotiating Time and Space When Working From Home: Experiences During COVID-19 (sagepub.com)

> **"** I was not able to get furloughed so had to home educate and continue working. I feel I badly let my children down and their wellbeing and education suffered hugely". (Female, 35-44)

An issue that appeared to intensify feelings of strain was the fact that some people did not perceive a lack of separation between their personal and work life.[71] [72] Survey research conducted in the UK found that some workers found it hard to switch off at the end of the day and take regular breaks when they worked from home.[73]

As will be discussed in the last section on challenges (workspace environment) the environment and resources that people work within can impact on their ability to create a sense of separation between their home and personal life. For example, research conducted as part of the Working@Home Project found that women were less likely than men to have a separate closed off room to work in. This may then make it more difficult to detach from the domestic environment.[74] [75]

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[71] Negotiating Time and Space When Working From Home: Experiences During COVID-19 (sagepub.com)
[72] As Uncertainty Remains, Anxiety and Stress Reach a Tipping Point at Work (oracle.com)
[73] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html
[74] Remote Working: A Research Overview - 1st Edition - Alan Felstead - R (routledge.com)
[75] Evidence for House of Lords COVID-19 Committee submitted by the Working@Home project, December 2020

Overworking and increased responsibilities

During the pandemic, it has been reported that workers from across the world (who use a range of online interfaces) were working longer, on average, than they did before the pandemic.[76] [77] Analysis of the emails and meetings of 3.1 million people, in 16 global cities affected by lockdown orders (including London), found that the average workday increased by 8.2% (or 48.5 minutes) during the pandemic's early weeks in 2020.[78]

This can be problematic as working more hours in the day is related to negative outcomes such as stress and a reduction in job satisfaction. Also, as discussed above, the blurring of work-life boundaries.[79]

This quote below, taken from the free-text survey, describes this challenge. It also raises the issue of remote employee monitoring. [80] It has been suggested that the use of employee monitoring can have negative impacts on employees and it can erode trust. [81]

> " I am also working way more than I did when I physically went to work, as my employer assumes that since I'm home all day I'm available all the time. I am working much longer hours with less breaks because my organisation is constantly checking if I'm logged in. It seems there's more of a need to prove we're working more now. " (Female, 25-34)

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[76] Proof the workday is longer since COVID - Work Life by Atlassian
[77] As Uncertainty Remains, Anxiety and Stress Reach a Tipping Point at Work (oracle.com)
[78] Collaborating During Coronavirus: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of Work
[79] Healthy and Happy Working from Home? Effects of Working from Home on Employee Health and Job Satisfaction
[80] Remote workers experiences with electronic monitoring (2021)
[81] What Do Employees Think about Electronic Surveillance at Work? (igi-global.com)

The pandemic restricted people's access to formal and informal care services (including, home-based care, community based care and care homes).[82] This increased the number of people who were balancing unpaid caring responsibilities with paid employment.[83] For example, those with the added tasks of home schooling, caring for pre-school children and/or caring for relatives. This combination of trying to juggle work commitments with increased caring responsibilities was associated with challenges. Using semi-structured interviews, a study exploring family carers' experiences of balancing work and care in Ireland, found that attempting to manage work and caring responsibilities generated considerable stress, with the boundary between work and care becoming increasingly blurred during the pandemic.[84]

Similarly, a respondent from the free-text survey described the challenge of trying to manage home schooling during the pandemic alongside home working:

> " Home working and home schooling simultaneously was ridiculous, and a recipe for burnout" (Female, 35-44)

While one of the benefits of working from home (see section one) was saving money due to decreased childcare costs, this can have a negative impact on the caregivers' mental health. Polling conducted by RSPH, found that two thirds (65%) of people who provided care for at least one child found they experienced increased stress from managing childcare and work.[85]

A review of literature on pandemic-related changes to work and family in the United States, provides insights into how and in what ways the pandemic has affected men and women differently. [86] Examples include, the way the experience of working from home has posed gender-related work and productivity challenges (and opportunities) in the absence of institutional childcare support.

Focusing in on the UK, drawing on data collected by the NatCen Panel (a representative sample of adults across Britain) in January 2022, women were more

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[82] The Impact of COVID-19 on Informal Caregiving and Care Receiving Across Europe During the First Phase of the Pandemic (frontiersin.org)
[83] As reported by Carers UK We're here to make life better for carers - Carers UK
[84] Colliding worlds: Family carers' experiences of balancing work and care in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic
[85] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html
[86] The gendered pandemic: The implications of COVID-19 for work and family

likely than men to be extremely worried about their work-life balance and about their level of education, training and qualifications. These differences between men and women were not seen in data collected in January 2018 or January 2019.[87]

A further study, using self-report questionnaires with heterosexual participants, from a number of countries (with the majority residing in the UK or Ireland), raises questions about the gendered implications of COVID-19 for work and care. Findings indicated that women who worked from home during the pandemic, performed more caregiving and spent less time on paid work duties. Additionally, during the initial lockdown in 2020, women reported more burnout, and work-family conflict than men.[88]

Although it should be noted that these findings only provide the starting point for exploring how lockdowns and restrictions on people's access to care services may impact on men and women differently. The analysis described is centred around documenting trends and variations in work and domestic labour. Additional studies will be required to test theories in order to explain the differences identified, to explore how gender and caregiving may impact on career outcomes and wellbeing and to understand their significance within a Scottish context.

[87] NatCen Social Research - Society-Watch-Anxious-Britain-How-worried-are-we-in-2022.pdf (natcen.ac.uk)

[88] Gender and the pandemic: Associations between caregiving, working from home, personal and career outcomes for women and men | SpringerLink

Physical health and inactivity

While some people engaged in more exercise during lockdown (see section one) periods of lockdown have also been associated with a decrease in levels of physical activity and an increase in sedentary behaviour.[89] [90] A systematic review that aimed to investigate global differences in physical activity and sedentary behaviour before and during lockdown, in 2020, found that most studies (out of 66) reported decreases in physical activity and increases in sedentary behaviour.[91] However, most of the studies in this review used self-reported, subjective measures of physical activity. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with the consideration that people may have found it difficult to recall how much physical activity they were engaging in before the pandemic. Also, that the experience of the pandemic may have impacted on these perceptions.

All the same, this is an issue that requires consideration within the context of working of home. Respondents from the free-text survey described a number of challenges relating to their health that specifically stemmed from the disruption to their normal, pre-pandemic work routine:

> " The downside to working from home is my fitness has suffered and weight gained through reduced activity, even only from walking to and from the train station." (Male, 45-54)

> " I've now been working from home for almost 2 years come March … this is a drastic change and I find all sorts of negatives… isolation, weight gain." (Female, 45-54)

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[89] Changes in physical activity and sedentary behaviours from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown: a systematic review
[90] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html
[91] The 66 studies included a total of 86,981 participants and the age ranged from 13 to 86 years old. Most (45) studies were conducted with healthy adults but some were with children and populations with medical conditions. Changes in physical activity and sedentary behaviours from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown: a systematic review (bmj.com)

Academic researchers assessed the habits of 184 workers who had begun working from home during the first UK lockdown in 2020. They found that 70% of the respondents reported more sedentary behaviour, 63% reported an increase in smoking, 41% increased their alcohol consumption and 39% their overall food intake. [92] Correlational analysis (a statistical technique to test for associations between variables) also revealed an association between sedentary behaviour, poor mental health and worse work productivity.

Mandatory working at home has also affected patterns of dietary consumption.[93] A UK study on the effect of the pandemic on diets found that there was a 15% increase in calories consumed by the end of the first lockdown in 2020. The study attributed working from home as a key factor in this increase.[94] From polling conducted by RSPH, it was reported that 23% (from a sample of 678) said they ate more healthily due to a reduction in commuting time, a larger percentage (31%) say they were eating more unhealthily.[95]

Considering the wider associations, academics who run the UCL COVID-19 Social study (a UK panel study collecting weekly data during the pandemic) explored eating behaviours during lockdown in 2020. They wanted to explore people's behaviours over time and look at what factors may influence people's eating behaviour trajectories. Participants with greater depressive symptoms were more likely to report any change in eating. Loneliness was linked to persistently eating more, being single or divorced, as well as reporting more stressful life events (e.g. bereavement) were associated with consistently eating less.[96]

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[92] PsyArXiv Preprints | Influence of the COVID-19 lockdown on remote workers' physical and psychosocial wellbeing and work productivity
[93] Impact of Working from Home on Cardiovascular Health: An Emerging Issue with the COVID-19 Pandemic - PMC (nih.gov)
[94] Institute of Fiscal Studies The dietary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic
[95] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html
[96] Trajectories of eating behavior during COVID-19 lockdown: Longitudinal analyses of 22,374 adults - Clinical Nutrition ESPEN

Polling conducted by RSPH with UK based employees, to find out what they had been provided with to work effectively, showed some variation. Findings indicted that 51% had been offered a laptop, 20% were offered information/support about staying active, 17% were offered a fully adjustable chair, 8% a laptop stand and only 7% a desk.[97] This may be problematic, as working for long hours with an unsuitable set up can put people at an increased risk of back, neck, joint and muscle pains, also known as musculoskeletal problems.[98]

Research suggests that compared to previous work in the office, some home workers experienced musculoskeletal health problems (including back and neck pain) when working from home.[99] [100] [101] For example, an online questionnaire conducted in 2020 with Australian residents working from home during the pandemic, found that 70% (from a sample of over 900) of all respondents reported experiencing musculoskeletal pain or discomfort.[102]

This can a particular issue for those who had to work from the sofa or those who worked from a desk or table in their living room.[103] As will be discussed in more detail in the next section, poorer work conditions at home (relating to space and equipment) can negatively impact on someone's health and work experiences.

> " "Working from home has injured my back. I have spent around £750 on chiropractic and physio care. I can afford this but many people would not be able to. My health and mental health are definitely worse than they were." (Female, 45-54)

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[97] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html
[98] Muscle, bone and joint injuries / problems | NHS inform and Working from Home in the Context of COVID-19: A systematic Review
[99] Investigating The Impacts of Working at Home Among Office Workers With Neck Pain on Health Status, Depression and Sleep Quality During COVID-19 Pandemic: International Journal of Occupational Safety and Ergonomics: Vol 0, No ja (tandfonline.com)
[100] Work from Home and Musculoskeletal Pain in Telecommunications Workers During COVID-19 Pandemic: a Pilot Study - PMC (nih.gov)
[101] Working From Home During a Pandemic
[102] Working from Home in Australia during the pandemic
[103] Royal Society for Public Health (2021) Disparity Begins at Home. https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/wellbeing/disparity-begins-at-home.html

Workspace environment

Working from home can have a negative impact on employees due to the environment that someone is required to work in. Challenges including insufficient internet access and living in shared housing are factors that may contribute to how challenging someone may perceive working from home.[104]

Leading with the belief that an employee's workspace context, including their satisfaction with their workspace, plays a major role in shaping the work at home experience, a team of researchers in America conducted an online survey to examine how worker, workspace and work related factors affected productivity. The results from the survey indicated that employees' self-assessed productivity levels were higher for workers who have a dedicated workspace at home, in comparison to those who do not have a dedicated workspace.[105] The authors of this study suggest that their work illuminates potential equity issues, as many workers may not have the capability or resources necessary to create an ideal work from home environment.

Digital skills and access to the internet have played a crucial role in facilitating homeworking throughout the pandemic, from video conferencing to emailing. In 2018, in Scotland, 10.7% of the population were internet *non-users*. This compares to 7% in London (the lowest proportion of internet non-users) and 14.2% in Northern Ireland (the highest proportion).[106] Non-use of the internet can be due to a range of factors such as, lack of skills, lack of confidence, cost of equipment and service and no or slow internet access.[107] In Scotland, particularly in rural areas, speed and connection can be a barrier to home working. This was raised by a respondent from the free-text survey:

> " Parts of rural Scotland suffer from NO mobile signal and abysmal broadband (0.48 mbps is common here) which makes working from home impossible. Thought should be given to the creation of village hubs using village halls with satellite telephone and broadband being provided." (Male 65-69)

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[104] Alan Felstead. Remote Working : A Research Overview. Routledge, 2022.
[105] Working from home during the pandemic: Impact on office worker productivity and work experience (2020).
[106] Exploring the UK's digital divide - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[107] GROS - Census - General Report Template.dot (scotlandscensus.gov.uk)

The Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes, (a monthly survey of between 2,500 to 5,000 US residents aged between 20 and 64) was founded in 2020 in response to the impact of COVID-19 on working arrangements. One of their projects explored the link between employees' internet access and their self-reported efficiency. Those with internet access that worked all the time, felt they were more efficient while working from home, than those with a less reliable connection.[108] The authors of this study give consideration to the idea of universal, high quality, reliable home internet and the benefits it could bring in terms of productivity but also the social benefits of universal access in a pandemic.

Data from 29 European countries (with the majority from Denmark) on the experiences of employees working from home, during the early stages of the first lockdown (March-May 2020), indicated that two of the main interrelated disadvantages were 'home-office constraints' and 'inadequate tools'. [109] In summary, this related to an unsatisfactory physical working environment (for example, not having an adjustable chair, poor lighting, noise) and not having the required data or documents to be able to work. Of note, participants who described themselves as a manager were less likely to report having 'inadequate tools' than other professional groups.

Having a dedicated or uninterrupted workspace in the home environment can play an important part in developing a healthy work life balance and, as discussed, help to maintain a boundary between home and work.[110] Some respondents in the free-text survey raised the issue of space, highlighting how living and working in a small home was challenging:

> " Working from home is increasingly difficult in a small house with two of us working from home. How many homes have quiet spaces for everyone? Again, a rule that favours the wealthy." (Female, 35-44)

[108] National Bureau of Economic Research - Internet-Access-and-its-Implications-for-Productivity-Inequality-and-Resilience-published.pdf (wfhresearch.com)
[109] Six Key Advantages and Disadvantages of Working from Home in Europe during COVID-19 | HTML (mdpi.com)
[110] Remote Working: A Research Overview - 1st Edition - Alan Felstead - R (routledge.com)

> **"** Most houses are not big or spacious enough for multiple people to have space and quiet to work." (Non-Binary, 35-44)

As brought to attention in the above quotes, the risk is that the opportunity to work from home will benefit workers with quiet and dedicated spaces to work over those who do not have such facilities. This may worsen long-standing inequalities, with younger workers or low paid workers less likely to live in larger homes with dedicated or quiet spaces to work in.[111]

Supplementing this, analysis conducted by ONS in 2020 from a survey with individuals in the UK, found that employees who earn higher annual wages are more likely to be able to work from home. Analysis conducted in April 2022 found that high earners are also more likely to hybrid work. In contrast, lower earners and workers aged between 16-29 years were least likely to report hybrid working.[112]

Considering the association between home and work life, a global study of 12,000 workers, from across 11 countries (including the UK) carried out in 2020 showed that 89% of those aged 22 to 25 said the pandemic had negatively impacted on their mental health. This compared to 62% of those aged 55 to 74.[113]

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[111] Working from Home (ingentaconnect.com)
[112] ONS - Is hybrid working here to stay? - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[113] As Uncertainty Remains, Anxiety and Stress Reach a Tipping Point at Work (oracle.com)

What next?

This report points to some key interrelated topics, such as: work-life balance, autonomy and flexibility, productivity, personal/work boundaries and social interaction that should form the starting point for further research and discussion. It will be important to understand if and how these factors change over time and what the associated implications are for employees and employers.

There is evidence that some employees value the opportunity to work from home and there are clear preferences for hybrid working in the future.[114] The overall proportion of businesses using or planning to use increased homeworking as a permanent business model has increased from 2020 to April 2022, although there are variations by sector.[115] As many employers are now developing new policies to facilitate flexible and hybrid working, including the Scottish Government, this report highlights the continued need to consider the factors that impact on people's home working experiences.

In terms of future research questions and analysis, it is recommended that there is a deeper analysis into the various different benefits and disadvantages that are created, through different models of hybrid working. In particular, analysis that gives consideration to employees' experiences across the life course. For example, those who started their first job during the pandemic in comparison to those who are further into their career. Thought should also be given to what considerations or innovations should be made by employers to support employees and mitigate the identified challenges and risks.

This report focuses on employees. Future work that examines the employers' perspective (of different sized organisations and across different sectors) to gain an understanding into their perceptions of the benefits and challenges and their long-term expectations for home, hybrid and office based working will also be valuable.

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[114] Evidence presented by ONS - Is hybrid working here to stay? - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

[115] Analysis conducted by ONS 4-17 April 2022. Information and communications businesses are the most likely to be planning to adopt homeworking permanently (54%) followed by professional scientific and technical (43%) and then education (37%). Full details here - Is hybrid working here to stay? - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk). The latest publication (August 2022) containing weighted estimates for Scotland can be found in the 'Homeworking' section here: BICS weighted Scotland estimates: data to wave 63 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

Annex A – Open text survey

An online survey was launched on 24 January and closed on 13 February 2022. It was publically available on the Scottish Government website and it was promoted through the Scottish Government Facebook page. A link to the survey was also shared via a range of over 30 organisations in the third and public sector. An easy read version of the survey was provided and respondents could request a paper copy to return by post, if they wished. The aim was to reach a diverse group of people with varied experiences and life circumstances to provider greater understanding on wellbeing and where additional support may be required. The main limitation to this type of research is that the sample was self-selecting and therefore not representative of the wider Scottish population.

Questions included (bold indicates the question we focused on for this review):

1. How do you feel at this point in the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do you feel thinking about the year ahead?
3. Which protective measures do you find the easiest to follow and why?
4. Which protective measures do you find the hardest to follow and why?
5. What has made it difficult for you to follow measures and guidance?
6. In the last 3 months have you or your household self-isolated because of COVID-19?
If yes, what factors made this easier or more difficult?
7. Please tell us about any of your experiences with the following (if they are relevant to you), and how it has impacted on you or your household:
• your neighbourhood and amenities
• unpaid caring responsibilities
• **working from home**
• reduced social contact and social interaction
• regular testing
8. What kind of help would make you feel generally safer and more supported at the moment?

In total, 3162 responses were received. This included, 70% who identified as female, a range of ages but most (51%) were aged between 35- 54 years. A third (32%) were 55-69 years and 11% were under 35 years. 92% identified as White (Scottish, Irish, British or White Other). A quarter of the respondents identified as having a long-standing physical or mental impairment, illness or disability and 22% stated that they were in an unpaid carer role. Most (60%) were in employment, 8% were self-employed and 15% were retired.

Responses were downloaded and analysed thematically by Scottish Government researchers. This involved a team of researchers, reading and rereading the responses to become familiar with the data and identify patterns and initial codes.

Preliminary themes were then identified, reviewed and then finalised. Excerpts from different respondents were used to illustrate these themes.

A report with the full findings (Coronavirus (COVID-19) and society: what matters to people in Scotland? - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)) has been published on the Scottish Government website.

Annex B – How we selected the literature

This rapid review is based on an analysis of literature relating to employees' perceptions and experiences of working from home during the time period March 2020 to May 2022. This time period was chosen to capture the beginning of lockdown restrictions in the UK and the requirement for people to work from home, (for affected sectors) unless they were key workers. The literature was searched again in 2022, after the point at which guidance was produced by the Scottish Government that advised employers to consider the implementation of a hybrid approach to working (where possible and appropriate), with workers spending some time in the office and some time at home where that can be done safely.

The rationale for the search strategy was to capture studies that focused on employees experiences (therefore, not the experiences of employers) who were working away from their usual, pre-pandemic place of work. There were no exclusions based on the sector or the profession of the employee, or their hours worked (for example, full-time or part-time). Priority was given to studies focusing on employees based in the UK although some international studies were included.

The search strategy was developed in consultation with a librarian and the literature was searched using a number of search engines such as KandE (a Scottish Government resource which includes a number of databases) and Google Scholar. The search included peer reviewed journal articles and grey literature (for example, reports that are published outside of traditional publishing routes) written in English. To ensure a broad coverage of research there was no limitations set on the study design.

The search terms included:

- 'Working from home' OR 'working at home' OR 'home work' OR 'remote work' OR 'telework'
- 'COVID-19' OR 'Coronavirus' OR 'pandemic'
- 'Employee' OR 'worker'
- 'Wellbeing'

The body of evidence includes 51 papers and reports. Most studies included in this review were published between 2020-2021. Data extraction (from the articles, books and reports) was undertaken using an Excel spreadsheet and included the setting (country), study design, main outcomes and details of participants. A formal quality appraisal was not applied. However, a team of researchers adopted a systematic approach to assessing the quality and risk of bias in the included studies.

Limitations to the evidence base include that a number of studies in the rapid review used cross-sectional designs. Such designs usually take the form of a questionnaire

in which concepts are measured at a single point in time. The main disadvantage of a cross-sectional approach is that it is not possible to determine causality. That means two concepts may be associated but it does not mean that one caused the other.

This review provides insights into people's perspectives across a broad time frame (2022-2022). While all studies included in the review focused on employees who had transitioned to working from home due to COVID-19 requirements, this included periods when working from home was mandated and when it was voluntary. In 2022, the proportion of workers both working at home and at their usual workplace was rising.[116] Therefore, when considering evidence, such as the analysis presented by ONS, on the perceived benefits of working from home, this is taken from employees who work from home in 'some capacity' – meaning the exact number of days people worked exclusively from home, or split their time between the home and an office over a working week, was unclear. This may have a bearing on people's perceptions with differences emerging depending on the frequency in which people work in a hybrid or home working model. Further, it was not always clear if the participants in the included studies had worked from home, or not, before the pandemic. Again, this is likely to have impacted on people's perceptions of the benefits and challenges – particularly in terms of having the appropriate equipment and space to rapidly adjust to the requirement to work from home.

It is important to acknowledge, when drawing on evidence from both across the UK and internationally, that polices implemented by governments and employers will differ. This poses a challenge when trying to understand the broad impact of a policy, such as working from home, as there are a number of contextual factors that will impact on people's experiences. For example, the nature of the employees' work from home policy (and associated expectations and responsibilities), their work culture and sector, the size of the organisation, their length of time in employment, their pay grade and so on. Demographic factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, health status and if someone has any caring responsibilities also play a key part in someone's experiences and subsequently what their expectations are for future ways of working. This level of detail was not captured in this report. More focused research is required to explore if and how the themes identified may generalise to specific groups of the population.

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[116] ONS - Is hybrid working here to stay? - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

Annex C – Timeline

Date	Policies/Announcements
23 March 2020	PM announces UK wide lockdown
20 April 2020	Guidance published on home learning
29 May 2020	Phase 1 of route map out of lockdown begins
19 June 2020	Phase 2 begins
10 July 2020	Phase 3 begins
19 July 2020	Revised fair work statement published
11 August 2020	Pupils return to school
10 September 2020	Extension of localised restrictions
Christmas Day 2020	Meet up only
5 January 2021	Mainland lockdown in place until mid-February
2 July 2021	Scottish Government publishes COVID-19 office guidance "In line with good practice, employers should work with their employees to consider hybrid and flexible working models to avoid a wholesale return to offices at this time"
September 2021	Scottish Government urges businesses to allow staff to work from home until mid-January 2022
31 January 2022	Businesses were advised to prepare for a new situation of hybrid working where possible and appropriate.

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