

**Response to the Call for Evidence to
The House of Lords Select Committee on Home-based Working**

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1. Background

- 1.1. At the University of Leeds we have been undertaking research since 2020 on how work and workplaces are changing to adapt to hybrid and flexible working. Our key research was funded by UKRI. We collaborated with a range of public and private sector organisations (including local and national government organisations, financial, legal, and professional services, health and research organisations), we have gathered rich, in-depth data, generating a variety of insights. The UKRI-funded work was first published in two public reports (Davis et al., 2022 - part 1 and 2). Subsequent additional research data and publications are also included in our evidence. References summarising our findings are appended to this document and available via <https://futureworkplace.leeds.ac.uk/>.
- 1.2. We have selected a small number of questions to respond to but welcome the opportunity to discuss our evidence further. Evidence is based on:
- 74 stakeholder interviews with office and urban design experts plus leaders involved in office design, people management, health & safety, finance, operations, technology.
 - 115 interviews with workers in varied roles, at different levels of responsibility, multiple working patterns, across public and private sectors, inc. 25 early career employees.
 - 8 workshops with business organisations exploring what future hybrid work practices could look like and the role of workplace and city infrastructure within this.
 - 2 snapshot surveys with 1025 workers across industries and sectors exploring hybrid experiences and opinions.
 - 3 snapshot surveys with 243 graduate interns, on their experiences of hybrid working, over a year-long internship.
 - 10,257 quantitative diary observations from 817 office workers in different types of workplaces and hybrid working configurations, exploring day-to-day experiences.
 - 34 qualitative audio diaries recorded over a two-week period exploring hybrid worker experiences in the public sector.
 - Social network data collected from 867 employees, examining the effect of hybrid working on collaboration and performance.

2. What are the challenges and opportunities of remote and hybrid working for workers? To what extent do these vary depending on the worker's characteristics, such as their job role, gender, race, age, disability, income, educational background, carer/parental status and living situation?

- 2.1. **Hybrid working is the preferred work arrangement for most UK office workers, but it is important that policy makers avoid the assumption that this is either universally empowering or desired by all workers.** This statement is supported by ONS workforce statistics regarding current work practices, but also when assessing individuals' stated preferences. Our cross-sector surveys of UK office workers consistently show that hybrid

working is the preference of office workers (52%). However, 22% would prefer fully home-based working, and 22% fully office-based working.

- 2.2. **Challenges and opportunities for hybrid working depend on the ‘version’ of hybrid working practice considered.** Our data reveals a range of hybrid work arrangements commonly used (see Davis et al, 2022a). For instance, “free hybrids” enjoy freedom of choice over when and where they work – typically workers who are independent, outcome focussed, and higher status. More typical hybrid work arrangements involve degrees of constraint over employees’ choice of work location or time. For example, due to policies regarding team days in the office, restrictions on when work sites can be accessed, requirements that key activities must occur in person or remotely, core service hours, etc. Different opportunities and challenges are associated with each of these hybrid work forms, so defining this term within legislation and policy is vital for policy makers, particularly as these remain conflated in research literature and organisational practice.
- 2.3. **Our research shows that workers value the *autonomy* provided by some forms of hybrid working, but not all hybrid work is empowering.** The value workers place on hybrid working largely depends on the degree of autonomy they have in selecting their work location and schedule. While hybrid working typically provides greater ‘flexibility’, some forms of hybrid work constrain worker autonomy. For example, individuals may be required to work in a “fixed hybrid” arrangement, with limited or no choice over when/where they work, e.g., allocated days to work from home or an office, scheduled rotas, or shift patterns. When work arrangements change week-to-week, the uncertainty makes it harder to plan childcare, other caring responsibilities, social activities, or coordinate with household members who share the home workspace. This is more challenging than having a fixed working pattern or a fully home or office-based arrangement. We observed complaints from office workers regarding practical challenges when commuting part of a week, e.g., lack of opportunity for season tickets, losing parking access, difficulty accessing childcare. We found misalignment between preferences and actual work arrangements was associated with low job satisfaction and an intention to change jobs.
- 2.4. **Our research finds that working preferences vary beyond stereotypical demographic groups, and there is significant variation in hybrid working preferences within demographic subgroups and job roles.** We found there was no universally preferred number of days in the office or hybrid work pattern. Workers were more driven by a desire to exercise a sense of personal autonomy, which could be found in several ways. For some, simple changes that enable them to personalise office or home-work spaces are enough, for others this means autonomy to choose their office/home days, or the time spent in different spaces.
- 2.5. **Graduates and school leavers entering employment for the first time are ill-prepared for hybrid working, and need training and support to develop the new *socio-digital skills* required for effective hybrid working.** Younger workers find it easier to learn many technical skills online (e.g., via screen shares or recorded meetings), but struggle to grasp social and cultural norms in hybrid workplaces. We found graduate interns spent only 15% of their working time co-located with peers, that 47% of their communication occurred through scheduled video meetings, and 31% of their communication occurred digitally via online ‘chats’. Hybrid working practices change the way that information flows through

organisations, which can result in slower, and more formalised communication. Younger workers find it difficult to benchmark their abilities, performance, understand their role or build workplace networks in hybrid contexts with minimal time in the office. Employers are often unaware young workers are struggling as they appear competent performing technical tasks (see Hughes & Davis, 2024).

3. What is the impact of remote and hybrid working on individual physical and mental health? How does this impact and the steps taken to manage it compare to traditional site-based work?

3.1. Location autonomy (choosing where to work) positively impacts employee outcomes and benefits organisations. More important than the type of hybrid working practices is that employees perceive that they have a choice about where and how they work. Our diary study found the opportunity to choose your work location day-to-day, positively impacted employee outcomes including performance, job satisfaction and wellbeing (Wu et al., 2024; Davis et al, 2022a).

4. What are the challenges and opportunities of remote and hybrid working for employers, including concerning recruitment and retention, the potential for collaboration and creativity, management, worker attitudes and expectations, and use of office space?

4.1. The hybrid office needs to be designed for more than ‘social’ activities and this may require more and higher quality space. A design trend and assumption has been that offices can be downsized in response to hybrid working, and that social and collaborative space should be prioritised above individual workspace. Our diary data (over 10,000 data points) challenges this narrative by establishing that the proportion of activities that hybrid office workers engage in are strikingly similar between office and home. For example, in the office 40% of activities involved solo high concentration, 20% solo low concentration and 20% face-to-face interaction (i.e., 60% of activities require individual workspace). At home, 60% of activities were solo and 25% video/online meeting. Most workers are simply unable to organise their work in a way that enables all solo or concentrative work to be performed at home. To enable productivity, offices still need to provide sufficient individual and quiet workspace to cater for the activities that will actually take place there – this may require a greater footprint than anticipated.

4.2. The expectations and responsibilities of employers and education providers are misaligned. Employers expect school leavers and graduates to be ‘hybrid-work ready’, while educators expect businesses to offer training for these employees. Consequently, only 7% of graduates reported receiving any form of training for hybrid working. Employers reported high levels of technical competence demonstrated by tech-savvy, younger workers who they considered digital natives in this space. Graduates themselves reported masking social competency deficits by working long hours, and relying on role models (e.g., parents and siblings) outside the workplace to learn work etiquette. Employers, educators, and career services must develop their roles to address young people's socio-digital skill gaps to help them thrive in hybrid work environments.

- 4.3. **Organisations find hybrid working practices difficult to successfully embed where they only consider the supporting ‘technical’ factors.** Productive hybrid working must be supported by organisational re-design – e.g., adapting roles, activities and training, workspaces and infrastructure, organisational policy and practice, IT, and culture. Seemingly small changes to one aspect (e.g., mandating the number of office days) necessitates changes to others (e.g., workspace may be unable to accommodate occupancy fluctuations). Unintended consequences of decisions can have widespread implications, such as on collaboration, worker attitudes, recruitment and retention.
- 4.4. **Network data shows office attendance influences network building** (i.e., who workers know and who they can share knowledge with). This is a particular issue for new staff, and early/late career-stage employees, who need to either learn from others, or rely on the workplace as a primary point of social contact.
- 4.5. **Network data shows that hybrid workers who spend time in the office develop a stronger sense of workplace belonging and have lower intentions to leave their job.** For workers who seek home working opportunities to accommodate family commitments, caring needs, or a health condition, it is therefore vital that employers develop alternative ways of engaging these employees and helping them build relationships.
- 4.6. **Mid-career hybrid workers who work predominantly from home, while others are in the office, may limit career development and future leadership opportunities.** Our research found that within legal and professional services organisations, mid-career staff (already possessing sufficient expertise to perform their roles), missed out on exposure to higher-level experiences required for them to progress, as reported by senior leaders.
- 4.7. **Workspaces and hybrid working practices are commonly configured to accommodate the assumed needs and preferences of younger workers.** This may negatively affect the retention of older workers who often have established expectations about office work and for whom social contact may be a key reason to remain in the workforce. Informal office furniture may not meet older workers’ ergonomic needs. Losing experienced older workers from the workforce through such alienation, poses risk to knowledge and skill transfer, and productivity.
- 4.8. **Workers and their employers have different understandings of what “hybrid” working is.** There remains a lack of consistency and clarity regarding the parameters for hybrid working within many organisations. This can lead to friction, misunderstanding, and dysfunctional collaboration practices. Our research showed that organisations found it easier to embed hybrid working where there was clarity regarding the parameters for individual discretion in choosing working patterns, times and locations, together with the extent to which these may vary week-to-week. The distinction between related practices such as hybrid working, flexible working, home working and condensed hours should be clear within HR practices and inclusive work policies.
- 4.9. **There are inherent tensions in hybrid working.** There is a risk of employees experiencing an ‘us and them’ workplace, but this can be addressed through localised policies, job redesign and provision of other types of flexibility within roles. There is also tension between ‘me and we’ – with employees prioritising work-life balance or personal productivity over accepting greater co-location/office working or coordinated schedules.

- 4.10. **Organisations are still designing what hybrid looks like in practice.** Hybrid working continues to change the nature of workplaces, technologies and ways of working. We are actually a long way from the ‘new normal’ – AI will affect possibilities further.
- 4.11. **Training for hybrid working is woefully low.** To capture gains from hybrid working we need to upskill organisations, leaders and workers. Hybrid is different to virtual and in-person working. Only 8.5% of our sample of UK office workers, and 7% of graduate interns receive any training on how to conduct or be a part of a hybrid meeting.
5. **What, if any, are the key policy and/or legislative changes the UK Government should make in this area? Where remote and hybrid working is appropriate, what can the UK Government do to facilitate good practices in the workplace?**
- 5.1. UK government need to **clarify a consistent definition of ‘hybrid working’ in legislation**, that reflects the variety of the practices it can represent.
- 5.2. Education policy makers must recognise **the need for socio-digital training provision in schools, FE, and HE**, and ensure that training on hybrid working is explicitly embedded within this, to ensure young people are able to develop the necessary social skills to thrive in a hybrid work environment. Given that graduates are 10 times more likely to work hybrid than those without a degree (ONS, 2024), this is especially important for HE policy, Universities and Careers Services. Government policy mandating face-to-face education should be careful not to undermine this, since hybrid work skills are vital and distinct from those required in face-to-face work environments.
- 5.3. Some employees (e.g., those with caring responsibilities, with particular disabilities or illness, and/or living with neurodiversity) may welcome **hybrid working as a reasonable adjustment that facilitates the return to work**. Inclusive policy must recognise that:
- 5.3.1. There are **social mobility implications** – these hybrid worker groups may particularly benefit from training that enables them to understand social norms and etiquette, role modelling opportunities, or enables them to navigate hybrid technologies.
- 5.3.2. Such workers may be particularly **vulnerable to having poor quality homeworking environments** (e.g., noisy space, lack of suitable IT infrastructure, or working alongside continued challenges accessing caring provision), and may benefit from access to HM Treasury and Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) support.
- 5.3.3. If hybrid work is to be empowering for these workers, it must be **implemented alongside appropriate social care provision** (e.g., mentoring, supportive line management and leadership), otherwise it can inadvertently perpetuate isolation and reduced workplace development opportunities.
- 5.3.4. Where a workplace is available to the employer, **employers must not be allowed to choose to use hybrid work as an opportunity to pay employees less than office based employees, or offer poorer quality or exploitative work opportunities** (our research found evidence of such practices overseas).
- 5.4. To facilitate productive hybrid working, HM Treasury and DWP must enable businesses to **financially recognise that ‘place’ of work can be more fluid**. 35% of hybrid workers still

do not have a suitable homeworking space, and 27% of hybrid workers find it difficult to find a quiet workspace in their home. Many employers reported tax and employment rules restricted them from formally acknowledging homeworking for workers with access to an employer workplace. It will benefit productivity if workers can have suitable tax relief for hybrid work that recognises the associated costs.

- 5.5. To facilitate productive hybrid working, HM Treasury and DWP must support employers in **recognising hybrid work as a reasonable adjustment in some cases**.
- 5.6. The Department for Science, Education, and Technology, and especially ‘Building Digital UK’, must not only focus on the technological possibilities, but must also **recognise socio-digital skill development as a fundamental funding priority**. Digitally facilitated working environments (compounded by AI advances) create social skill deficits in the workforce.
- 5.7. The Departments for Business & Trade, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government should continue to **support investment in office and third spaces that support hybrid work activity**. Workspaces play a vital role in both developing communities, support local trade, and provide a variety of individual and high concentration workspaces for businesses, while being central to the building of organisational belonging.

6. References:

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