

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Hybrid Working

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked:

1. Review the progress made with hybrid working
 2. Note the impacts that hybrid working has (or hasn't had) on performance
 3. Note that this approach will continue to develop as we learn from our experiences
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Date of O&S meeting: 13 February 2024

Chair of O&S Committee: Cllr Bell

Relevant Portfolio(s): Cllr Nilsson

Summary: Members of the committee were interested in exploring how well the hybrid arrangements were working and in particular wanted to consider this in terms of performance. This report will aim to provide a review of these areas.

Exempt from Publication: **NO**

Background Papers:

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Report Title: Hybrid Working

Introduction and Background

1. Since the pandemic, and the major change in attitudes around more flexible forms of working, hybrid working in particular has created new employee expectations and desires. At Ashford we already had flexible working policies and the ability to work remotely but the pandemic, and the emerging picture that hybrid working was likely to be widely adopted across other organisations, meant that we needed to ensure we could respond effectively to the wider employment market remembering that it would not be for everyone, one size may not fit all, and some service delivery models may not fit hybrid working.
2. We reviewed our homeworking/remote working and flexible working policies in early 2021 so that as restrictions eased we were prepared and could make consistent decisions within a framework of guidance.
3. The **remote working policy** supports requests for the flexibility to work some contractual hours in a location other than the usual base. This policy provides ongoing flexibility for both the staff member and the organisation recognising that needs change and both sides benefit from a requirement to review the success of the arrangement.
4. The **flexible working policy** is a statutory route to be taken where both the individual and council need certainty about working hours or location and, as a result, becomes a contractual term. An individual can currently only make one flexible working request per year so it is less flexible in this respect (although this is due to increase to a maximum of two per year in April 2024 when the Flexible Working Bill comes into effect).

Hybrid working

5. For staff whose roles can accommodate a hybrid style of working ABC's current approach is to require staff to attend their workplace an average minimum of two days per week.
6. Our full-time 'normal' working patterns continue to be Monday to Friday, office hours. There are a few teams that have different patterns due to operational requirements- Aspire, Ashford Monitoring Centre, Civil Enforcement Officers, for example. Nationally there has been much interest in 'four-day week' trials across both the public and private sector. Our staff are able to request part-time hours over four days, but a four-day week is not something that Ashford is considering exploring as a standard working model therefore hybrid working patterns for full-time staff is the 'normal' Monday to Friday pattern.
7. There are a range of approaches to hybrid working across the council that reflects different service needs and customer needs. All of these arrangements

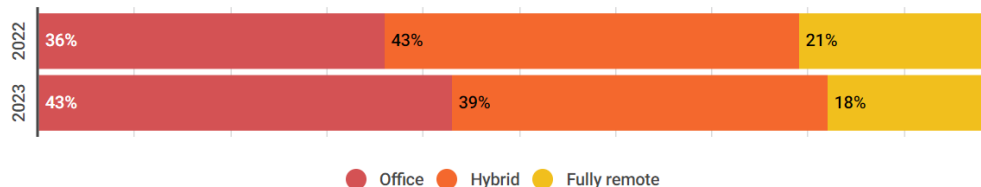
are agreed with the managers of the service and ensure that the service delivery is not compromised. For example:

- a. some teams tend to all be in on one specific day per week so that they can collaborate and have team meetings but vary where they work their other days across the week for the rest of the time.
 - b. other teams will have fixed days in the office to provide face-to-face cover for customers and colleagues, but also ensure they have at least one face-to-face team meeting every other month.
 - c. some staff arrange their week around the needs of their customers, having a mix of site visits, office time and homeworking time that accommodates the demand from their customers.
 - d. a number of teams are able to be flexible around the needs of the service and the demands of that week and fit their remote working days around whether they have face-to-face meetings scheduled.
 - e. a number of staff, either by choice or role do not work any of their time remotely/from home and work 100% of their time in the office.
 - f. a handful of staff work most of their time remotely, either through contractual flexible working arrangements or a more flexible remote working agreement.
8. The table below shows that our office attendance has increased over the past year, this is consistent with the wider world of work where fewer people worked 'fully remote' in 2023 than 2022 (chart 1 below Hays: [Tide Turns on Hybrid Working. October 2023 shows some comparison survey data](#)). There have been no reported difficulties in booking a desk, on occasions where more people come in than the department has allocated desks staff are able to use hot desks, or empty desks in other zones. This will continue to be the approach in International House but will be kept under review.

Month	Number of desks booked
October 2022	1202
November 2022	1761
October 2023	2095
November 2023	2086

Chart 1: Hays research on office/hybrid/fully remote working level

Office working vs hybrid working and fully remote working (2022-23)



Source: Hays UK and Ireland survey (Aug-Sep 2023) n=14,9

Source: Hays: [Tide Turns on Hybrid working. October 2023](#))

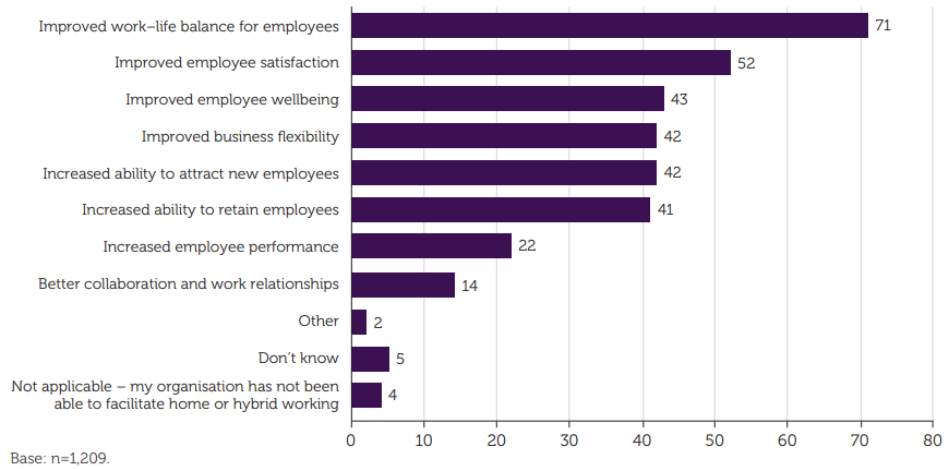
2023 Research

9. The Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) conducted research, published in May 2023, into [“Flexible and Hybrid working practices in 2023. Employer and employee perspectives”](#). The survey, carried out by YouGov plc, was carried out online and the figures have been weighted by work sector, business size and region to ensure it is representative of UK workplaces.
10. This research showed that 83% of organisations have hybrid working in place, 45% with a formal policy (as we do). Over half (52%) require hybrid working employees to be in the workplace for a minimum number of days in the week/month, while 46% do not. Overall, employees are most likely to be required in the workplace for two (35%) or three (33%) days per week.

Benefits

11. The CIPD research, reports that staff identify many benefits from working in a hybrid way, for both them and their employer (chart 2). These benefits include a better work–life balance, greater ability to focus with fewer distractions, more time for family and friends, saved commuting time and costs and higher levels of motivation, job satisfaction, improved productivity and reduced absence rates.
12. Hybrid working also provides other opportunities for organisations in terms of enabling employee wellbeing, supporting inclusion and diversity and reducing facilities costs.

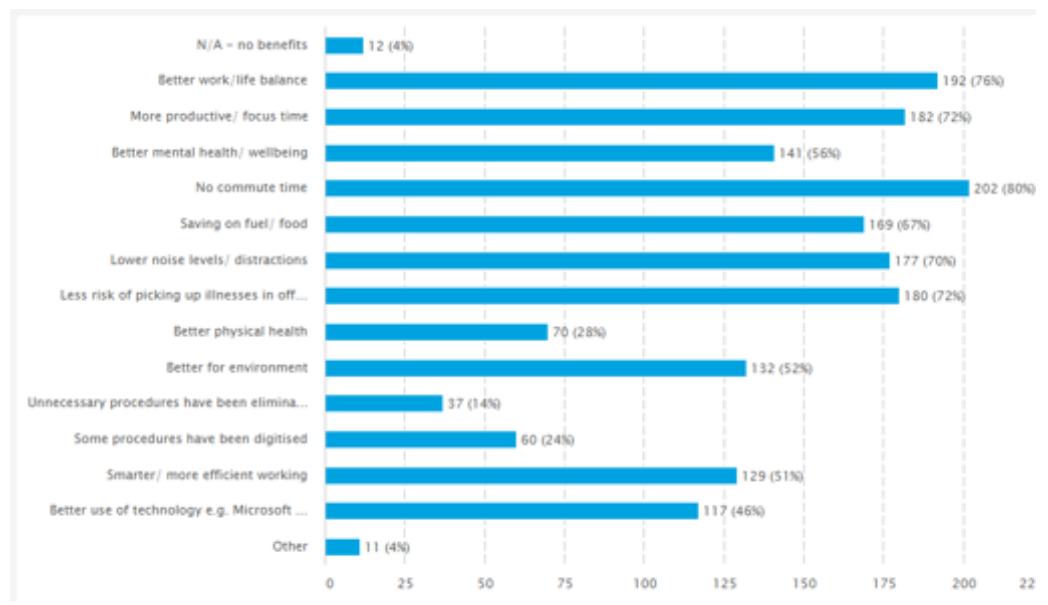
Chart 2: Benefits of increased home/hybrid working (%)



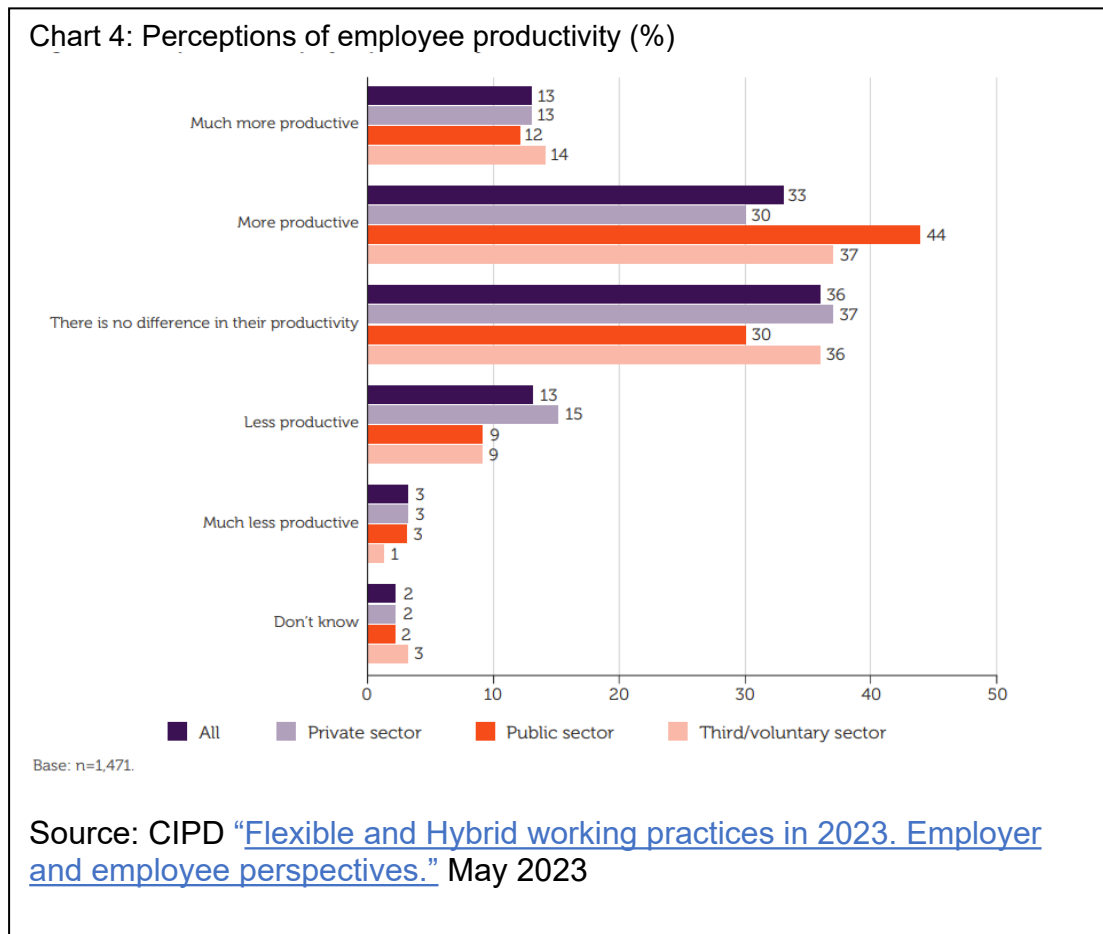
Source: [“Flexible and Hybrid working practices in 2023. Employer and employee perspectives.”](#) May 2023

- The reported benefits for employees are consistent with the feedback we have had from our staff in the surveys we have conducted, including the most recent survey in November 2023 (chart 3).

Chart 3: What are the benefits of working at home? (ABC staff feedback)

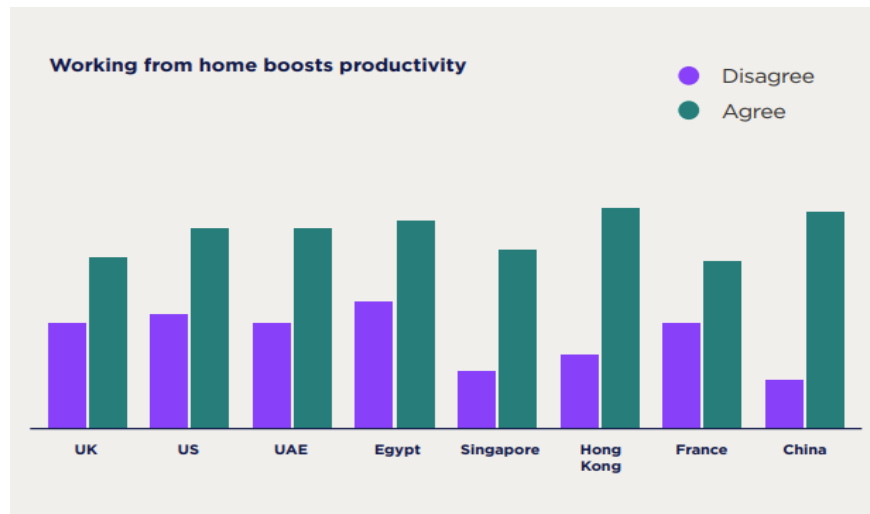


Productivity



14. The CIPD research (shown in chart 4) shows that two thirds (33%) of organisations say that more home/hybrid working has increased their organisation’s productivity/ efficiency; and [global research from Bupa \(2022\)](#) shows that 35% of UK business leaders say implementing hybrid working has boosted productivity in their organisations (chart 5).

Chart 5: Global research by Bupa on homeworking and productivity



[Source: Bupa Executive Wellbeing Index 2022](#)

Challenges

15. The CIPD research into some of the top issues faced as a result of the shift to increased home or hybrid working include:
 - getting people back into the office when needed (42%)
 - managers managing remote teams from a wellbeing and performance perspective (41%)
 - impact on collaboration and creativity (35%)
 - technology and/or connectivity difficulties (33%)
 - the impact on culture (26%)

16. The challenges identified in the research are similar to the feedback we had from our staff, with managers telling us the following:

Manager Benefits of hybrid working (top 3)	Manager Challenges of hybrid working (top 3)
Happy team	Harder to manage
Productivity/better focus	Need to be more organized
Ease of setting up meetings at short notice (via Teams)	Harder to collaborate

17. Managing remotely is very different to managing in a face-to-face environment as are the skills and behaviours managers need to take this difference into account. Whether they have a whole team working remotely or just a small number of the team working at home for a couple of days a week. Very early

during lockdown we recognised these challenges and produced a guide that helps to support managers in the communications they have with their team, how to build team morale, tackle difficult conversations, set objectives and support development, as well as ensure they are visible both in a face-to-face setting and virtually.

18. Alongside this guide is a programme of management development sessions that have been updated to take into account hybrid working. We will also be reviewing the managers' guide in response to the 2023 staff survey.
19. We also have a 'working remotely' guide for staff designed to assist them in understanding the basic requirements and tools available, as well as to emphasise the importance of looking after their wellbeing and especially that although they are physically distanced it is important to remain socially connected.
20. Whilst our staff survey results do not support this, in the past there has been some anecdotal feedback that staff started to feel that the 'family' environment we had pre-pandemic had diminished. We recognise that much of our prior successes in collaborative working, and having a strong 'family' culture, were as a result of having a social connection with the people you are working with. This isn't as easy to achieve without the ad hoc chats in the kitchen or by the copier so we have worked hard to reintroduce the face-to-face elements of our engagement programme (summer rounder's match, quiz nights etc.) and we are currently refreshing our programme to encompass more opportunities for face-to-face social connection.
21. Staff engagement is an area that we have been recognised as being strong in in the past, winning engagement excellence awards. Our staff engagement work has always helped us to stand out from the crowd compared to other organisations (including the private sector) and so we can have confidence that an inclusive and varied approach will be deployed to suit a wide range of staff in building and maintaining relationships that assist collaborative working in this new way of working.
22. Based on previous feedback 'office etiquette' designed to help minimise distractions when people work from the office have also been developed with input from staff, with the intention is that working from the office needs to be as convenient and productive as from home, with barriers minimised. Further important considerations for us are cyber security, data protection and health and safety. We have ensured a varied comms plan has been rolled out for each of these including staff training and awareness across all three areas.
23. Whilst managers are telling us it is harder to manage remote teams, both our managers and their staff are citing improved productivity as a benefit of remote working. There is data later in the report that highlights performance at ABC, but from a perception of productivity perspective the CIPD research is consistent with the views of our managers and staff (chart 4).

24. From a technology perspective our experience is not similar to the challenges identified by the CIPD (technology and/or connectivity difficulties (33%)). We were well advanced for remote working as the pandemic struck so our systems have worked well. Where staff have had connectivity difficulties due to their broadband we have been robust in requiring staff to work from the civic centre- even during the pandemic when we arranged 'socially distanced' workspaces.
25. We are remaining alert to the challenges and it is likely that our approach will need to change as we learn from our experiences, and learn from the feedback from staff, customers and members. We will also need to be flexible as technology, service design and customer demands/needs change to ensure service delivery is responsive, efficient and effective.
26. We had seen how learning and development, for example, had a seismic shift in approach where many programmes have gone online through virtual/zoom/Teams for their person to person sessions. Developments in the software now mean that traditional breakout groups are possible and this has broken down the barriers to remote learning. However many programmes now have a blended approach with a mixture of virtual seminars, independent eLearning and face-to-face. It is fair to say that the days of traditional learning are changed forever due to the advancements in hybrid technology.

Recruitment

27. As stated above our office attendance has increased (see paragraph 8), this is consistent with other employers yet despite this employers continue to offer hybrid working as a key feature during recruitment campaigns. This is a sign that there is still no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to how staff want to work and how flexible employers are willing to be.
28. Our experience when recruiting has been that candidates have an expectation of hybrid working. Recent campaigns where we have sought advice from recruitment specialists following unsuccessful ABC lead campaigns have resulted in feedback from the specialist companies recommending that we offer the ability to work in a hybrid way as this is what is offered by other employers and gives us a more choice of candidates due to the wider geographical pull for applicants.
29. We specifically asked questions of our new starters (joining since April 2022) to help us understand the recruitment and retention impacts on ABC of hybrid working. The chart below (chart 6), shows that 68% of staff recruited since April 2022 felt the ability to work in a hybrid way as an important factor in accepting the role with us, and told us that hybrid working is amongst the top factors in deciding to accept a job (chart 7).

Chart 6: Was your decision to accept the role with ABC based on having hybrid working in place?

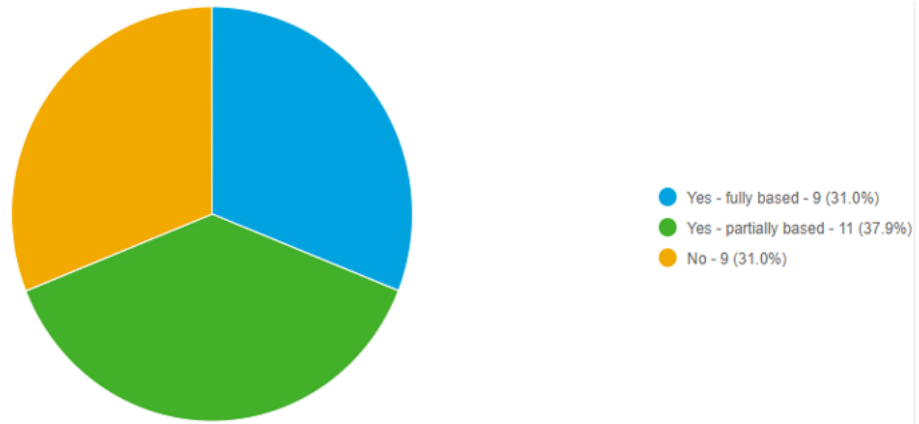
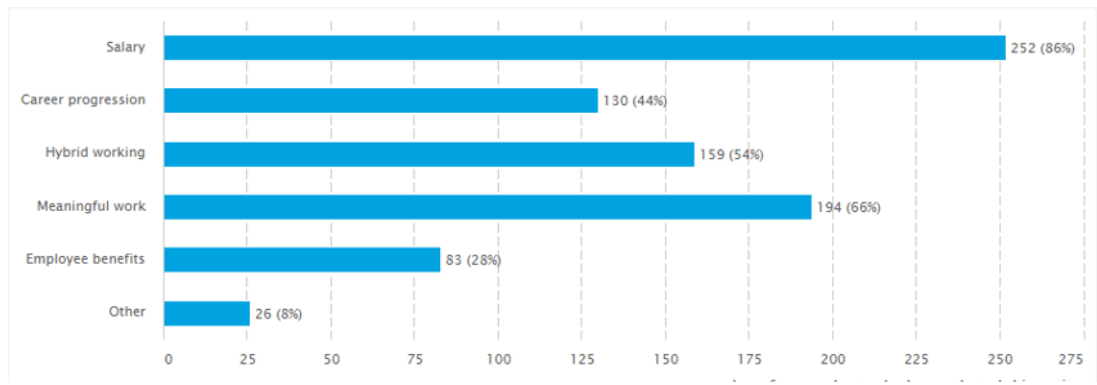


Chart 7: Which of these factors are important to you when accepting a job?



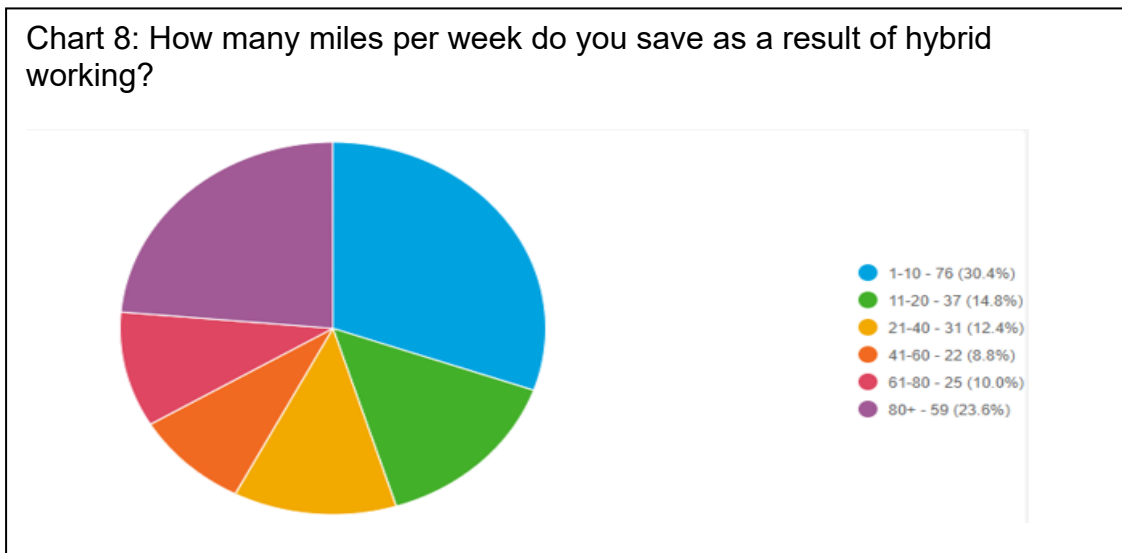
30. We have found that hybrid working has been high on the list of queries to our recruitment team when advertising roles, and for difficult to recruit roles like lawyers and planners being able to offer some hybrid working has proven to be essential in being able to attract applicants from a much wider geographical pool, with the majority of equivalent roles being advertised by others as hybrid too.
31. As we have developed our understanding of the complexities of hybrid working we have adjusted our approach to on-boarding. Initially all but essential on-boarding processes were carried out remotely however this approach is becoming much more 'blended' with a mix of dedicated face-to-face support as well as on-line and remote elements. A further review of the approach will be undertaken to ensure we welcome and train our new starters appropriately.
32. Similarly the support we provide for inexperienced and trainee staff has improved as we have reflected on our experience and increased our in office presence. As a result we have seen improved rates of satisfactory probation periods. In 2022

five probation periods were unfortunately unsuccessful, however in 2023 only two probation periods were unsuccessful (a 60% improvement), this is a positive outcome as it means people are 'getting up to speed' more quickly, and need less manager intervention time.

33. We provide a good range of opportunities for entry level roles within the organisation and currently have nine apprentices and three T Level placements

The impact on our carbon footprint

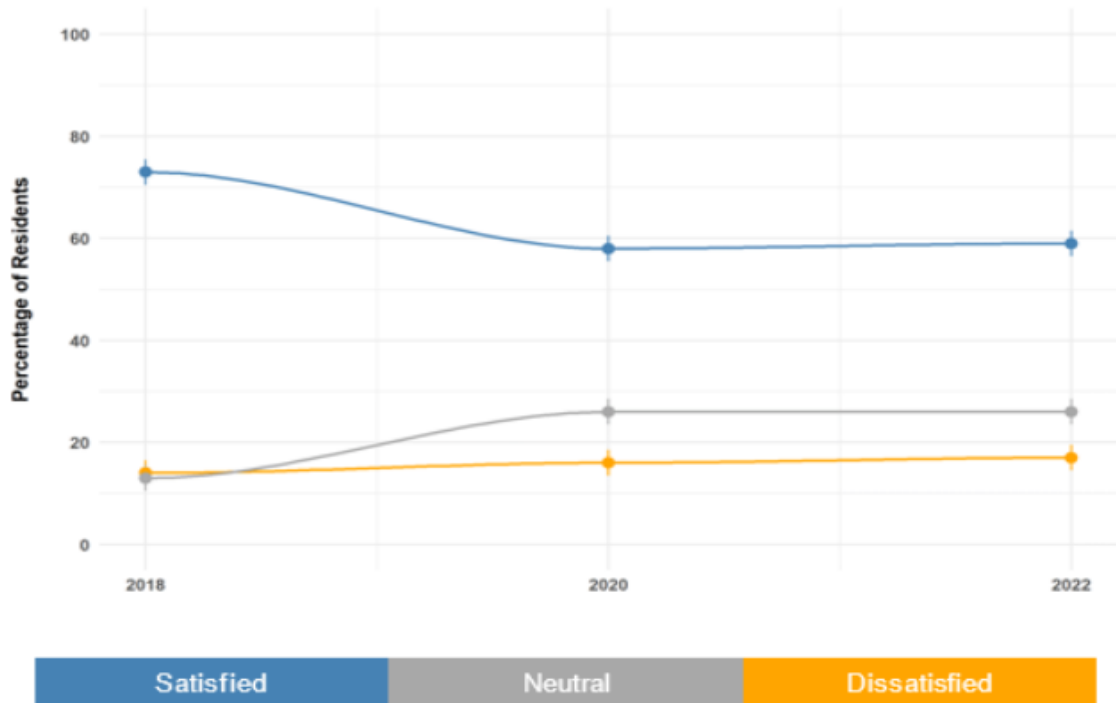
34. Fewer days working from the office has contributed to a reduction in our carbon footprint. We also asked staff how many miles per week they saved in commuting miles by working remotely, over the year this equated to approximately 370,000 commuting miles saved.



Performance

35. Members were interested in exploring how well the hybrid arrangements were working and in particular would like the Committee to consider this in terms of performance. The rest of this report will aim to provide a review of these areas.
36. One aspect of performance is **customer satisfaction**. A review of our complaints tracker has shown that there are no incidents of complaints related to staff working at home. The phone system allows a seamless direct dial to officers and the customer should therefore not know if the officer is in the civic centre or working elsewhere.
37. The 2022 residents survey asked "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way Ashford Borough Council runs its services?" the chart below shows the results for 2018, 2020 and 2022. Dissatisfaction levels have remained broadly the same during this period, and satisfaction levels have remained stable between the 2020 and 2022 surveys.

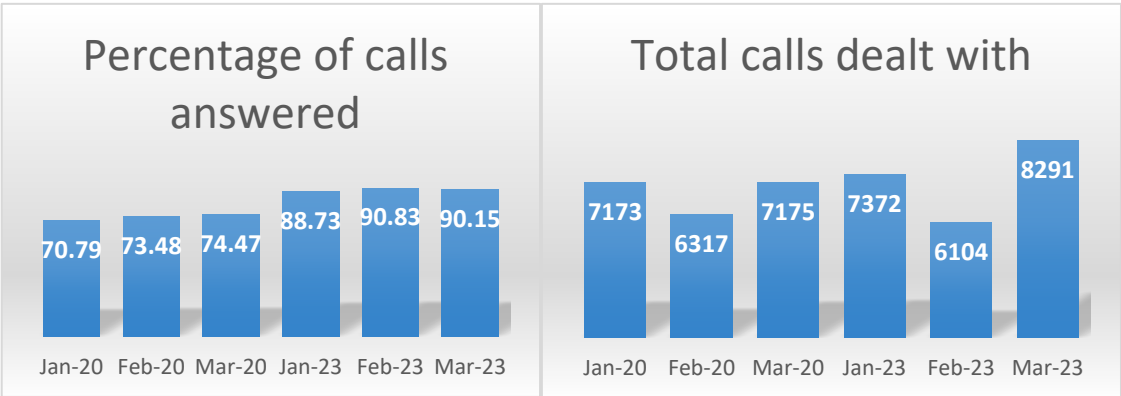
**“How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way
Ashford Borough Council runs its services?”**



38. More widely, quarterly **Corporate Performance Reports** are a well-established tool for members to review the council's performance, and to ask questions. This appears to be working well, and as an example the O&S Committee have recently taken a deeper dive into whether the recycling KPIs ought to be reviewed.
39. The Corporate Performance Reports provide a higher level picture of performance, and Members will see that where KPIs have not been achieved it is as a result of key issues such as Stodmarsh, and a narrative is provided to explain the change in performance.
40. Within services other data is recorded to help with performance management and resource management. Better productivity is cited as a major benefit of homeworking, in some teams it can be difficult to measure this objectively by having tangible measures. For example the accountancy team will be measured on whether monitoring and reporting is complete and if budget pressures etc. are highlighted in a timely way, it will not necessarily measure how many or how long a piece of work took. However there are teams where it is easier to objectively see how performance was before widespread hybrid working compared to now.
41. Historically (pre-pandemic) the Customer service and Revenues and Benefits teams have had regular homeworking arrangements within the team and we

have always seen the homeworkers with higher productivity than equivalent office based staff.

- 42. There will always be a range of factors that contribute to the changes in productivity levels, and it can be difficult to pin-point exactly which elements have impacted and when, for example digitisation, different resourcing levels, demands and models, wider economic impacts etc.,
- 43. The following tables shows **Customer Service** data for the fourth quarter of 2019/20 (pre pandemic), compared to the fourth quarter of 2022/23.



- 44. It can be seen that the percentage of calls answered have increased from circa 73% to circa 90% across the comparison quarters despite the total numbers of contacts increasing by around 1,100 during the quarter. Some of this can be attributed to fewer face-to-face contacts, that take longer and have more down time;. but also based on pre-pandemic experience of homeworkers being more productive much of this will be a result of fewer distractions than being in the office.
- 45. The following data for **Environmental Health** shows the number of inspections carried out pre-pandemic, for the year up to the end of March 2020, and to date for this financial year. It shows the number of completed inspections are higher for the current year.

Inspections	Up to end 2019/2020	2022/2023 up to 17/11
Food - Non Routine (inc sampling)	52	98
Food - Routine	258	566
Food - Questionnaires	108	42
Licensing - Non Routine	2	32
Licensing - Routine	134	96
Licensing - Desktop Rated	43	4
Animal Inspections	24	40
H&S Inspections	18	0
PPC inspections	10	12
Total Inspections	649	890

46. Similarly for licencing the number of licence applications handled have increased.

Licensing Applications	Up to end 2019/2020	2022/2023 up to 17/11
Taxis (all)	474	582
Premises licences (inc new,transfer, DPS, variation, personal)	185	188
Temporary Event Notice	129	475
Gambling (inc Lotteries)	112	95
Animal Licensing	14	26
Other licensing	127	134
Skin piercing	30	50
Total	1071	1550

47. The data below for **Housing Services** shows a number of areas of comparison data across the same two periods. In the context that the demands on the housing team are higher now due to homelessness pressures, increased demand for housing, new regulations and emerging issues such as damp and mould the data shows that delivery has been broadly consistent despite the additional demands on staff and our housing stock.
48. It can be seen that the number of housing applications received increased significantly over these quarters; and whilst the number of applications we have accepted (i.e. added to the housing waiting list) reduced slightly during the quarter for 2022/23, this is not as a result of reduced productivity but is as a result of fewer eligible applicants that we need to support. However a much

higher level of initial applications have been reviewed and assessed by our housing colleagues.

Housing activity	Q4 2019/20	Q4 2022/23
1. Number of lettings	98	110
2. Housing Register Applications received	470	639
3. Applicants added to the Housing Register	350	333
4. Average number of days properties are 'void'	18	24
5. Number of ABC properties managed by ABC lettings	173	196
6. Private Sector Housing condition reports	265	440

49. The number of days an empty property is classified as 'void' increased during this period, there was a legacy disruption as a result of Covid that was still impacting this aspect in Q4 of 2022/23 this figure is much improved now although not back to pre-covid levels partly due to the additional pressures highlighted above.
50. The data below relating to **planning** applications show that the number of applications determined across the two comparison quarters is broadly consistent for major applications but has increased slightly for non-major applications.

	Q4 2019/20	Q4 2022/23
Major applications determined	8	9
Non-Major applications determined	290	321

51. Some of this increase in output may be attributed to the ability to work remotely and free of office distractions, but also historically this service relied heavily on consultants to supplement the resources and towards the end of 2022/23 most of this temporary support was ended, this will have a positive impact on performance as the impact of 'churn' in these roles inevitably lead to inefficient repeated getting 'up-to-speed' as cases were handed to new case officers.
52. Due to the timescale between all of these data sets, there will be a range of factors that may have contributed to the variance in the data, and it can be difficult to pin-point exactly which elements have impacted and when, for example digitisation, different resourcing levels and models, wider economic impacts etc., however this data does show that there has not been a reduction in performance as a result of widespread hybrid working.

Conclusions

53. Widespread remote working was originally foisted upon us as a result of the pandemic, we quickly rolled out systems, approaches and support frameworks for our organisation, this was in an environment where there was no rule book, or case studies to help guide us. We had to learn quickly and we continue to learn both from others and from our experiences.
54. Hybrid working is now a permanent feature of a modern workplace. If we are to remain relevant as an employer, we will need to ensure that we can meet candidates and existing employees' expectations; but equally ensure that managers are well equipped to manage issues that crop up as a result of remote working.
55. Whist managers are telling us it is harder to manage remote teams, both our managers and staff are citing improved productivity as a benefit of remote working, and the data shows that they continue to get the best out of their teams; however to get the best out of our teams we need to remain alert to emerging issues and listen to what our staff and managers are telling us and ensure that we respond in a positive way.
56. We have seen there are a range of benefits to both the staff member and the council of supporting hybrid working. We do however need to strike the balance and bear in mind that one size will not fit all and there is no single way to implement hybrid working. In some cases hybrid working cannot be accommodated, and in other cases its exact form is likely to vary and change and differ between services and this will require us all to be flexible and adaptable especially as technology, service design and customer demands/needs changes, and we will need to ensure service delivery is responsive, efficient and effective.

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