

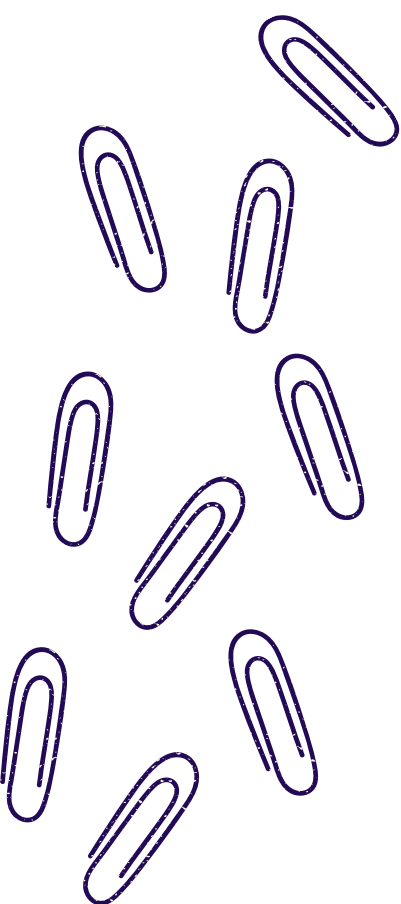


EAST SUSSEX WORKING WELL FROM HOME

PROJECT REPORT
OCTOBER 2021

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

RATIONALE

Homeworking is now a permanent feature of many people's lives across East Sussex, and is likely to continue for many. However, we do not yet know about the long-term impact of homeworking and we do not have long-term plans about how best to support people to effectively work at home. Whilst there is a range of online support provisions, there is a need to support individuals and business owners with homeworking in the longer-term, with a specific focus on how employers can better support their employees.

In October 2020, an East Sussex Council Business and Wellbeing survey highlighted that the three most highly rated negative impacts of COVID-19 on the workforce were (i) mental health challenges, (ii) loneliness/isolation, and (iii) poorer communication. The three most highly rated areas for support were (i) physical health, (ii) mental health, and (iii) managing health and safety. This survey highlighted local need and appetite for resources to help businesses better support homeworking.

PROJECT TEAM

The East Sussex 'Working Well From Home' project was a collaboration between the University of Sussex, Team East Sussex, East Sussex County Council, Locate East Sussex and local East Sussex business consultants.

FUNDING

The Working Well From Home (WWFH) project was supported via funding from the University of Sussex Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) and the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (ESRC IAA).

PROJECT OUTLINE

The WWFH project comprises three main research stages:

- 1) Survey of local need
- 2) Scoping Literature Review
- 3) Qualitative interviews

The findings from each activity were amalgamated to produce guidelines for employers to help advise on best-practice policies for homeworking.

STAGE 1: SCOPING LITERATURE REVIEW



The scoping review was conducted using a systematic literature search methodology; the findings are described utilising a narrative synthesis. The aim of the review was to understand the evidence-base regarding employee support for homeworking.

METHODOLOGY

Initial searches were conducted using the Scopus research database for the years 2020-2021 in order to capture recent literature on homeworking . Search terms were "work* from home" OR "remote work*" OR remote-work* OR home-work* .

A pragmatic search was also conducted by looking at the reference sections of recent research articles for other relevant literature published prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Homeworking is not a new phenomenon. In the UK homeworking was undertaken by 2.9 million people in 1998, and this had grown to 4.2 million in 2014 (Office for National Statistics, 2014).

Furthermore, many companies and businesses have supported flexible working, whereby individuals have more autonomy over their work patterns, and the days on which they work from the office or at home. The examination of the effects of homeworking on personal health as well as work-place productivity and relationships has increased in the last decade.

BACKGROUND

One review of the literature (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007) found associations between homeworking and a number of positive outcomes such as improved job satisfaction and performance, and reduced stress. However, time spent homeworking was an important mediating factor. For example, high-intensity homeworking (e.g. greater than 2.5 days per week) was beneficial for reducing work-family conflict, but had negative effects on relationships with co-workers. Some evidence indicates that voluntary homeworking is associated with positive benefits and mandatory homeworking with negative impacts (Kaduk et al., 2019).

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT HOMEWORKING FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed full-time homeworking to unprecedented levels and consequently there has been an explosion of research into the impacts of homeworking.

Broadly, a number of both positive and negative outcomes of homeworking are highlighted. However, these outcomes are often context dependent, with a number of variables (e.g. gender, income, job type, and parenting responsibilities) impacting whether people have a positive or negative experience. It is also important to note that the majority of literature on homeworking during the pandemic examines mandatory homeworking whereas literature pre-pandemic is more likely to be examine flexible or elected homeworking.

We can draw on this research to help inform employers' decision-making as to whether homeworking is appropriate for their company in the longer-term. Key findings from the literature regarding contextual factors that influence people's experience of homeworking broadly fall into three categories: health, environment, and organisational support/leadership.

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

Examination of the home-working literature during the Covid-19 pandemic is couched within the context where the usual activities (gyms/sports clubs) that people undertake were unavailable. It is unsurprising that literature reports decreased physical activity and exercise, and a decrease in general physical and mental well-being, in those who worked but had transitioned to homeworking because of Covid-19 (Xiao et al., 2021). Both income and gender are key factors shown to predict mental health and wellbeing when homeworking during the Covid-19 pandemic (Xiao et al. 2021). Similarly, a systematic review of literature on homeworking pre-pandemic, found women were less likely to benefit from homeworking than men (Oakman et al., 2020).

Loneliness is highlighted as another key challenge in the context of homeworking. The nature of remote work means that spontaneous meetings do not occur and interactions with colleagues tend to be more task-focused (Wang et al., 2021). Pre-pandemic literature indicates that homeworking does not have a negative impact on workplace relationships but only if homeworking is not more than 2.5 days per week (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Homeworking does provide some opportunities for positive health impact, but they are context dependent. If homeworking means no long commute, this time gained could be used for exercise. However, homeworking can mean that people move less (e.g. no cycling to work or walking between buildings) and is also associated with greater screen time (in place of face-to-face meetings) (Majumdar et al., 2020).

Those who worked at home prior to the Covid-19 pandemic are typically considered 'higher-income workers' (Desilver, 2020). Arguably for workers with prior experience of homeworking the shift to full-time homeworking was less marked, due to having equipment and resources to work from home. An important factor impacting on physical and mental health is working environment (e.g. dedicated work-station set-up, lighting, noise, air quality). Individuals with a dedicated home-office reported fewer negative physical and mental health difficulties when homeworking, compared to those who had no dedicated or adjustable space (Xiao et al, 2021).

ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT AND LEADERSHIP

A key factor that impacts how people experience homeworking (if working for an employer) is the type of management and support provided by their organisation. A finding in a survey conducted by NordVPN Teams (published by Bloomberg, 2021) showed that during mandatory homeworking in the Covid-19 pandemic, people worked more (2.5 hours more on average in the UK), despite obvious challenges to effective working (such as children being at home, and lack of appropriate workspace or equipment). Whilst this may seem beneficial to employers, it may explain why a number of negative mental and physical health occurrences were reported by people homeworking during the pandemic. If businesses are considering whether to adopt homeworking practices in the longer-term, having a healthy workforce is crucial.

A number of management and organisational factors have been highlighted in the literature as contributing to effective homeworking. Job autonomy is linked to greater satisfaction with homeworking (Wang et al., 2021) and consequently micromanagement has a negative impact. Flexibility (where possible) in when and how people were working was perceived positively. Although some find that having regular check-ins with managers or colleagues can help combat distractions or procrastination that can more likely occur when homeworking (Wang et al., 2021).

Separating work and home life can be harder when homeworking and many reported struggling to 'switch-off' from work. Providing clear expectation about the importance of disconnecting from work is crucial. Furthermore, providing clear instructions about levels of expected communication and markers of productivity can help workers at home to know what is expected of them (Rysavy & Michalak, 2020).

STAGE 2: SURVEY IN EAST SUSSEX

East Sussex is a county comprised of five local government districts, which are a mix of both rural (Lewes, Wealden, Rother) and urban (Hastings and Eastbourne) environments. Compared to England as a whole, East Sussex has higher percentages of workers in the wholesale, retail and motor trades, health, accommodation and food, and education sectors[1]. The 2021 East Sussex County Council Research and Information Economic Update also highlights the fact that East Sussex has few medium and large businesses (e.g. more than 50 people) and 86.4% of businesses in the county have fewer than 10 employees. Small businesses are less likely to have in-house human resources support, therefore it will be crucial to provide information about how to support their employees to work well at home as homeworking becomes the new norm.

[1: Based on information from the East Sussex County Council Research and Information Economic Update February 2021: Accessed here: <https://www.southeastleap.com/app/uploads/2020/12/Item-8b-economic-update-Feb-2021.pdf>]



SURVEY STRUCTURE

A survey was carried out in May 2021 with employers, employees, and self-employed workers living and/or working in East Sussex. This included questions about their homeworking experiences and support needs in relation to a number of domains, including mental and physical health, technology, and working relationships. The survey consisted of both open and closed response questions, allowing for quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

There was a total of 296 survey respondents. 33 responses were excluded from analyses for a range of reasons, with the most common reason ($n = 22$) being missing data regarding demographics, which was key for establishing working or living in East Sussex. This left a final sample of 263 participant responses.

SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Sample characteristics can be found in the Appendix.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 5 individuals from East Sussex, including 4 employees and 1 employer. Themes replicated the survey findings, as such results have been presented together.

IMPACTS ON PRODUCTIVITY

Data was taken from open text questions regarding the positive and negative impacts on productivity. Responses are summarised below and reflect the range of responses which were given, as such there are contradictions in people's experiences of positive vs negative impacts.

Positive impacts.

- Increased concentration and fewer distractions
- Increased flexibility
- Less time spent commuting
- Better use of technology
- Increased efficiency

Negative impacts.

- Lack of engagement and barriers to communication
- Stifled innovation
- Increased distractions
- Poor motivation
- Zoom fatigue
- Technological limitations



MENTAL HEALTH



Impact on mental health. Open text questions addressed positive and negative impacts on mental health.

Positive impacts.

- More flexible workday
- Less commuting stress
- More time at home
- More pleasant work environment
- More relaxed mornings
- Physical health improving mental health
- Less stressed about work
- Improved confidence

Negative impacts.

- Uncertainty with learning new job roles
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Difficulty maintaining work/life balance
- Struggles with work/family balance
- Decreased physical activity

Suggested Mental Health Provision.

The most common suggestions for mental health support were access to professional support, access to information and resources, and access to supportive activities.

Access to professional support included a desire to be provided with access to psychotherapy (e.g. Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy, counselling). A range of suggestions were provided regarding information and resources, including:

- Wellbeing toolkits and guides
- Links to recommended counsellors
- Subscriptions to apps (e.g. mindfulness apps, Headspace)
- Tips and tools for coping with anxiety and stress
- General online information, resources and support links
- Surveys/questionnaires assessing how people are coping with working from home.

Similarly, a range of suggestions for activities were also given:

- Social opportunities both online and in person
- Mindfulness/meditation/wellbeing and relaxation classes
- Creative activities
- Yoga



MENTAL HEALTH



Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Support.

The most common barriers to mental health support that were described by participants were concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and stigma.

Concerns about privacy and confidentiality included concerns that managers would find out about the need for support, that access to support might be recorded on personnel records, or that colleagues might find out.

Concerns about stigma included shame and embarrassment, fear of judgment from others, and concern that accessing support would affect future opportunities and promotions.

A wide range of additional barriers were also outlined:

- Lack of time
- Psychological barriers (e.g. not recognising when help is needed)
- Concerns about who is offering support and if it is a colleague
- Format of support (e.g. preference for face to face or virtual)
- Concerns that support may not be adequate
- Practicalities (e.g. time and location of support)
- Concerns about the potential cost of support

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Survey respondents were asked about their organisation's current provision. Only 28% reported that their organisation offered support that they could access at home.

Suggested Physical Health Provision.

- 1) Access to activities including online exercise classes, physical activity challenges, walking meetings and groups, and workplace sports teams
- 2) Discounted access to gym and leisure facilities, both as memberships and home equipment, and
- 3) Information and resources, such as guidance on food and nutrition, access to exercise videos and apps, and tips for staying active.

Additional suggestions included:

- A culture that supports physical activity (e.g. explicit permission and encouragement to take breaks)
- Flexible working hours
- Occupational health checks
- Access to professional support (e.g. osteopathy)
- Bicycle and bike repair schemes



HEALTH AND SAFETY

Only 46% of respondents reported that their organisation had adapted workplace health and safety procedures to the homeworking context. Respondents were asked how health and safety procedures could be improved. The most common suggestions were provision of health and safety assessments, and provision of suitable workspace equipment.



In relation to health and safety, specific suggestions included:

- Virtual workstation assessments or home visits
- Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments and support to address issues raised
- Regular reviews
- The need for suitable desks, chairs and IT equipment

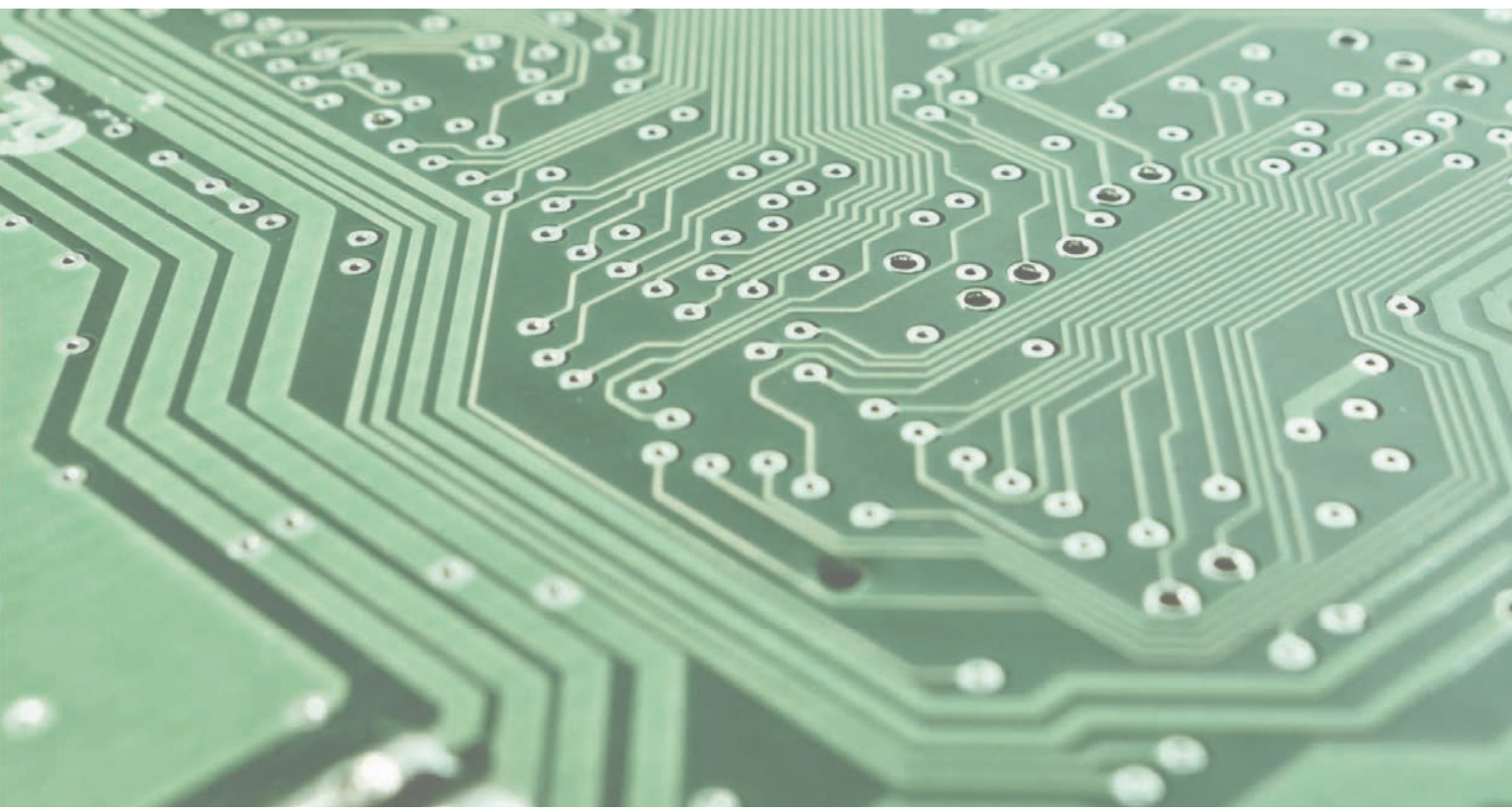
Additional suggestions included how to set up the workstation, tips on how to improve working from home practices, stretching exercises.

TECHNOLOGY

The majority of respondents (80%) reported that they had all the necessary technology to conduct their work from home.

With regards to challenges with technology, the following open choice responses were given

- Lack of equipment
- Poor internet connection
- Inadequate equipment
- Compatibility of work environment
- Lack of space
- GDPR
- Training with technology
- Security





WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Respondents outlined positive impacts of homeworking on working relationships:

- Fewer negative interactions
- Wider network
- Greater trust
- Smooth introductions for new colleagues
- Greater privacy
- Higher meeting attendance

Negative impacts were also described:

- Difficulty building relationships
- Difficulty reading colleague emotions
- Affected spontaneous interactions
- Difficulty engaging

A wide range of suggestions were made for building a sense of community when colleagues are working from home. These could be loosely categorised into opportunities to connect socially, opportunities to connect for work activities, and effective communication strategies. Detailed suggestions are presented below:

Opportunities to Connect Socially.

- Regular group walks
- Online social events such as zoom quizzes, book clubs, after-work drinks, games events
- Encouraging informal discussions
- Coffee mornings or coffee breaks
- Occasional on-site activities
- Welfare calls

Opportunities to Connect for Work.

- Working together with open webex
- Regular meetings
- Walking meetings
- Short check-in's
- Regular 1:1s

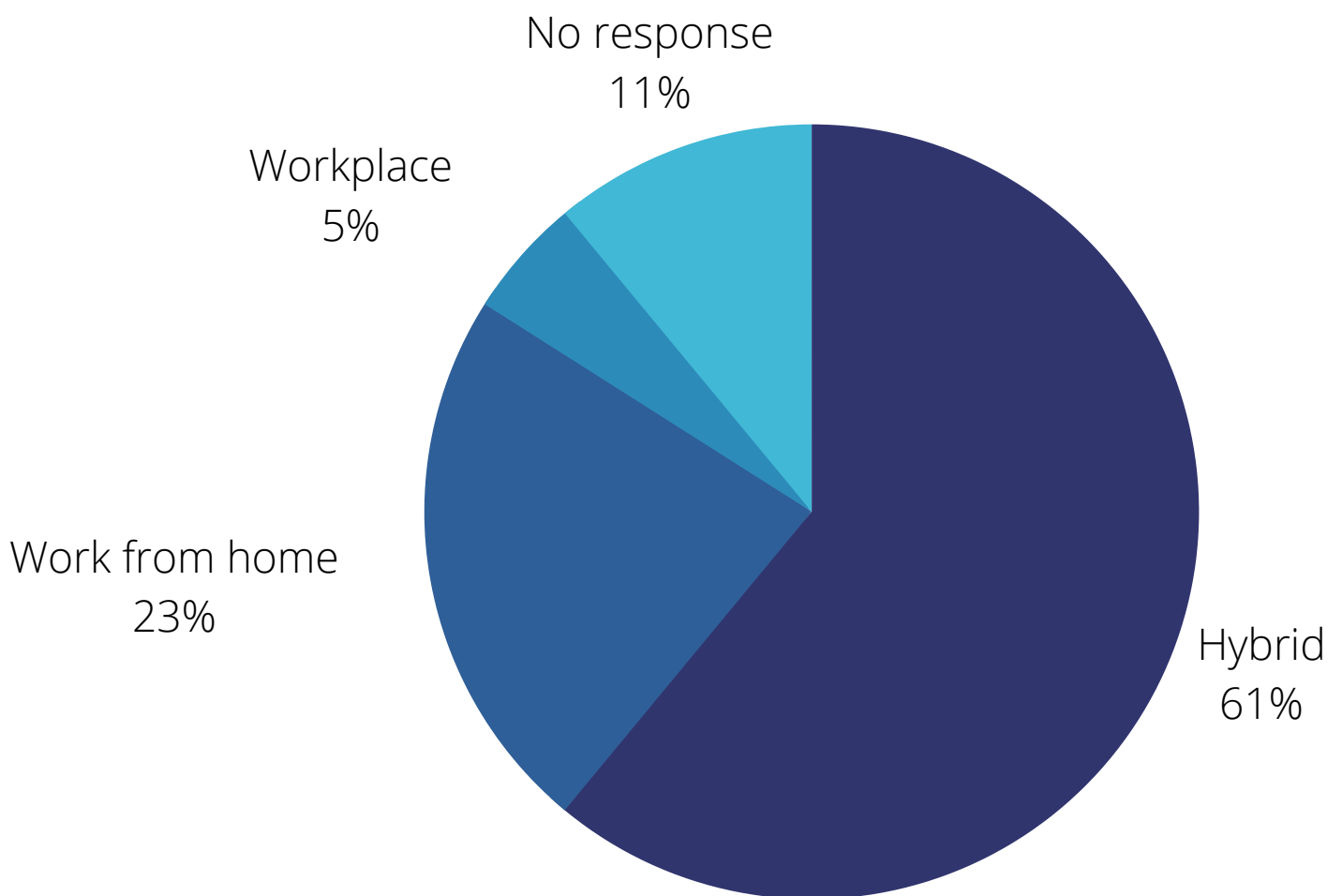
Effective Communication Strategies

- Regular updates and briefings
- Social media
- Newsletters
- Virtual notice boards, sharing personal and professional good news
- Effective intranets

Other suggestions included team-building activities, local team bases to meet up, buddy systems, opportunities for home-workers to visit the workplace.

FUTURE PREFERENCES

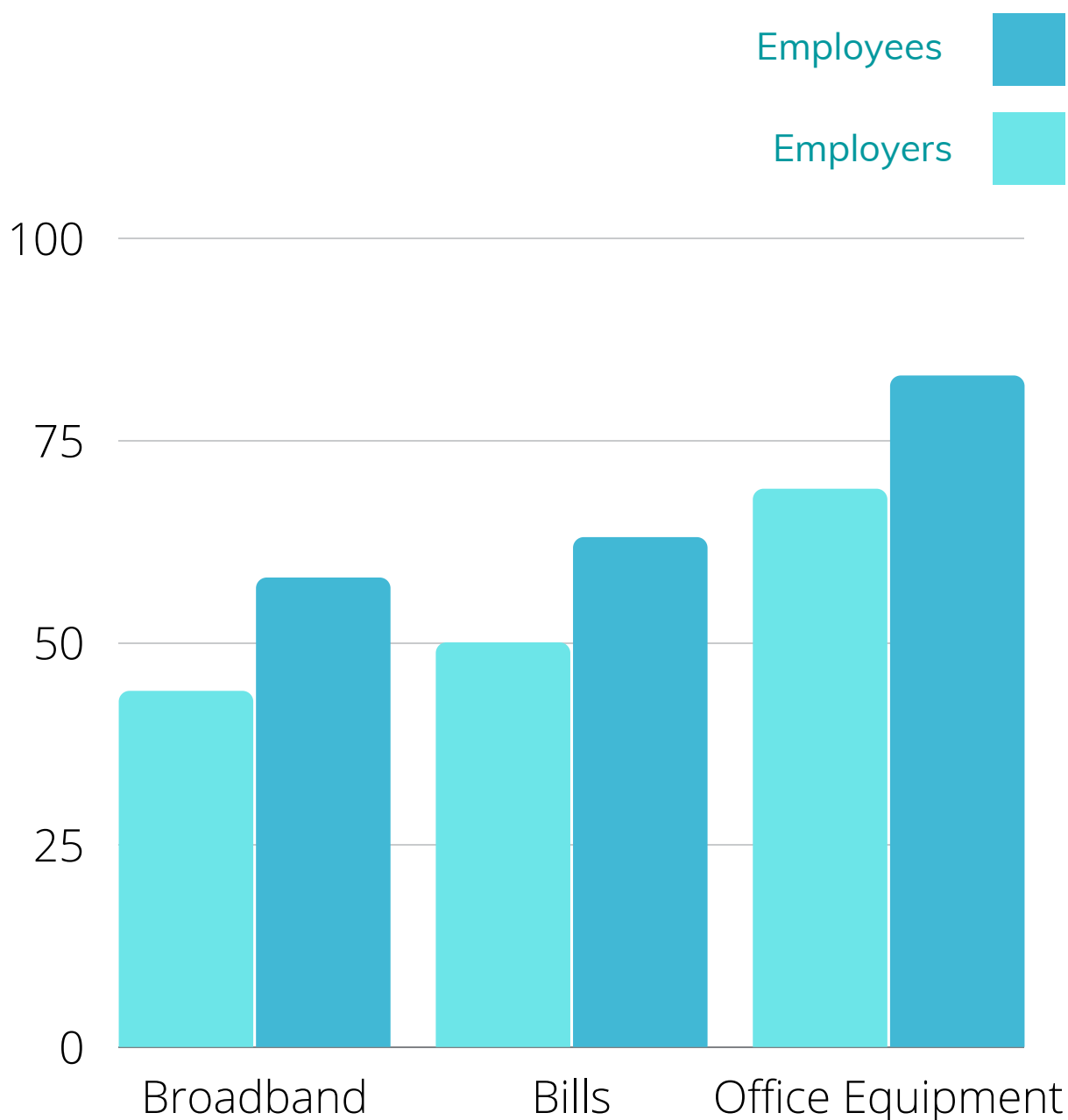
Respondents were asked what their preference for working practice would be going forwards.



EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Employers and employees were asked whether they believe employers should contribute towards: the cost of broadband, and the cost of bills associated with homeworking (e.g. electricity and the provision of office equipment).

The graph shows the proportion that did believe employers should contribute.



SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The majority of survey respondents reported that they either wanted to continue homeworking full-time or that they would want a flexible hybrid model of working. As such, it is important that organisations consider the long-term model of homeworking which considers the practicalities, such as office equipment and health and safety, as well as physical and mental wellbeing.

This piece of research identifies some key areas of practice that can be adapted by organisations to help provide this support. These suggestions are outlined in the 'Toolkit'.

It is important to note the limitations of the survey and interviews in reflecting a diverse range of opinions, for example, the participants were majority female, white British and employees rather than employers. However, this is somewhat alleviated by the examination of the research literature to fill in the gaps and back up findings from the research.

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES ('TOOLKIT')

Best practice guidelines have been generated drawing on the research conducted in East Sussex, the interviews and survey, as well as the wider national and international research literature. The Best Practice Guidelines are split into two sections: 'Take home messages' and 'Practical suggestions'.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

SOME PEOPLE HAVE THRIVED AND SOME HAVE STRUGGLED. THIS CAN BE INFLUENCED BY GENDER, FAMILY COMMITMENTS, PREFERENCE FOR WORK STYLE, FINANCIAL STABILITY, HOME ENVIRONMENT, EXISTING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS.

STAFF CONCERNS ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

STIGMA AND CONFIDENTIALITY WITH REGARDS TO PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH ARE MAJOR CONCERNS FOR STAFF

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

- EMPLOYERS MAY BENEFIT FROM UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL ENVIRONMENT OF EACH OF THEIR EMPLOYEES TO PROVIDE PERSONALISED SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE
- MAKE SURE THAT POLICIES ARE GENERATED FOR WORKSPACE ASSESSMENTS AND HEALTH AND SAFETY AS PART OF HOMEWORKING
- ENSURE THAT ALL EMPLOYEES HAVE THE APPROPRIATE EQUIPMENT AND THAT IT IS SET UP CORRECTLY, INCLUDING BOTH TECHNOLOGY AND OFFICE FURNITURE
- PROVIDE STAFF WITH REASSURANCE THAT INFORMATION REGARDING THEIR MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH WILL NOT BE SHARED, AND WILL NOT AFFECT CAREER PROSPECTS.
- SUPPORT FOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SHOULD BE VARIED AND INCLUDE BOTH ONLINE SUPPORT AND FACE TO FACE ACTIVITIES

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES (‘TOOLKIT’) CONTINUED...

TAKE HOME MESSAGES

SPOTTING THE NEED FOR SUPPORT AT HOME

IT CAN BE HARDER TO
SPOT WHEN SOMEONE IS
STRUGGLING WHEN
PEOPLE ARE WORKING
FROM HOME.

HOME-WORKING SHOULDN’T MEAN MORE WORKING

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY
WHICH PROVIDES
FLEXIBLE HOME WORKING
SHOULD NOT ENCOURAGE
EMPLOYEES TO WORK
MORE / OUTSIDE OF
‘HOURS’

HOME-WORKERS WOULD LIKE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH RESOURCES

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

- GOOD LINE-MANAGEMENT SHOULD INCLUDE REGULAR CHECK-INS ON HOW PEOPLE ARE MANAGING WITH WORK, WORKLOAD AND WELLBEING
- PARTICULAR SUPPORT WITH COHESION IS NEEDED WITH THE INTEGRATION OF NEWER STAFF MEMBERS

- MAKE SURE HOME-WORKERS KNOW WHAT MARKERS OF PRODUCTIVITY ARE E.G. SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR WHAT IS EXPECTED
- SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO TAKE REGULAR BREAKS AWAY FROM THEIR WORK STATIONS – THIS IS IMPORTANT FOR BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH
- ATTEMPT TO CREATE SEPARATION BETWEEN WORK AND HOME AT SOME POINT EVERY DAY (E.G. TURN OFF NOTIFICATIONS, SILENCE PHONE, OR PACK WORK AWAY).

- SIGN-POST TO RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT BOTH MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH
- ASK EMPLOYEES ABOUT THEIR PREFERENCES FOR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

SUPPORTING INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

National resources for employers and employees on how to implement home-working effectively:

- ACAS: Homeworking - A guide for employers and employees. Link to guide here
<https://www.acas.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/homeworking-a-guide-for-employers-and-employees.pdf>
- The Work Foundation: Implementing an organisational right to disconnect policy: key considerations for employers. Link to information
<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/news/blog/implementing-an-organisational-right-to-disconnect-policy-key-considerations-for-employers>
- The Work Foundation: Delivering day one flexibility: What will the latest changes mean for workers and employers? Link to information:
<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/news/blog/delivering-day-one-flexibility-what-will-the-latest-changes-mean-for-workers-and-employers>
- Health and Safety Executive: Protect home workers. Link to information:
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/home.htm>

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APPENDIX

Survey Sample Characteristics

Demographics

Age.

Mean Age = 46.59 years; Standard Deviation = 10.593

Range = 46 (Min = 21; Max = 67)

Gender.

	n	%
Female	188	71.48
Male	70	26.62
Another gender	2	0.76
Gender non-conforming	1	0.38
Prefer not to say	2	0.76

Ethnic group.

	n	%
Another Asian or Asian British background	1	0.38
Another White background	15	5.70
Asian/Asian British - Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi	1	0.38
Mixed	2	0.76
White - British	238	90.49
White - Irish	3	1.14
Prefer not to say	2	0.76
No response	1	0.38

Employment and Homeworking Characteristics

Employment status.

	n	%
Employee	224	85.17
Employer	16	6.08
Self-employed	23	8.75

Current occupation.

	n	%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	54	20.53
Associate professional and technical occupations	59	22.43
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	8	3.04
Manager, director, senior official	71	27.00
Professional occupations	62	23.57
Sales and customer service occupations	3	1.14
Skilled trades occupations	4	1.52
No response	2	0.76

Working from home over the past 12 months.

	n	%
I have been conducting all of my work from home	188	71.48
I have been combining working from home with working from my usual workplace	68	25.86
I have not been working from home at all	3	1.14
No response	4	1.52