



Is hybrid working?

FDA Report on hybrid working



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Introduction



The debate around hybrid and home working has shifted immeasurably since the publication of the FDA's Flexible Working Report in 2019. That report opened by highlighting the civil service's commitment to becoming the UK's most inclusive employer, with the implementation of flexible working central to this ambition.

Embracing a hybrid model - where employees could work part of their time in the office and part of their time from a remote location - seemed like the logical next stage of efforts to improve work. Promising advances not only in wellbeing but also in productivity levels, there were huge potential benefits for employers and employees alike. The civil service may not have been able to compete with the private sector on pay, but it could compete on offering genuinely flexible working arrangements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the terms of the hybrid working debate over the last two and half years. Our polling of the public in July 2022 tells us that about half of those in work do at least some of it from home, while 74% of our members surveyed said that they do most of their work from home. Coming out of the pandemic, we have a much clearer understanding of the strengths and drawbacks of hybrid working, and the potential for us to focus more on work as what you do, not where you do it.

Unfortunately, the government has seemed blinkered in its rush to get civil servants back to offices, often ignoring the tangible upsides that hybrid working has afforded departments and employees. Our members feel strongly about this, with 87% of respondents to our survey preferring to spend at least three out of five days per week working from home. This report aims to move past the culture war narratives and febrile tone of debate which has often clouded discussions on the future of work.

This report is an evidence-gathering exercise, allowing the FDA to buttress the anecdotal information we have gathered with both quantitative data and the qualitative perspectives of our wide and varied membership. Our members' views are nuanced, and while, generally speaking, we found that large majorities were supportive of hybrid working, our members were clear-sighted about the significant challenges this presents, with issues like overwork and colleague interaction particular areas for concern. Nevertheless, they cautioned against a kneejerk return to the office. As shown in this report, the benefits on offer are too great to ignore.

1 Public First Polling commissioned by the FDA, and FDA members' survey on hybrid work, 2022.

2 FDA members' survey on hybrid work, 2022

Executive summary



The majority of our members feel positively about hybrid working, and many cite improved productivity and effectiveness as particular benefits. While concerns were raised about the lack of office experience and interaction, particularly for young people, the drawbacks were largely outweighed by the improvements in wellbeing.

Respondents with disabilities and mental health issues were particularly effusive about the improvements in their working experiences when working from home. It was also reported that remote technology had in some cases, in fact, allowed for greater, more efficient and more equal collaboration.

Furthermore, nearly all respondents appreciate the flexibility that such working patterns afford them - especially (but not limited to) those with childcare and caring responsibilities. Most people report having an improved work-life balance, in spite of increased levels of overwork and work encroachment. This must be an important consideration - when does dropping in and out of work as circumstances demand turn into an "always-on" culture? While most were happy with that trade-off, opinions were varied as to what should be done about it.

It is clear that policy needs to go beyond the discretion of individual managers, but given the perceived heavy-handedness of efforts to intervene on this issue, and fears about the feasibility and desirability of more wide-reaching legislation such as a proposed 'right to disconnect', many respondents also exhibited a wish to be trusted and treated as experienced professionals. There is clear frustration at the imposition of arbitrary targets for returning to offices, and perceptions that employers obfuscate when it comes to requests for flexible working.

FDA members appreciate, and have in some cases taken advantage of, hybrid working precipitating a shift away from London and the South-East. The public recognise this too, with our polling indicating that people fear the return to offices would damage the accessibility of civil service jobs for those in the North, Midlands and devolved nations more than it would for those in the South.

We also found that people generally are unlikely to be swayed by political posturing around where a civil servant's desk is located, with 78% of those in the 'Red Wall' believing there are larger issues facing the government. As such, attempts to weaponise the issue of hybrid working are misguided.

A reframing of the debate around why civil servants should be in offices would prove more fruitful for all parties. What is the value of coming together and why should we do it?

Reflecting the views of FDA members, this report recommends that employer policy on hybrid working becomes less ad-hoc, improvised and contingent on individual managers and teams, and is better protected, supported and consistent across departments. This could include:

- Departments and government giving all employees who work remotely or in a hybrid model an allowance to help towards increased energy and utility costs, as well as the necessary equipment for remote working to be safe and effective.
- A rejection of the pervasive long hours culture that dominates many departments and agencies. Senior managers should lead by example, with cultural change driven from the top.
- Consideration of implementing a wide-reaching hybrid-work strategy, akin to that adopted by the Irish government. The government should take steps to increase and improve access to hybrid working.
- Broader recognition in government that hybrid working has the potential to act as a tool of regeneration and a driver of equality.



Overall experiences of hybrid working



This section explores attitudes to hybrid working, and what FDA members see as the benefits and drawbacks, and their preferences for hybrid working in the future.

Extent of hybrid working

With much of the last two and a half years characterised by a series of lockdowns, and the definitional difficulty as to the range of working patterns encompassed by the term 'hybrid working', it can be difficult to establish exactly how many people benefit from the opportunity to work remotely. However, an ONS study conducted in May 2022 puts the figure at 24%, but also finds that 38% had worked from home once or more in the previous seven days. Meanwhile, the Public First (PF) polling commissioned by the FDA suggests that 49% of those in employment worked from home at least some of the time, compared to 51% who worked fully from their place of work.

When the ONS survey in March 2022 asked why people hybrid worked, 62% said that their main reason is that it is a part of their 'normal routine'. Our PF polling, meanwhile, found that 68% of those who work from home at least some of the time do so out of choice, even though they are able to go into the office. This points towards hybrid working ceasing to be an adaptation; rather, it is now viewed as a desirable settlement in its own right.

Main benefits of hybrid working

Productivity, effectiveness and autonomy

A ScienceDirect study of 250 employees in the US who transitioned from office-based work to WFH during the pandemic found that workers' perceptions of their productivity and creativity increased while working remotely. The ONS, meanwhile, found that among businesses that have or plan to adopt hybrid working as a 'permanent business model', improved productivity is cited by 41% of businesses. There has, however, been some scepticism around these claims, and a Global Counsel report on 'Regulating the Future Workplace' notes that there were widely held concerns among businesses that WFH would precipitate a steep drop in productivity. Those concerns have largely

3 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/ishybridworkingheretostay/2022-05-23>

4 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0090261621000449>

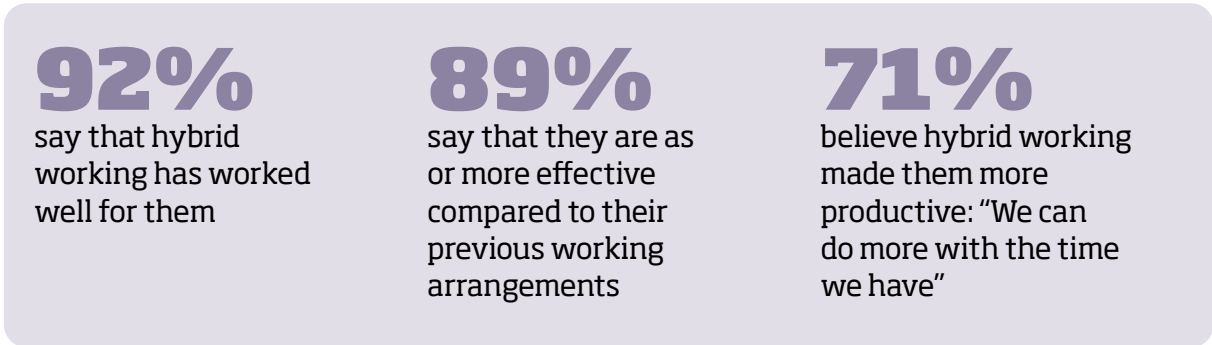


dissipated since the pandemic though, with business leaders largely convinced of the productivity gains that hybrid work has caused.

This scepticism has not entirely dissipated among the general public, however. The FDA’s polling with PF looked at how perceptions of different facets of employee performance differ between those that WFH and those that do not, and found large gaps. Those who work solely from the office believe that WFH has a negative effect on employee motivation, creativity and concentration and focus. Those who work hybrid found the opposite to be true; each had a net score of +39%, +39% and +43% respectively, indicating that those with experience of WFH - as with the experience of business leaders - tend to come around to the improvements that it affords employees. Moreover, 66% of those that WFH find that it is easier to focus compared to the office, while 62% say they are more productive.

Clearly, people’s experiences vary, and the more employers are able to accommodate these differing attitudes and preferences by allowing choice and flexibility the better. Nevertheless, there is a compelling evidence to suggest that employees are at least as productive and effective when working from home.

FDA members largely came to the same conclusion in the survey:



Technological solutions are often preferable, especially given changes to office conditions

A Momentive/Zoom survey of American employees found that the majority find it easy to build relationships with colleagues, even if there are certain things - teambuilding and meeting clients - that they would prefer to do in the office. Additionally, a Zoom-commissioned SurveyMonkey poll indicated that a majority prefer to attend larger meetings remotely. So, while there is acknowledgment that some features of office life are difficult to adequately replicate remotely, remote solutions prove preferable to some employees.

5 General Counsel report, https://6008785.fs1.hubspotusercontent-na1.net/hubfs/6008785/GC_FOW_Complete_12.pdf?utm_campaign=EVENTS&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=214401657&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-80li4IKMp6NTVzjITcOyt4yHq5uBZI56XbG5NM6DxT1bcZ92GsJ8jYqcdx6ACZqfX_LbGijJKWdBOHmgSdhqETNL3Udg&utm_content=214401657&utm_source=hs_email

6 Momentive/Zoom Poll: Future of Work Revisited - <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/future-of-work-zoom-revisited/>

7 Zoom blog on SurveyMonkey Poll - <https://blog.zoom.us/new-survey-what-people-really-think-about-hybrid-work/>

This sentiment was quite common in our focus groups, with attendees very appreciative of the collaborative solutions that technology was able to provide above and beyond traditional in-person meetings. This is not to say that respondents wished to replace in-person collaboration, but they felt that technology could complement it perfectly well:

“ One respondent insisted that regular online meetings with their team had adequately replicated the informality and spontaneity that the office environment provides, remarking that it was ‘just what you would have done at the coffee machine if you’d been in the office’.

“ Another recalled a time when online messaging enabled him to have an ‘online watercooler moment’ of sorts. While the initial conversation was sparked by an incidental conversation at the office, the problem raised was only solvable due to online messaging while working from home, which eased and sped up the process considerably: ‘It’s not just that watercooler moments happen virtually, it’s that they can be better virtually’.

“ Another in a newly assembled team central to the pandemic response of one of the devolved administrations, said using technology allowed them to bond well and carry out their responsibilities with an efficiency that wouldn’t have been possible working in the traditional fashion.

Some focus group attendees also dismissed the notion - often implicit in debates around hybrid work - that the office is a thriving hotbed of ingenuity and teamwork, and instead focused on how it is ill-configured for the way it is being used:

“ One respondent criticised the setup of his office, saying that his devolved government department had been hamstrung by overly strict partitioning of office space for individual departments, with some areas completely full and others empty but unbookable. When he does come back to the office to meet his team, they face considerable difficulty doing so.

“ Another respondent also expressed doubts as to the importance of ‘watercooler moments’ that office-working supposedly provides, saying that they are yet to experience any of its reputed benefits and that it isn’t a ‘tangible’ thing.

“ One participant downplayed the notion that the office represents the ideal of a collaborative and innovative space, describing it as ‘a bit of a fallacy’, noting that when he does come into the office, he ‘can’t necessarily get a desk near the rest of our team’, so ends up resorting to technological solutions anyway.

In summary, there is a recognition that technology can often complement some of the traditional strengths of office work, and sometimes employees feel able to complete certain tasks more effectively online. Some members think the dichotomy many draw between impersonal and siloed remote work and effervescent and collaborative office work is an exaggerated one. The answer lies somewhere in between.





Drawbacks of hybrid working

The literature and our PF polling data suggests that many people still have concerns around collaboration and team working. The ONS study found that in February 2022, nearly half of those who either hybrid-worked or worked from home said that they had experienced difficulty in working with others. Other studies have reached similar conclusions, with one finding that working from home has negative effects on a person's teamwork and colleague relationships, and another finding that a third of participants reported that they felt lonelier and more irritable while remote working. Clearly, there are substantial pitfalls that cannot be dismissed, and the mental toll that prolonged periods of isolation can have on people is an area of concern. This isolation could also have implications for career progression; a survey of Irish Financial Union members showed that asking people about how hybrid working had impacted this elicited a mixed response, with one respondent speculating that there is an 'out of sight, out of mind' effect when it comes to those working remotely.

The general public share many of these concerns. The PF polling found that 51% of those who work from home cite decreased time spent with colleagues as a disadvantage. Those working from the office tend to hold hugely negative ideas of the impact of WFH on colleague relationships and teamwork - scoring -58% and -54% respectively.

Whilst the large disparity between those who work from home and those who do not is perhaps not surprising, the results still show that even for those who work hybrid, remote solutions alone cannot yet adequately replicate the in-person human interaction that most people value highly.

The focus group participants shed some light on these concerns, noting some specific problems that a lack of interaction has caused them:

“ One respondent did miss the 'incidental meetings and interactions' that the office facilitated. In their view, that hasn't been replaced. Similarly, she expressed frustration at never seeing anyone other than her direct colleagues. This contact with co-workers is especially key in terms of offering guidance; she recalled the case of a colleague who received a disciplinary warning that she felt would have been averted in the office due to help and instruction from co-workers.

“ Another participant argued that working in an office around more experienced colleagues allows for younger employees to naturally acquire knowledge and workplace custom through 'osmosis'. This is lost when prolonged periods of time are spent working from home. However, being in the office isn't a panacea to this problem, as the reduced desk space means that it is harder to be with your team. The heavily structured nature of in-office time leads to what she describes as 'going in for the sake of going in as a sort of tickbox exercise'.

8 <https://www.proquest.com/openview/abd3c688b0426b6b3cdc28ff9797e609/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=4916366> and <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/4/1990/htm>

9 Financial Services Union - Employee experiences of remote working in Financial Services - <https://www.fsunion.org/employee->



“ This sense of being constrained by the ever-tightening structure of work was a sentiment that a number of respondents made reference to. One noted that the tightly structured scheduling of meetings and tasks has eroded a lot of the spontaneity of office work: “You don’t get that spontaneous opportunities to meet people, bounce ideas off people, spark conversation...”

Overall, there is a sense of unease amongst some - although not all - about not only the lack of colleague interaction, but also the ever-more orderly fashion in which it happens when it does take place, and the effect this can have both professionally and socially.

Preferences on the future of work

The vast majority of the available survey and polling data, for the UK and beyond, suggests that employees would like to continue with hybrid working, or switch to it if they are not currently. In the Momentive/Zoom poll of workers in the USA, 83% of those that work from home want to continue either fully from home or in a hybrid setup. In the Republic of Ireland, too, a study of Financial Services Union members indicated that an overwhelming majority prefer to work from home at least some of the time. This trend is replicated in the UK data too, where the Computer Weekly IT Priorities survey of knowledge workers showed a majority of those who had returned to the office would choose a hybrid work model, if given the choice.

Business leaders are largely in agreement. A recent study showed that 90% thought that the future of work should be hybrid, so attempts to pit business and employees against one another are misguided. Among UK businesses that either have or plan to adopt hybrid working as their ‘permanent business model’, improved staff wellbeing, reduced overheads and improved productivity are the three most cited reasons. Indeed, the speed with which the shift to hybrid working is taking place in the private sector casts the intransigence of some public sector decision-makers in a bad light.

The FDA’s member survey shows this clearly:

87%

of respondents would like to spend at least 60% of their working week working from home.

It is important to note, however, that people are not wedded to remote working. Most recognise the specific advantages that office work affords employees - even if it is not always properly optimised for its role as a collaborative space. Few prefer to work all of the time from home.

10 Momentive/Zoom Poll: Future of Work Revisited

11 Financial Services Union - Employee experiences of remote working in Financial Services

12 <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252512263/Majority-of-UK-employees-prefer-hybrid-work>

13 ONS



Importantly, those businesses that have moved to a hybrid working model do so not purely out of an urge to cut costs, and neither are they somehow in thrall to over-indulged employees. They have instead recognised that employee welfare and profitability need not be in opposition to one another, and hybrid working can help on both of those fronts. There is little reason that this should not be the case in the public sector, too. With much of the taxpaying public concerned about getting value for their money from public services, the improved productivity of employees is as convincing an argument as any, and crucially does not come at the cost of employee wellbeing.

Summary

Our members largely want to continue hybrid working, and while the jury is out on whether remote work solutions and technology can yet provide a passable approximation of the office environment, attempts to characterise the office as the gold-standard of improvisation and synergy are misguided. If the office is to be used for the express purpose of collaboration, then questions need to be asked about how best to facilitate this, in terms of office configuration and addressing overly regimented ways of working.



14 PF poll shows waste of taxpayer money the most convincing argument for Civil Servants returning to offices.

Work-life balance and overwork



This section assesses how increased flexibility has affected work-life balance. It then looks at issues of overwork and work encroachment, and whether hybrid working is culpable for increases in workload, or whether other factors are to blame. Finally, it tries to reconcile these two trends, and see what members think should be done to address overwork.

Work-life balance and flexibility

ONS survey data suggests that 78% of people who either worked from home or hybrid worked reported improved work-life balance, and the benefits of this are increasingly recognised by employers. Notably, the Welsh Government has been a prominent adopter and promoter of hybrid working. The Remote Working Strategy outlines their aim to achieve a target of 30% of the Welsh workforce working at or near their home. Chief among the benefits the report cites is the 'reduced time and expenses associated with commuting', which was commonly referenced as a key driver of improved work-life balance by focus group participants. And the public see this as the biggest benefit of working from home, with 68% of respondents identifying the savings made on commuting as an advantage.

The PF polling data backs up this general trend, with 74% of those who work from home at least some of the time saying it had improved their work-life balance. It also shows that the public recognise the potential for hybrid working to level the playing field, especially for those with children or childcare responsibilities. 56% of people polled think that civil servants being forced to return to the office would make it harder for those with childcare or caring responsibilities to access civil service jobs.

The FDA's survey shows that members' views are in line with the rest of the country:

73% report that their work-life balance is either improved or greatly improved while working from home.

72% have changed their working patterns whilst working from home.

The most common change to working patterns is starting work earlier in the morning, which **45%** of respondents said that they did. Additionally, **26%**

said that they work later in the evening, while **29%** said that they adopted different working patterns during the day.

The absence of significant commuting time has also enabled this trend to take hold, with **90%** of those surveyed using some or all the time they would have normally spent commuting for work.

In the focus group, members went into more detail about the benefits this afforded them, with respondents highlighting a variety of improvements to their daily lives:

“ Being able to take breaks from work that are ‘not time-pressured’ was a particular benefit for one respondent, who was mostly appreciative of the flexibility of his hybrid-work arrangements. He also said that hybrid working ‘helps work-life balance for most of us’.

“ Another participant was extremely grateful to be able to spend time with his son who was born just before the onset of the pandemic. Working from home enabled him to be a much more active presence in his son's life. It also proved crucial in one specific scenario when he was able to attend to a medical emergency involving his son, when otherwise he ‘would have been 30 miles away and of no help to my family on that particular day’.

Overwork and encroachment

This flexibility can also manifest itself in an always-on working culture, and - while the issue of work encroachment is not a novel one - there is some evidence to suggest that hybrid working can worsen these issues if not properly managed.

Research by Tom Hunt and Harry Pickard shows that work intensity has increased in the UK since the turn of the century, and their study poses questions about what the increased prevalence of remote work - and related issues like long working hours - could mean for this trend. Other research has raised similar issues, with Heejung Chung's ‘The Flexibility Paradox’ noting that ‘when workers gain more control over when and where they work they end up working harder and longer’, though this trend is also contingent on broader, cultural issues and is a reflection of societal customs and expectations.

16 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/irj.12364> - Tom Hunt and Harry Pickard

17 Heejung Chung, presentation based on upcoming book ‘The Flexibility Paradox’ - <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-flexibility-paradox>



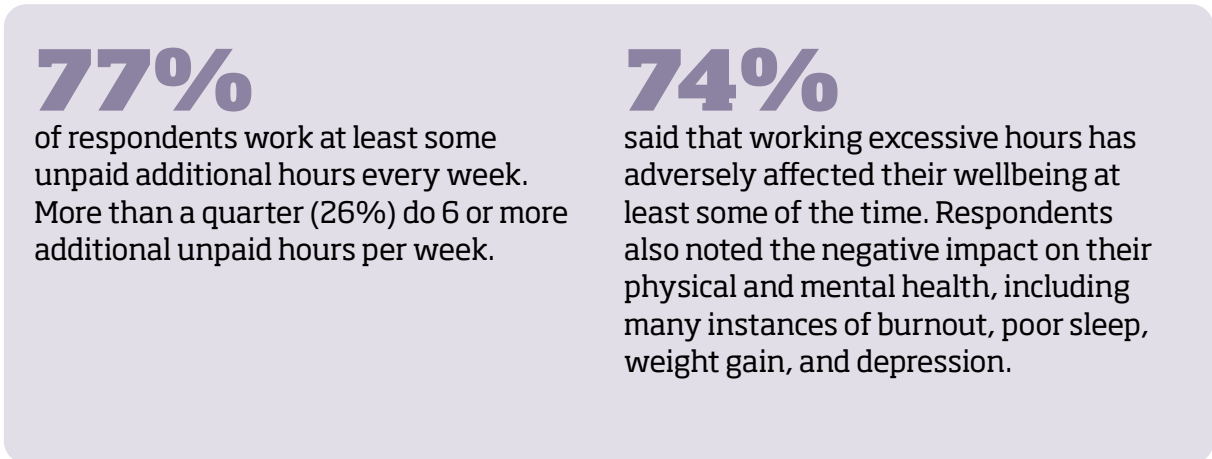


Nevertheless, there are significant and specific problems that remote work has impacted, including the inability to switch off outside of work hours. Many of those who work in a hybrid model have this problem, with the PF polling showing that 60% said they were more likely to answer a work-related email out of hours when working from home. While these issues do not have to be inevitable features of any hybrid-work model, it is important that proponents of hybrid working are receptive to issues of encroachment and overwork.

The FDA member survey shows that around three in five respondents experience many of these issues:



An even larger proportion reported working excess hours:



However, one theme of the comments was that little reference was made to hybrid work and the impact of the pandemic, suggesting that members experience of excessive work predates the mass introduction of remote work. Instead, many labelled it a cultural problem within their departments:

- Many departments do not have enough staff, and as such the expectation and example of overwork is passed down by senior staff and other colleagues.
- This affects the quality of work produced, and leads to a constant churn and turnover of staff, as well as a difficulty in filling vacancies.

Nevertheless, when asked about the effect of hybrid working on excess hours and overwork, focus group attendees did echo some of the problems identified in the research:

“ Many noted that divisions between work and personal life had started to dissolve, with one respondent noting that the ‘boundary between work and non-work has become blurred’. Another commented: “The advantage of going into the office is that the work doesn’t contaminate your home in quite the way it does at the moment, and I’m finding that challenging’.

“ Another participant mentioned that - between having the equipment at home and no longer being required to commute into the office - there is an expectation that employees continue to work ‘unless you’re at death’s door’. Previously, if you were ill then you wouldn’t have to come into the office. Without that physical boundary, the separation is no longer there.

Even if hybrid working has merely intensified pre-existing problems, there is an opportunity for departments and policymakers to use the issue of hybrid working to investigate and solve broader issues surrounding working culture.

Reconciling the improvement in work-life balance with the increase in overwork and work encroachment

Investigating the trade-off between work-life balance and overwork

This is a complex problem to solve, as there is significant overlap between those reporting improved work-life balance while also working extra hours. 73% of FDA members report improved work-life balance, but the majority of members are also working more hours, have seen their workload increase and have worked while on annual or sick leave.

Some respondents in our focus groups indicated that hybrid working has worsened issues of overwork. This paints a confounding picture of the impact of hybrid working on employees, although Chung does attempt to explain this dynamic by noting that employers have used flexible working models to give employees additional work ‘through the back door’.

In order to probe this question further, the focus group attendees were asked which of those two effects of hybrid working - improved work-life balance, or increased overwork and encroachment - was closest to their experience, or whether they found both to be true concurrently. And, short of legislative or departmental solutions to this problem, those that experienced improved work-life balance at the cost of increased encroachment and overwork were asked explicitly whether this is a trade-off they were willing to accept.





Virtually all of the participants admitted that their work-life balance had improved, but most were also aware that there was a real danger of overwork and encroachment being an issue.

Many of those with good or improved work-life balance due to hybrid working were able to avoid overwork, largely because of cooperative management or strong boundary-setting:

“ One respondent said that they had managed to avoid such issues by ‘being strict with myself’, and said that maintaining a strong sense of self-discipline allowed them to keep a separation between work and their personal life. This personal discipline has been supported by their department and is contingent on having managers willing to promote healthy working patterns: ‘having supportive management, I think, is key to reinforcing those work personal life boundaries’.

“ One attendee said that avoiding this issue is possible with some self-discipline, but requires a lot of strength on the part of employees. Higher grade employees are more likely to be successful, especially as making such a request requires a considerable degree of confidence and bravery: ‘Unless you are quite assertive and say actually no, I am setting my out of office and I’m not going to switch on my laptop and my phone on outside of these hours’.

“ This participant also noted that it took illness and other personal setbacks during the pandemic for her to reconsider her work-life balance and decide that she wanted to spend more time with loved ones. She decided to take partial retirement, saying ‘it took some terrible, personal things happening to me for me to sit back and take stock... those are hours of my life that I’m wasting, almost’. Crucially, though, she notes that not everyone is able to take such decisions.

“ On the need for cooperation from managers, one participant argues that ‘it doesn’t matter what policy you have, it’s the culture that you have’.

However, some respondents were not able to avoid taking on excess work, drawing attention to the specific set of expectations inherent to working with ministers or in high-pressured departments:

“ One respondent argued that working for ministers essentially precludes the opportunity to set firm boundaries, making her work-life distinction ‘a real issue’. The ambiguity between personal and work time has been allowed to grow by ministers, with the participant noting the ‘bad habits from the pandemic which our ministers are very keen to allow to be normalised’.

“ Another expressed frustration that, while healthy working practices are ostensibly being supported by senior management, the high-pressure environment of her department renders that advice pointless.

A few participants said that their work-life balance had improved but that they had also experienced issues around finding it hard to switch off:

“ One respondent noted that the trade-off absolutely exists. Between taking breaks for his caring responsibilities, keeping time aside to look after his own mental health as well as other interruptions, he experiences great difficulty. Despite this, it is ‘absolutely a trade-off I’m willing to make’, and he wouldn’t be able to do the same in the office.

It is exceedingly difficult to extricate these two issues from one another. Those who benefit from hybrid working tend to admit that they benefit from certain privileges that others might not have access to, while those who lose out and work excess hours often face significant institutional barriers to changing their situation. Others are willing (or have little alternative but to) to accept better work-life balance in return for an increased workload and greater slippage between their personal and professional lives. What is abundantly clear is that there needs to be greater regulation and consistency - both within departments and more widely.

Reducing encroachment and overwork

Government and individual departments should be prepared to adapt their to hybrid-working approach as more evidence emerges. Issues around overwork and encroachment are increasingly recognised as one of the pitfalls to effective and equitable implementation, and guidance such as that the CIPD and Flexible Working Taskforce have produced has urged managers and organisations to take a more proactive approach to tackling digital presenteeism, workload issues and boundary-setting.

There is also a case to be made for extending access to hybrid work as a means by which to alleviate some of these issues. Chung - while somewhat critical of the impact flexible working has had - maintains that promoting and normalising flexible work reduces the (often gendered) stigma that many face for working using this model, whereby they are viewed as ‘not as committed, motivated, productive and that they make more work for others’. By making flexible working more commonplace, the stigma is reduced and there is less pressure on employees to overwork to make up for the perceived deficiencies that their flexible working is seen to have caused them. As such, her research recommends that stronger rights to flexible working are instituted by the government. But it also places the overwork issues bound up in the flexible and hybrid working debate within a wider context - that of a working culture that values long hours, lacks union power, and has only weak welfare protection and childcare policies. A strong ‘Right to Disconnect’ policy could ensure that hybrid working does not lead to the always-on working culture that some members identified as being prevalent.



While the UK already has a Right to Request Flexible Working, members note that its implementation is patchy, and their rights are not always made clear to them. Meanwhile, France and the Republic of Ireland have both introduced policies surrounding the Right to Disconnect. While reliance on managerial discretion to maintain boundaries was a point of contention for most in the focus groups, members were more mixed in their opinions as to the Right to Disconnect:

“ One respondent said the extra hours he spent working was the time he would otherwise spend commuting. He believed departments should have an internal policy to prevent this from happening.

“ Another participant thought that departments make it seem more difficult than it is to design adequate policies.

“ Another respondent urged caution, warning that ‘Right to Disconnect’ policies could be counterproductive. They also suspected that it might lead to people taking advantage of the system, ‘legitimising those people that don’t understand the etiquette’ and emboldening those who ‘will use the rules to create a hostile environment for their staff’.

Some members recognise the benefits, but feel that such policies are unnecessary at their organisation:

“ One participant thought the viability and necessity depends on one’s personal situation and also what one’s department is like. In his case, there is a healthy working culture at his organisation, meaning that the right to switch off is unnecessary for him.

Despite recognising that there is an overreliance on managerial discretion, some members appeared resistant to more universalised legislative approaches like the Right to Disconnect. There was a scepticism of approaches that involved senior management or government getting closely involved with mandating how they work. There is also a weariness (especially from those in ministerial departments) that has come from the perceived futility of repeated efforts made by senior management and line managers to institute a better working culture, which are invariably quashed by the reality of work at many departments - overstretched, always-on and reliant on excess work.

Short of a more fully-formed legislative approach, it is unclear what the best course of action is for those departments. There was little consensus among the members that we spoke to aside from a general urge for departments to be receptive to their choices and preferences. It is hard to engender this flexibility in an ad-hoc and individualised way, so, it may be that the broad, cultural change that many desire is only possible through legislative action such as the Right to Disconnect.



Health, equality and inclusion



This section will explore the impact of hybrid working on employees' mental and physical health, as well as the implications it has for disability rights and access. It will also assess how equitable hybrid working is, and whether there are any groups that are particularly advantaged or disadvantaged by it, especially in relation to seniority.

Health

Chung notes that homeworkers are more likely to experience 'mental spill-over' than those that work from the office, and they also tend to take fewer breaks. And, in identifying a potential uptick in work intensification caused by the adoption of remote working, Hunt and Pickard's research warns of the risk of harmful effects on employees' 'psychological and mental well-being', and also points out that remote workers are less likely to take days off due to sickness.

However, none of these trends are intrinsic or unique to hybrid working. While these issues could undoubtedly prove problematic if left unchecked and unregulated, Chung in particular is keen to diagnose these problems as broader issues with working culture, rather than specific pitfalls of hybrid or flexible working. Stronger legislative rights to flexible-working and a greater degree of proactivity from companies and human resources managers would largely quell these issues, and ensure that hybrid working is a driver of positive health outcomes.

In any case, the PF polling for the FDA shows that hybrid working has largely had a positive impact on employees' mental health and wellbeing. There are differences in opinion between those that work from home and those that do not - as is to be expected - but most importantly, nearly half of those who do work from home cite improvements in their mental health as an advantage, compared to a quarter of those who do not work from home.

There is some recognition more broadly that those with mental health problems benefit from home and hybrid working. 37% of respondents said that civil servants being made to return to the office would make it more difficult for those with mental health conditions to work in the civil service, compared to just 15% that said that a return to the office would make it easier.



This is not to downplay the issues that some have had with their mental wellbeing, and it should be noted that the FDA hybrid working survey showed that many members have experienced difficulty. The impact of overwork and work encroachment was especially evident:

74%
 said that working excessive hours has or sometimes has adversely affected their general wellbeing.

Overall, focus group attendees tended to extoll the positive impact of hybrid working on their mental health and wellbeing:

“ One respondent drew attention to the benefits remote-working has had on their mental health as a neurodivergent person. They reported being happier and healthier in their personal life, due to both not having to commute during busy rush hours and also not experiencing the difficulty they used to face in the hotdesking system their office has in place.

However, one respondent was concerned about the impact of much of the working day being taken up by online meetings:

“ They noted that ‘spending nine hours a day staring at a screen... lots more tiring doing meetings like this by the time it gets to 4 o’clock’.

That said, some respondents noted the revelatory potential of home-working on employees’ physical health, though acknowledging the danger that employees may have previously relied on their commute for exercise:

“ One respondent regretted that working from home had caused him to be ‘more sedentary’. However, balancing home-working with childcare responsibilities allowed him to maintain his personal health and sleeping patterns far more effectively than would have been the case were he still commuting to and from the office every day.

“ Another respondent said that ‘my back was bearing the brunt’ - people who work from home have to think more about how to incorporate exercise and physical activities into their lifestyle.

Disability, equality and inclusion

There are valid reasons to be concerned about the impact of hybrid working on disability, equality and inclusion. Some observers argue it has not lived up to its potential as both a force for equality in the workplace and as a working model which widens access to groups otherwise disadvantaged by traditional working patterns.



Perhaps the most prominent area in which hybrid work is seen as especially conducive to equality is in strengthening access for those with childcare and caring obligations, particularly women. But there is also a danger that it ends up doing the opposite, and instead reinforces traditional gender norms. Indeed, research shows that home-working leads to fathers increasing their overtime hours, and mothers taking on extra hours of childcare as well as working slightly more overtime. Women are much more likely to have to balance their professional and childcare responsibilities than men are, often at the expense of leisure time. It is therefore little surprise that women are more likely to both work and think about work during their free time.

Mothers - as well as working-class, disabled, LGBT+ and ethnic minority workers - also experience a greater stigma around their use of flexible work, leading to assumptions of lower productivity and commitment. Therefore, expecting the expansion of hybrid working practices to naturally translate into equality for mothers and a more progressive childcare situation for most households would be naïve and reductive.

More generous childcare policies as well as a promotion of the benefits flexible working can afford men in meeting their childcare obligations could help equalise these inequalities. At its best (and when properly supported), hybrid work can be a force for equality and parity. Indeed, the public are aware of this potential and understand the benefits to childcare that hybrid working can offer, with 69% of respondents naming people with children or childcare responsibilities as the group that most wants to work from home.

Another area of specific concern as to the impact of hybrid working is the welfare of young people and new starters at organisations. The CIPD and Flexible Working Taskforce guidance on hybrid working makes particular reference to the difficulties inherent in induction processes for new starters, and notes that new recruits are likely to take longer to familiarise themselves with the culture and structure of the organisation. Measures such as ensuring new starters have enough social contact with colleagues early in their tenure or using a buddy system can ensure that the transition into hybrid-work at a new organisation is kept minimal.

The existing research is clearer about the positive implications for disability access that hybrid working has brought about. A TUC study into the experiences of disabled workers during the pandemic shows that - with the right support, reasonable adjustments and control over their working hours - disabled workers were likely to experience an improvement in their mental health as a result of working from home. Disabled workers who worked from home during the pandemic were overwhelmingly likely to want to continue doing so, with 90% expressing a desire to carry on working either remotely or in a hybrid arrangement. By and large, the public recognise this, with the PF polling showing that 54% of respondents think that making civil servants return to offices would make it more difficult for people with physical disabilities or access requirements to work in the civil service.

22 Chung

23 CIPD report

24 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/ReasonableAdjustments>

In the focus group, respondents with and without disabilities alike agreed that the impact of hybrid working had been positive:

“ The improved inclusivity these working patterns afford ‘enables those with disabilities and caring responsibilities to be at the table, albeit virtually’.

“ A respondent with mobility issues was extremely content with his hybrid-work setup. Previously, travelling had proved difficult for him, and he had to take a fair number of sick days. Since remote working was implemented, he has had no issues whatsoever.

Another respondent appreciated the option of being able to work from home, and noted that, as a transgender person, the office was not ideally set up for their needs:

“ ‘When I work from home, I don’t have to pick between which loo I want to go in... the office just isn’t built for neurodivergent, transgender people’.

The area of concern was that young people were missing out on crucial office experience:

“ Two attendees made tentative suggestions of higher attendance expectations for younger people, noting that they might not be aware of the development and networking opportunities that they are foregoing by not being in the office: ‘I don’t think that people at the start of their career realise the value in being with others and learning from the experience of other people who’ve been around a while longer’. However, they recognised that young people did not take their decisions over their work location lightly and were cognisant of high commuting costs.

Overall, that advances in hybrid working will precipitate a more equal and less discriminatory working environment is not a foregone conclusion, and particular attention must be paid to ensuring that new recruits do not feel siloed and isolated from their peers. However, many are already experiencing the benefits, and hybrid working does seem to be a driver of inclusivity especially with regards to disability access.



Hybrid work: access and support



This section explores employee access to hybrid working, the support on offer for those who hybrid-work and the extent to which employees' preferences are taken into account.

Accessing hybrid work

Workers in the UK have had the Right to Request Flexible Working since 2003, with employers only able to reject applications if a prescribed list of entitlement conditions are not met. All applications must be dealt with in a 'reasonable manner'. In practice, the implementation of this varies between different workplaces, and some have called for this right to be extended and strengthened.

Access to hybrid working is not evenly spread across the population, with PF polling showing that it is stratified by class - 72% of those in the AB socioeconomic groups work at least some of the time at home, compared to only 18% of DE respondents - and education level - 78% of those with a postgraduate qualification, versus just 43% of those whose highest qualification is A-levels - to a great extent. Aside from equality of access, there are certain groups that are deemed to be more in favour or have more need for hybrid working arrangements, which can cause issues of bias within organisations where some employees (often disabled employees) are assumed to favour remote work when this is not always the case, while others are deemed to have little need for it.

To a degree, these biases are reflected in the public too. There is a logic to the finding that 69% of respondents viewed those with children or childcare responsibilities as most likely to want to work from home, but only 16% of the public thought that junior workers wanted to do so. There is a risk that this could feed into sentiments that some workers are more deserving of hybrid and home working, while others are seen as having no valid reason to want to work remotely.

Research has also been carried out linking the tendency of flexible-workers to work longer hours to a perceived need to 'reciprocate for the gift of control' that their employer has granted them. In other words, employees feel that they have been done a favour. This is a worrying trend, and points to either an ineffectiveness of the Right to Request Flexible Working legislation, a lack of communication surrounding employees' rights, or more likely the widespread salience of ideals surrounding how the ideal worker should act and behave.

25 <https://www.employmentlawwatch.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2014/07/The-right-to-request-flexible-working-the-Acas-gui.pdf> - ACAS guide to the right to request flexible working

26 Chung

27 CIPD



To test attitudes surrounding this, our focus group attendees were asked if they saw access to hybrid working as a right or a privilege. They were also asked how they thought their employer saw it.

Some respondents said that their departments had been reluctant or unwilling to allow employees to work flexibly, or otherwise to make allowances based on the preferences and needs of employees:

“ One respondent noted that - given that employers are only able to reject requests on the basis of a few prescribed reasons - in theory most employees are entitled to work flexibly. However, in practice, employees at his department do not have carte blanche to work as they like, and the idea of flexible working is often met with pushback from senior management, arguing that ‘we don’t have to give this person that just because they quote legislation at us’, and, when justifying their decisions to employees, he notes that ‘the reasons that are given are often nonsense’.

“ Another participant said that in her department ‘management view it as a privilege’. Despite this, she doesn’t expect their intransigence to hold for much longer, noting that the direction of travel more generally is towards hybrid working - government departments will have to follow suit lest they lose staff to organisations that are more accommodating.

“ Another echoed this sentiment, saying that she views it as a privilege, but that this matters little as her employer has cut much of its desk space. This means that they have effectively boxed themselves in - it is impossible for everyone to come back into the office.

“ One attendee thought that people were becoming more aware or insistent of their entitlements: ‘The pendulum has swung now... people do feel that it is more of a right or an entitlement that they should have’. He attributes this recognition to economic factors such as the cost-of-living increase; people increasingly cannot afford to commute five times a week.

“ Another attendee claimed that his department has deliberately obfuscated and mystified the guidance, resulting in large swathes of people who are unaware of their rights and view making such a request as ‘asking for something that is a bit cheeky’.

“ Another said that managers often act with clouded judgement over what constitutes a reasonable adjustment.

Access to hybrid working is clearly far from universal, and given the benefits on offer, government must ensure that hybrid working does not become the preserve of a privileged minority.

Supporting hybrid work

One theme of FDA members' responses in our survey and focus groups is that they feel worn down by the lack of trust placed in them, and some are understandably wary about attempts by governments and departments to intervene in any way other than merely facilitating people to work in their preferred ways. However, there is also an acknowledgement that in order to ward off some of the potential downsides, then intervention will have to come in some form.

Governments around Europe have started to regulate on issues like mental and physical health support for employees, the right to disconnect and compensation for equipment costs, and while private sector leaders are hesitant about governments getting too closely involved, the majority do accept a need for regulation to 'smooth the experience of remote working', as the Global Counsel report puts it. But business leaders also admitted that they too have a role to play, and that self-regulation within companies will be necessary to ensure that employees do not lose out.

Civil service employers and departments should follow suit, more than just helping employees bearing the burden of increased internet, equipment and utility costs (especially given the cost of living increase recently), departments and agencies will have to be proactive in order to protect their employees from issues like increased social isolation and higher rates of domestic abuse.

Although only 2% of FDA survey respondents indicated that their department had no policies in place to help with work-life balance, the qualitative responses members left indicated that many internal policies are loose, ill-defined or superseded by a culture of overwhelmingly high workload expectations.

Some focus group attendees understood the need for support, especially in the current economic climate:

“ One respondent said 'people find it very difficult to reconcile the potential to have to go into the office five days a week with the unprecedented cost of living crisis'.

“ Three participants had been given support, and appreciated that their employer provided them with equipment (or the money needed to purchase it) in order to facilitate their working from home.

“ One respondent noted that their employer was already promoting flexible and hybrid working before the pandemic. As such, they had instituted a contractual allowance for different types of working - employees either had office-based, home-based or 50-50 contracts, and they were able to change this twice within a 12-month period.



“ Others were less convinced, with one respondent was sceptical about the ‘remote work allowance’ policy, noting that - save for some more expensive things - he does not mind buying his equipment himself. In his view, the savings made by not having to travel are commensurate with the increased costs incurred when working from home, and he added ‘I’d be a bit uncomfortable about asking for an allowance’.



Employee choice and back-to-office requirements

FDA members’ responses made it clear that they view being able to choose their working patterns as central to their both their sense of wellbeing and to their ability to carry out the functions of their jobs effectively.

Studies increasingly show that employees value this choice extremely highly, and in some cases are willing to look for another job if their current one does not allow them a choice over where they work. Indeed, the Momentive/Zoom poll of American employees shows that 45% of those surveyed would look for a new job if they were unable to work in their ideal location, while this rises to 55% among those who currently work remotely. This should not, however, be conflated with the view taken by some that employees are dogmatically wedded to remote work. It would be misrepresentative to reduce employees’ desire to be able to shape how and where they work to a caricature of inflexibility and a unanimous wish to stay at home; only 28% of those who work remotely say that they would prefer to stay working this way, indicating that most are open to returning at least partially. Meanwhile, 55% of those who work remotely would prefer a hybrid set-up instead. So, while it should not be forgotten that the desire to work remotely or within a hybrid model is widespread, employees of all stripes want choice and flexibility.

Not all have that choice, however. While the opportunities for greater equality and access for those with childcare or caring responsibilities are considerable, women are less likely to be able to work flexibly, and the same is true - as established previously - for low-skilled, low-education or lower socio-economic class workers. Other groups, meanwhile, are not traditionally associated with needing or wanting access to hybrid working, and can suffer from an expectation that it is not necessary for them. Many of the issues around hybrid working aggravating pre-existing gender norms around childcare would be solved, Chung suggests, if more heterosexual men with childcare responsibilities asked to hybrid-work. But as it stands, many employees have little say in the matter: 39% of American workers say that they have no choice at all in their choice of workplace, while only 23% of UK businesses say they plan to use hybrid working as a permanent business model.

Even when there is a choice, it is often limited to more basic things like deciding start and finish times. 54% of Irish Financial Services Union workers said they have some or a lot of influence over this, but otherwise, they had little influence over their work location or the number of hours they worked. Some respondents also raised concerns that hybrid models can be used as cover for a more wholesale shift to in-office work,

30 Zoom momentive

31 Chung flexibility paradox

32 Zoom/Momentive and ONS



based on what they deem as the inflated importance that their employers place on 'collaboration'. These concerns were echoed strongly among the FDA's focus group respondents.

The public, however, seem split fairly evenly on whether they think employers or workers should decide where they work. However, the PF polling does indicate that those in socioeconomic groups C1 and DE are more likely to favour giving employees the choice. That these are two of the groups with the least access to working from home or hybrid working is notable, and punctures the notion that a desire to have control over one's working environment is the preserve of powerful and higher paid civil servants.

On the specific issue of civil servants being forced to return to offices, the public are also split, and it is clear the issue of civil servants' working patterns does not animate people's passions in quite the way ministers would like. There is, however, a recognition that mandatory returns to the office would harm the accessibility of civil service jobs to those with childcare or caring responsibilities, disabled people, and those outside of London and the South-East.

Out of all of the topics raised in the focus groups, the issue of returning to the office and mandatory in-office targets provoked the most impassioned and vociferous criticism. Attendees found these policies impractical and demeaning, and many respondents bemoaned the lack trust placed in them by their departments and managers:

“ One respondent noted that his department had recently mandated that employees spend 40% of their time in the office, a policy which he feels has been disastrous. Rather than a looser average figure over a longer period of time, this amounts to a strict week-by-week requirement; obeying these rules leads to 'a ridiculous school register exercise', remarking that he feels 'infantilised'. The drive to get employees back into the office had been backed up with vague and implicit threats.

“ Another respondent was concerned at the recent push towards more of a hybrid model in his department, which essentially manifested itself in arbitrary stipulations around being in the office some of the time every week. He commented 'hybrid means being in the office... some of the week every week, and that raises all sorts of issues'.

“ Another said that their department had started using a register to monitor office attendance. She was not necessarily against coming into the office some of the time, but noted that 'encouragement is much better than the big stick'.

“ Another attendee echoed many of these comments, saying that there is an 'overarching issue of people feeling quite infantilised and like they're back at school and they're not trusted and they've got these rules that don't work for everyone... let people choose'.

“ One respondent said efforts to get people back into the office had affected disabled colleagues and those with caring responsibilities the most, and in some instances, disregards medical advice, the right to request Hybrid working and even the Equality Act. She said ‘I know of a number of cases where people who should not be going back to the office have been forced back to the office... all of that medical information has been overturned by a manager’.

Overall, this is the area where FDA members were in broad agreement, and the impact of efforts to get employees back into offices has been extremely damaging, and threatens to unravel the advances made in equality. Many feel undermined by the lack of faith that managers and departments have placed in them, and above all stress that they are professional enough to be able to choose how they work while ensuring that there is no detriment to their output.



Levelling Up and the wider political context



This section will assess how hybrid working can be of benefit to the government's ambition to reverse the London and South-East-centric nature of the economy. It will then consider the political debate around civil servants working from home.

Levelling Up and the 'Red Wall'

With the potential to cause significant shifts in where people locate and spend money, few policies would prove as transformative in addressing regional inequalities as an embrace of hybrid working.

In some cases, the change has already begun, with a recent Guardian article charting the rise of a burgeoning high-tech scene in Stoke-on-Trent, which has seen the third highest growth in remote and flexible jobs in the country, alongside other so-called 'Red Wall' areas like Hull and Burnley. With people in these places able to access opportunities that until recently would have necessitated a move to Manchester, Leeds or London, any government that claims to have an interest in both redressing the UK's severe lop-sidedness and encouraging a forward-thinking economy should be promoting hybrid and remote-working.

Research conducted by Demos backs this up - increased levels of remote working leads to more money being spent in local areas. Its impact is particularly felt in areas previously home to large numbers of commuters, which could go some way to fostering not only more prosperous communities, but more distinctively local ones. Any concern this this will cause our large cities to struggle appears to be misplaced, too. Nearly a quarter of people in the UK live in urban centres, and any uptick in local spending that remote and hybrid working precipitates will boost their local areas too - city centres.

It is with this wealth of evidence that Demos are leading calls for a Remote Working Strategy for England. Wide-ranging as this may sound, this is hardly a fanciful idea, and is already one that the Republic of Ireland have adopted. There, policymakers are wrestling with similar problems of regional inequality to the UK, and Ireland's 'Our Rural Future' programme covers much of the same ground as the UK's Levelling Up Agenda. Integral to these plans, however, is a wholesale adoption of remote and hybrid working, as outlined in the Irish Government's National Remote Work Strategy, which seeks to enable those in towns and rural areas to access well-paid jobs that would typically



be confined to those in Dublin. To help with this aim, satellite hubs have been rolled out around the country. As such, many of the inequalities that hybrid working has brought to the fore, and with which this report has grappled – access, lack of space and equipment, and increased utility costs – are alleviated, while also allowing employees to work closer to where they live. The benefits that this is likely to reap for disadvantaged areas of the Republic of Ireland should not be underestimated.

The eminent feasibility of such a strategy casts British ministers’ antipathy to hybrid working in a new light. Yet, the noises emanating from government do belie an acute understanding within Westminster that hybrid working is a useful strategy, and there have been longstanding efforts to move parts of government out of London.

The government’s attitude can perhaps be seen as playing to the ‘Red Wall’, but our PF polling suggests that red wall respondents hold views in line with the rest of the country on this issue – which is to say, largely apathetic. They are marginally less likely than the country at large to support plans to make civil servants return to their offices. Of all regions, respondents thought that workers in the north of England would find it hardest to work in the civil service, should departments mandate a return to the office. The most illuminating statistic of all from the PF polls is that 60% think that ‘opening up job opportunities for those who find it difficult to get to the office every day’ is a convincing argument against civil servants being made to return to the office. Red Wall respondents found this an even more convincing argument.

This sentiment was shared by our focus group:

“ One respondent noted that he was able to move away from the Southeast, saving him a lot of money: ‘The biggest benefit for me was that I went from a one-bedroom flat in St. Albans, I was able to buy a three bedroom house in the Midlands. I’m back near my family, I’m no longer spending exorbitant amounts of rent to live in St. Albans, and I have that ability to own my own home’.

“ Another participant noted that his department had used the onset of working from home to advance ‘levelling up’, and had used the opportunity to spread more roles outside of London, including where he works in North West England.

“ One respondent moved into a bigger house in a different location before the pandemic, and the fact that he was already working remotely made this an easy process. He also thought that this would help the economy outside of the larger cities, saying ‘better for people in towns that can get people with disposable incomes to move into them... it levels things out and allows local money to be spent locally’.

The overall picture is clear: attempts to weaponise the issue of civil servants working from home are met with a mixed response, including in the Red Wall, and, conversely, the government’s plan to level up left-behind areas of the country would be strengthened immeasurably by the implementation of a robust Remote Working Strategy.

36 <https://demos.co.uk/blog/how-ireland-is-using-remote-working-to-level-up/> - Demos article on Ireland using hybrid working to combat regional inequality

Recasting the hybrid working debate in these terms may prove fruitful. Previously, this report has framed the issue of hybrid working largely around employees' wish that departments allow them to choose how they work and do their utmost to facilitate them in that choice. But this section shows that - far from being incidental or secondary - an expansion in hybrid working can be central to redistributive policy. Aside from the benefits they have felt personally from hybrid working, FDA members also recognised this.



Political context of hybrid working

There is a sense among some that the debate around civil servants and working from home has not always been conducted in the best of faith by the government. With their series of high-profile inflammatory remarks and stunts garnering a great degree of media attention - not least those made by Jacob Rees-Mogg and Boris Johnson - they appear to be motivated less by any constructive policy agenda, and more by a wish to appeal to parts of their base. FDA members cite the wider impact of these attacks - a pervasive culture of distrustfulness and infantilisation - and how damaging that could prove in the long-term.

“ One member of our focus group described the impact of office-time targets as ‘almost a stick to beat us with sometimes. We know it’s being driven by a government agenda... we’ve all heard the arguments’.

“ Another respondent suggested that government grandstanding about getting people back into offices was a deliberate tactic to influence the parliamentary elections in her devolved administration - a tactic she recognises from the lead-up to previous election campaigns. As such, rational arguments about productivity and efficiency are likely to fall on deaf ears, as ‘it’s not about business efficiency, it’s about the politics’.

Ministers seem to be attempting to draw upon preconceptions and prejudices that they feel will play well with their ‘Red Wall’ base, yet our PF polling shows this does not stand up to scrutiny.

Firstly, it disputes any notion that the public dislike civil servants. On the contrary, the public hold a neutral-to-positive view of the civil service, with 35% of respondents saying they hold a positive view and 43% neutral on the issue. These figures differ little in the Red Wall. The idea that the public - whatever their overall opinion of hybrid working - might be naturally predisposed to dismiss the rights of civil servants in particular is not one that has any basis in fact.

Furthermore, the public are much more trusting of civil servants than Conservative politicians, with 48% saying that they trust the civil service more, compared to 10% that said the opposite; the same was true when pitting the civil service up against Jacob Rees-Mogg, who has been one of the most vociferous critics of civil servants working from home. Just 13% said they trusted Rees-Mogg more than the civil service, while 43% said the opposite.

Secondly, there is little consensus among the public about whether civil servants should be allowed to work from home. When asked about plans to make it mandatory for

civil servants to work in the office, a third of the public are neutral, with slightly more supporting the plans than opposing them. Interestingly, while a pledge to make civil servants return to the office in order to save taxpayers' money resonated much more with 2019 Conservatives and those who intend to vote Conservative than it did with Labour supporters, 2019 Conservatives and those who intend to vote Conservative also responded well to the pledge to allow civil servants to work from home in order to save taxpayers' money, scoring +17% and +18% among those groups respectively. So, depending on the framing of the argument, Conservative supports are not hugely predisposed against hybrid and home-working. While the evidence does show that an anti-home-working stance could be an effective one, it also shows that it can probably be neutralised by opposition parties.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the public largely feel apathetic about the issue. While some indicated that they would be swayed by political parties pledging to either force civil servants back into offices or to allow them to work from home, between 40% and 45% of the public told us that either that they don't know or that this would have no impact on their decision who to vote for. Additionally, the issue of where civil servants work from is unimportant for most people, with 72% agreeing that there are larger issues in government than this.

Overall, many FDA members recognised the political ruckus they had been drawn into, and there was some weariness at the fact that many of the issues they had faced were the result not of well-reasoned policy, but rather an attempt to promulgate a culture war.

Summary

The culture war that those in government have engaged in over hybrid working is not only a disruptive one for civil servants, but has also blinded policymakers to the reality that hybrid working is increasingly seen by governments - including our closest neighbours - as a serious instrument of growth, especially in left-behind areas. The cruel irony for those in economically disadvantaged areas is that they are the ones who stand to benefit the most from an expansion in hybrid working, yet they are also the constituency the government mistakenly feels it can placate by appealing to presumed biases. Perhaps the most viable way to ease the strain placed on civil servants is to convince the government both of the futility of their arguments, and that their flagship policy goal of Levelling Up would be significantly bolstered by a robust Remote Working Strategy.



Conclusion



Hybrid working largely works, but employees need support

On the whole, members think hybrid working has had a positive impact on their wellbeing, their effectiveness in doing their jobs, and in strengthening and equalising access to civil service work for those who would otherwise find it difficult to work in the office. Were a less drastic or outwardly controversial policy suggested that promised such wholesale benefits to employees and government efficiency alike, it would probably garner widespread acclaim and approval. Hybrid working should be no different, and any rowing back in hybrid working in the civil service would be damaging.

None of this is to suggest that those who work this way find no fault in hybrid working as it is currently implemented. It has been widely recognised in polling and by FDA members that a lack of colleague interaction (especially informal and incidental) and being able to switch off have proved difficult for many. Hybrid working can help avoid the worst of these issues, though, and by supporting flexibility and ensuring offices are properly equipped to facilitate collaboration, employees can experience the benefits that both modes of working can provide.

In any case, for these benefits to be fully realised, employees will need further support - both from government, and from their departments. There needs to be a serious and frank discussion around the dangers of a working culture that too often either incentivises or necessitates long hours, and also about the specific ways that hybrid working can worsen those issues. It is not enough that only those with the good fortune or seniority to benefit from supportive managers or departments benefit from improvements to work-life balance, and there needs to be a shift away from relying on the discretion of individual managers, and towards departments facilitating a healthy working culture.

Another issue of concern is how the burden of hybrid working falls differently on different socioeconomic groups. Some employees will find remote work a trickier proposition due to not having enough space or not having the equipment that they need. As in Ireland and Wales, the rollout of satellite remote-working hubs around the country would help alleviate some of these inequalities, and the government should consider this when deciding future policy. And, in light of the current economic situation, departments should consider further access to financial support to cover equipment costs, and, most importantly, the increased costs of energy and utilities.

Attempts to weaponise the issue are futile, but have caused civil servants real damage

As a vote-winning tactic, the bashing of civil servants' preference to hybrid work is unlikely to be successful. The public are largely apathetic, and the political impact of attempting to turn the issue into a lightning rod in order to garner support from the electorate is likely to be trivial.

The impact is far from trivial for civil servants themselves, though. The FDA members in the focus groups were almost unanimous in their profound dislike for measures to get civil servants back into the office, or for closely monitored attendance targets. These policies have caused logistical problems, and they also risk undoing many of the strides made in equality, health and wellbeing. Many civil servants have also felt infantilised and patronised, and are treated as though they lack the good judgement with which to take decisions about how best to get their jobs done. This is incredibly damaging, and this attitude cannot be allowed to continue, otherwise talented individuals will leave the civil service.



Methodology



The data and findings of this report were collated in different strands. Firstly, the FDA commissioned Public First to run a poll on the attitudes of the general public towards hybrid working, as well as attitudes towards the issue of Civil Servants hybrid working in particular. The poll was held between the 12th and the 18th July 2022, and surveyed 2009 adults. This was followed by a further poll of a representative sample of 542 red wall voters. This, in conjunction with a review of previous literature, forms the background of each section of the report.

Secondly, the report attempts to draw a clear picture of the experiences and feelings of our members in particular. This is done using a survey of 1410 of our members over June and July 2022, as well as probing deeper into some of the issues raised in a series of focus groups held later in July 2022. We have ensured that the feedback members gave us is anonymous, but have used direct quotes from the survey comments and the focus groups when deemed particularly relevant.

Together, these different elements allow for the report to gauge public opinion and assess the salience of the political debate, while explicitly focusing on what our members feel strongly about. As such, the report is wide in scope but seeks to address specific points of praise and criticism raised by respondents, aiding us in our goal of changing workplaces for the better.



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To find out more about the FDA's work on the issues
discussed in this report visit
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