

Report to: **Scrutiny and Overview** **16 July 2020**

**Lead Cabinet
Member:** **Cllr Neil Gough, Deputy Leader**

Lead Officer: **Liz Watts, Chief Executive**

Impact of homeworking on the Council

Executive Summary

1. In the week beginning 23 March, the vast majority of office-based employees moved to permanent homeworking, following the government lockdown. Some colleagues were moved to different parts of the council to support our COVID 19 response, and others continued 'business as usual'. This report looks not at what work was being delivered, but at the impact of moving to near 100% homeworking, both on productivity and wellbeing. Early estimates are also made of the reduction in CO₂ contribution. The report has been provided at the request of the Scrutiny Committee during their meeting of 9 June 2020.

Key Decision

2. No

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that Scrutiny and Overview note the report.

Details

4. Two surveys have been carried out to assess the impact of moving to homeworking, one in March and one in April. Summary findings are set out in Appendix A and B. Appendix C sets out a summary of the changes between the surveys, and some examples of the narrative captured through the survey.

Productivity

5. Broadly speaking, most colleagues have been able to transition well to homeworking and after some initial disruption (partly due to the need to support the additional workload of COVID 19 response), business as usual has been maintained. It is not easy to demonstrate hard evidence for productivity gains or losses, partly because the time period is too short, and partly because there are so many variable factors (such as the nature of the way in which we moved to homeworking, which for many has included responsibilities for childcare, unusual working hours, workspaces often constrained etc) and customer drivers (the council has seen a significant increase in take up of MySouthCambs accounts which indicates a transition to using on line help and services). However, there is tentative evidence that in some of the process driven workflows (such as processing benefits claims), there has been an increase in productivity, whilst in other areas there has been either no change or a possible decrease (particularly areas that rely heavily on collaboration). To some extent the external factors (such as the maturity of the software and the service itself) have probably had an impact. Two examples are given below, but caution is noted since the data is still very limited.

6. Benefits Processing

7. The below table shows that there has been a significant increase in the monthly number of new claims being processed during March – May 2020 compared with March – May 2019.

Month	2019	2020	% increase / decrease
Monthly new claims processed			
March	155 (ave. 14 per officer)	241 (ave. 22 per officer)	+55%
April	172 (ave. 16 per officer)	458 (ave. 42 per officer)	+166%
May	163 (ave. 15 per officer)	358 (ave. 33 per officer)	+120%
Monthly changes in circumstances processed			
March	3180 (ave. 289 per officer)	2402 (ave. 218 per officer)	-24%
April	1471 (ave. 134 per officer)	1516 (ave. 138 per officer)	+3%
May	2011 (ave. 183 per officer)	1909 (ave. 174 per officer)	-5%

8. Whilst this may partly be a result of a greater focus on new claims processing (as shown by the slight decrease in the number of change of circumstances), this alone cannot account for the extent of the increase, with change of circumstances generally much less resource intensive to process.
9. Equally, whilst the number of Discretionary Housing Payments (not included in these figures) being processed has reduced, thereby providing more time to focus on new claims processing, this has been at least partially offset by the processing of hardship payments that have been introduced in response to COVID-19.
10. These figures therefore indicate an increase in the productivity of the Benefits team during lockdown. This is particularly evident in the jump in productivity between March 2020 and April 2020, which seems to align with the introduction of widespread working from home arrangements from 23rd March onwards. The slight dip in May's productivity is likely to be at least partly the result of staff having taken leave during this period. The variation between claims processed per officer during lockdown is marked (compared to 2019) and suggests that there are a number of factors at play which require further data and investigation.
11. Overall, these figures support anecdotal reports from Benefits Assessors, many of whom have reported fewer distractions and increased focus while working remotely. Although this may not have been so much the case for those with caring duties, it has been noted that the children of some staff have recently returned to school. Recent surveys completed by staff indicate that most would be happy to return to a situation whereby their working time is split evenly between the office and home.
12. It is worth noting that the Benefits team included three remote members of staff prior to lockdown. These members of staff are all highly experienced, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions on productivity based on the output of remote vs office workers prior to lockdown. However, an additional positive of lockdown have been reports from permanent remote workers, of an increased sense of inclusion due to greater levels of contact with the wider team, who are now also working remotely.

13. Planning (Development Management)

14. An indication of the productivity of the Greater Cambridge Planning Service during lockdown can be gained through the monthly number of decisions made, as shown in the table below.

Month	Monthly number of decisions made (SCDC only)
December	334
January	325

February	183
March	275
April	288
May	200

15. Whilst there has been a decline in the number of decisions being made since December, there are a few factors that have contributed to this.
16. Firstly, the dip in February was a result of the introduction of the new Planning software system. During the transition from the old to the new system there was a two-week period where it was not possible to process applications, thereby reducing the number of monthly decisions made in this month. Within the context of a newly adopted system, the requirement for staff training and the introduction of remote working, the increases in March and April decision numbers are relatively positive results.
17. During May, three online Planning Committees took place and this will have diverted some resource from application processing, with requirements for some officers to prepare for, present at and attend Planning Committee meetings.
18. Additionally, the department is taking advantage of the lower number of applications currently being received to work through a backlog of applications that had accumulated over previous months. It is thought that some of these backlog applications have taken longer to process due to a higher level of complexity. Issues have also been experienced with some elements of the software that have demonstrated that for some members of the team, working remotely has reduced productivity.
19. As such, whilst May has seen a reduction from March and April, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions as to the impact of home working on these figures due to the number of additional factors involved, however June and July figures would help us to build on this picture once available.

20. Contact Centre Productivity

21. In general, Contact Centre performance has seen an improvement during the lockdown period, however this is within the context of approximately a 28% reduction in call numbers for April and May in comparison with last year.
22. One set of statistics that provides indication of productivity independent of call numbers, are average call duration, average wrap time (this time is spent writing brief notes to summarise what the call was about) and average call handling time (a combination of the two). The below table shows that these figures have all remained relatively stable over the past 6 months, with no discernible impact from remote working.

23.

Month	Average monthly handling time (seconds)	Average monthly call duration (seconds)	Average monthly wrap time (seconds)
December	488	318	170
January	523	350	173
February	464	305	159
March	474	295	179
April	499	307	192
May	479	300	179

Wellbeing

24. Balanced against some potential positive impacts in productivity, are a number of concerns around the wellbeing of colleagues. While the survey data suggests that the vast majority of people are happy to continue to work from home for some part of the week, 20% said they did not want to continue working from home given the choice. There are multiple reasons for people not wanting to work from home, some of which are temporary factors (such as trying to combine homeworking with childcare/home schooling) and some of which relate to individuals' personal preference for being in a social environment.
25. We have not carried out a survey in June, although we do intend to continue the surveys. However, it is clear from informal feedback by managers that it is hard to sustain what was clearly a very energised and focused response from colleagues in the early days of lockdown.
26. Productivity gains in more mature, process driven services need to be balanced against the difficulties that those services which require collaboration or personal contact have faced, and the early conclusions of the Leadership Team are that we will need to move towards a blended approach, with neither 100% home working nor 100% office working in most cases.
27. As we make plans to re-open South Cambs Hall, with significant restrictions in capacity due to social distancing requirements, we hope to address the issues raised by this extended period of almost exclusively homeworking. However, it is clear that things won't be 'back to normal' until the social distancing requirements are lifted, and this of course is an unknown factor. It is therefore critical that we continue to invest time and energy in supporting colleagues' wellbeing (through measures such as those mentioned in Appendix C).

28. It is worth noting that none of the homeworking could have been achieved without the roll out of Council Anywhere and the council was exceptionally fortunate to be in the position to have a fully functioning remote working platform. The delivery of this by 3C ICT, along with our internal champions, should be celebrated.

Impact on Carbon Dioxide

29. Business mileage figures for May 2019 vs May 2020 have been analysed. There has been a 40% drop in mileage, from 15,533 in May 2019 to 10,069 in May 2020. The reduction in greenhouse gases as a result of this reduction in mileage claims is about 1.6 tonnes CO₂ equivalent, based on [the government's 2020 conversion factors](#) for a medium petrol car.

30. However, this data is provided with a health warning, because mileage claims can be submitted for three months at a time, so some of the May 2020 figures will include Feb-April. Realistically, it's too early to be able to use the data that we can easily access via the payroll to estimate accurately.

31. Looking to the longer term, as an organisation we need to work to 'lock in' any reductions, through careful management of business mileage when people do start to return to the office.

32. These figures also do not reflect any reduction in commuting mileage, which will probably be more significant, but is harder to measure.

Options

33. Members of Scrutiny and Overview requested this report to update them on the position regarding the impact of homeworking on the organisation, and as the report is only for noting, there are no options to consider per se.

Implications

34. In the writing of this report, taking into account financial, legal, staffing, risk, equality and diversity, climate change, and any other key issues, the following implications have been considered:-

Financial

35. There have been financial savings as a result of less mileage and printing. We are working to ensure that we maintain some level of these savings as things return to normal, through encouraging people to continue using video conferencing for external meetings, and assess whether they can continue to print less.

Legal

36. By law, employers are responsible for the health and safety of all employees, including those working from home.

Staffing

37. Employees have reported mixed experiences and preferences through the staff surveys, as set out in the report and appendices.

38. Employee wellbeing and safety is a significant consideration as the council moves into the next phase of the crisis and resumption of 'business as usual'.

Risks/Opportunities

39. Part of the work of the new Head of Transformation will be to assess how many of the benefits of increased homeworking can be captured in the longer term.

Equality and Diversity

40. Different groups of colleagues have been affected by homeworking in different ways, for example some younger colleagues might be living in shared or smaller accommodation with less by way of suitable working space, some older colleagues might be less comfortable with some of the technologies that are enabling us to work from home, some disabled people may have needed reasonable adjustments to be made in the new 'work place' and young families may not have quiet space in which to separate work and family life.

Climate Change

41. See paragraphs 29-32.

Consultation responses

42. Two colleague surveys have been undertaken which are attached at Appendices A and B.

Alignment with Council Priority Areas

Being green to our core

43. As set out in paras 29-32, the impact of more homeworking and video conferencing could contribute to a council wide reduction in CO₂

A modern and caring Council

44. The Leadership Team have, from the outset, committed to a strong psychological contract with all colleagues, offering considerable flexibility in terms of working hours and patterns, and in return, colleagues have stepped up in ways that we could never have imagined or expected.

Appendices

Appendix A: March 2020 homeworking survey

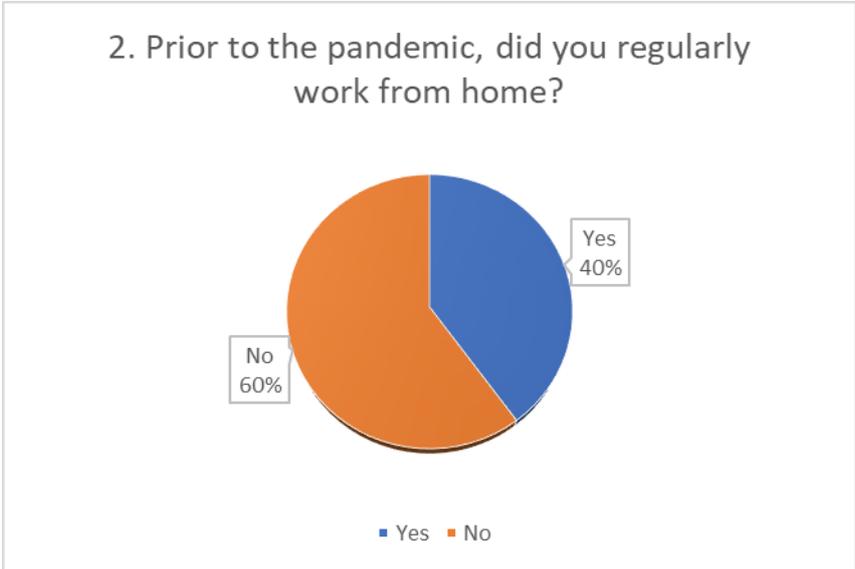
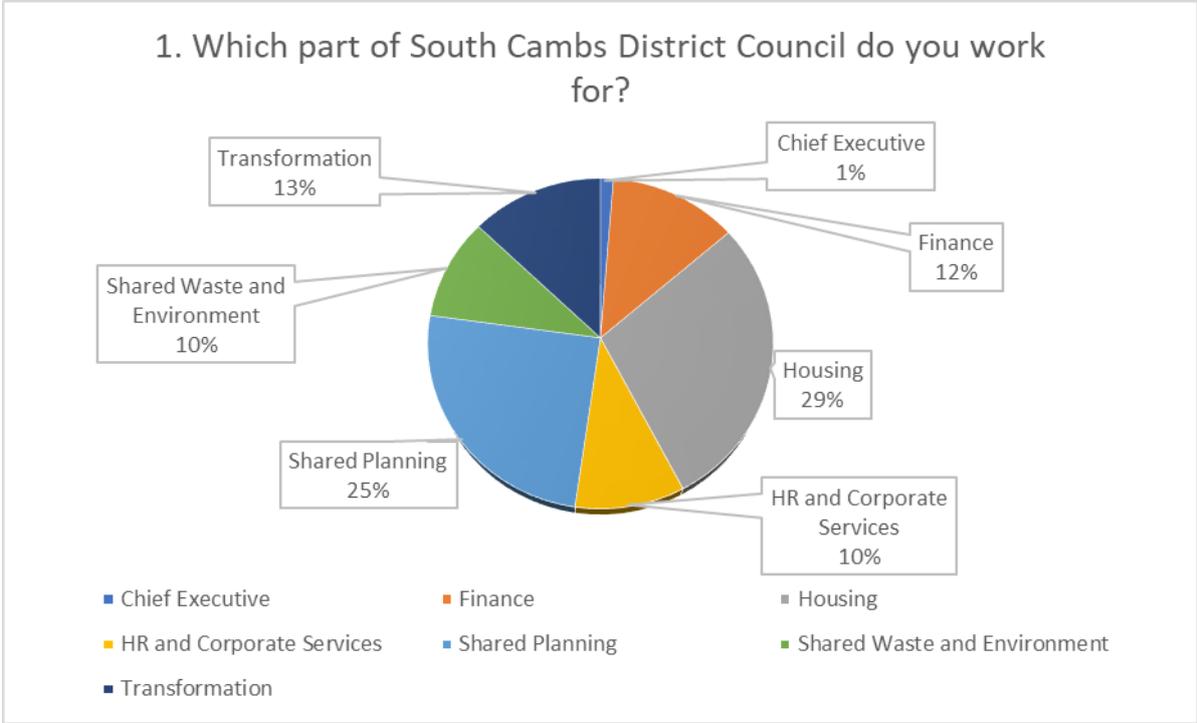
Appendix B: April 2020 homeworking survey

Appendix C: Summary of changes between the March and April surveys and narrative around measures taken to respond to both

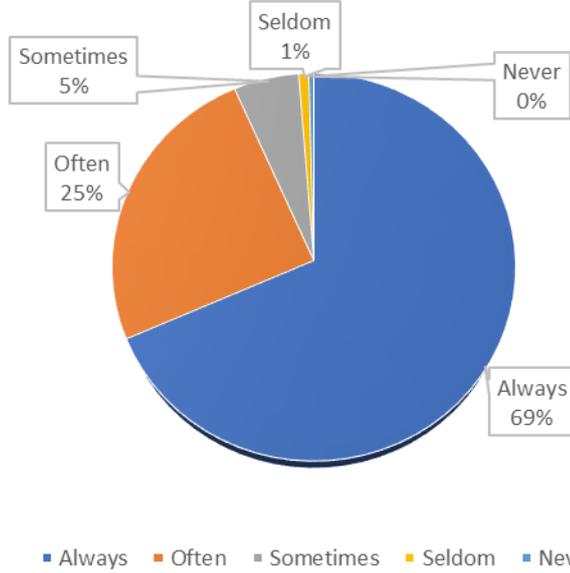
Report Author:

Liz Watts – Chief Executive Telephone: (01954) 713430

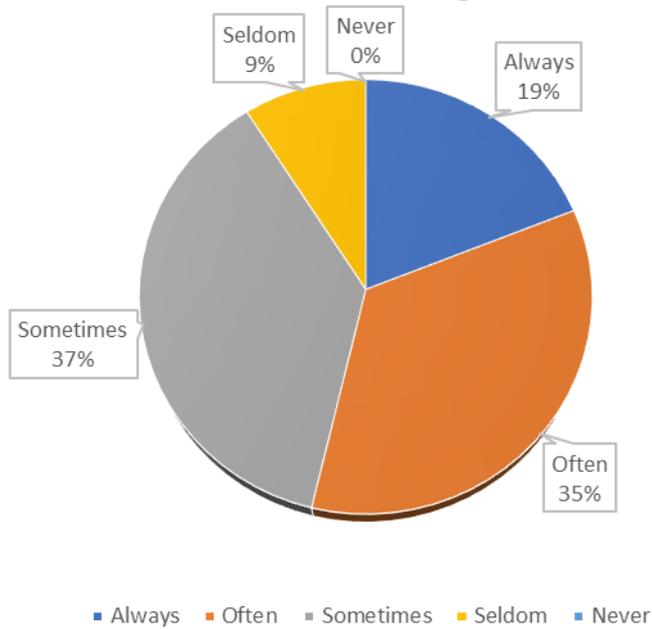
Appendix A – March homeworking survey



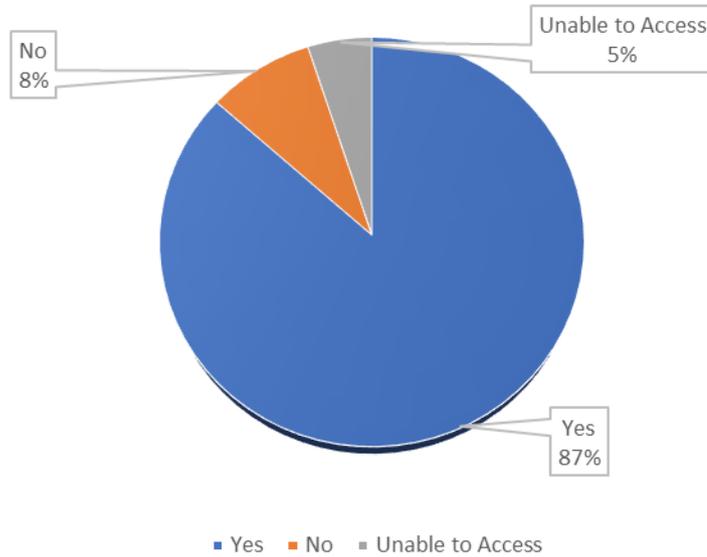
5. Are you clear about what's expected of you whilst you're working from home?



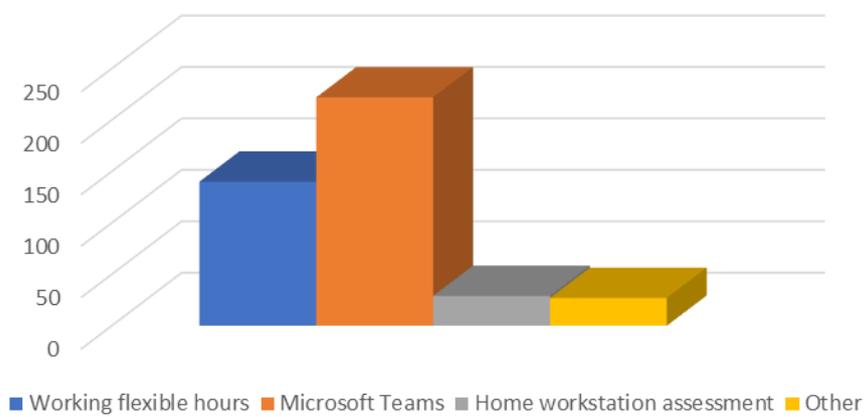
6. Are you taking regular breaks away from your workstation whilst working from home?



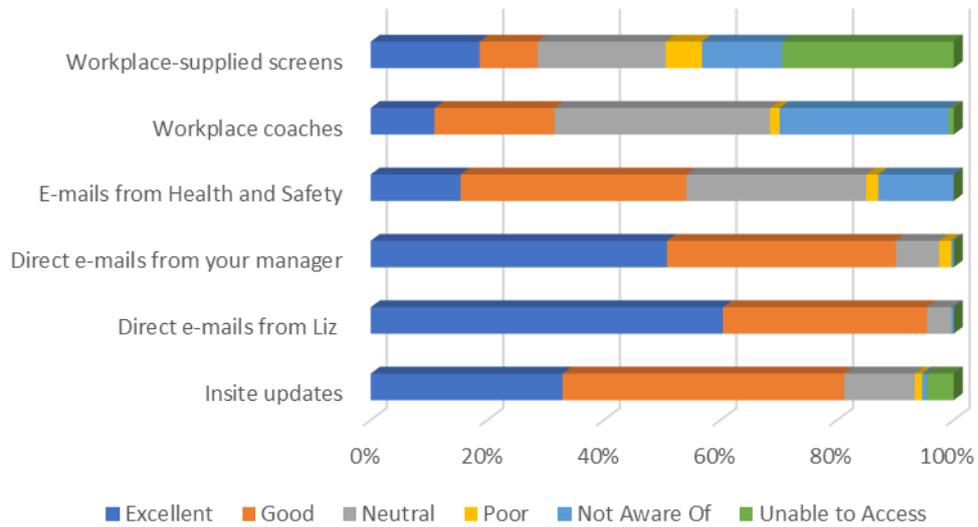
7. Are you aware of the health and well-being support resources available on Insite?



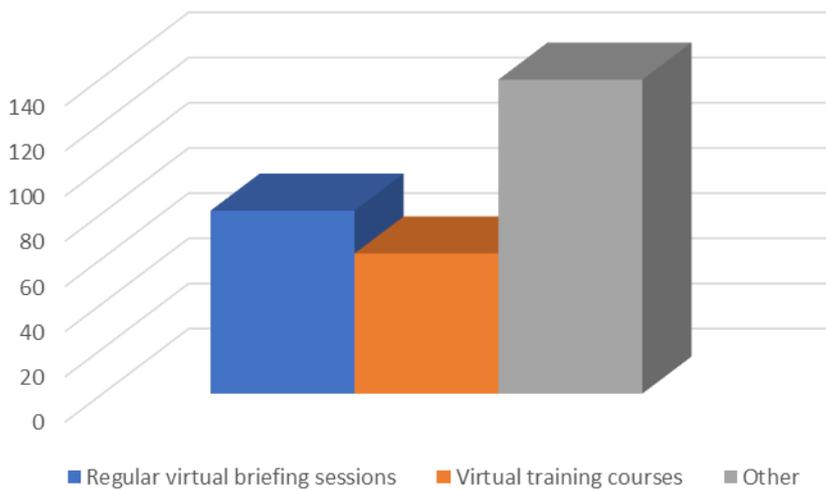
8. Which tools have you utilised to make it easier for you to work from home?



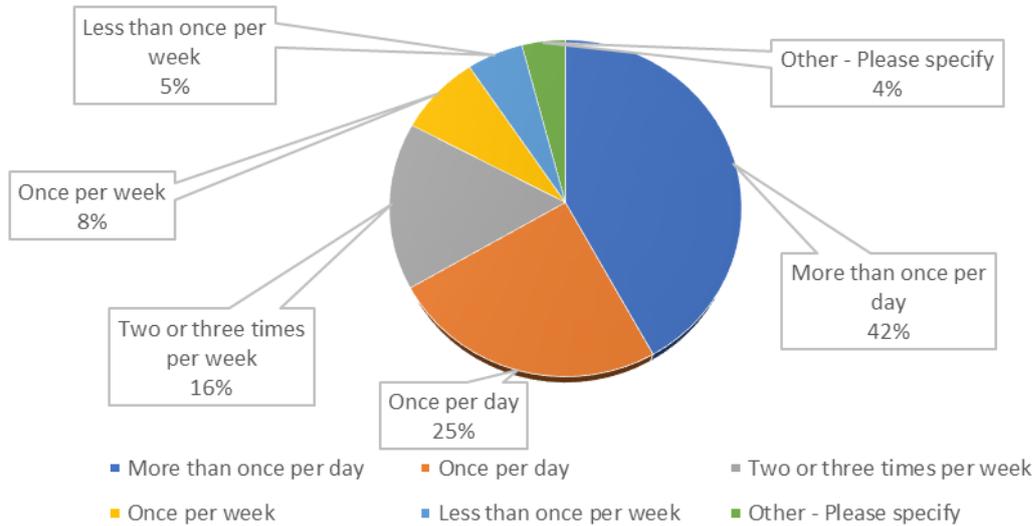
9. How do you rate the success of the following support measures for home working?



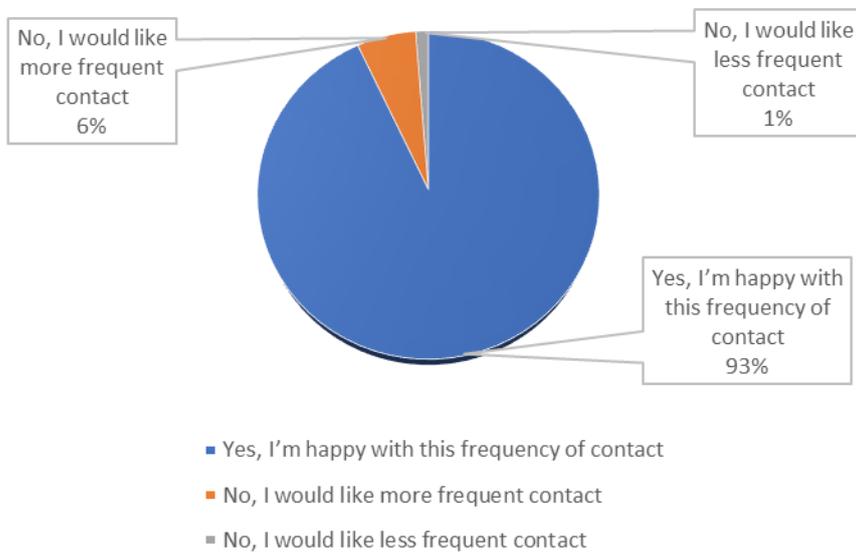
10. Is there anything else we can do to better support you during this period of home working?



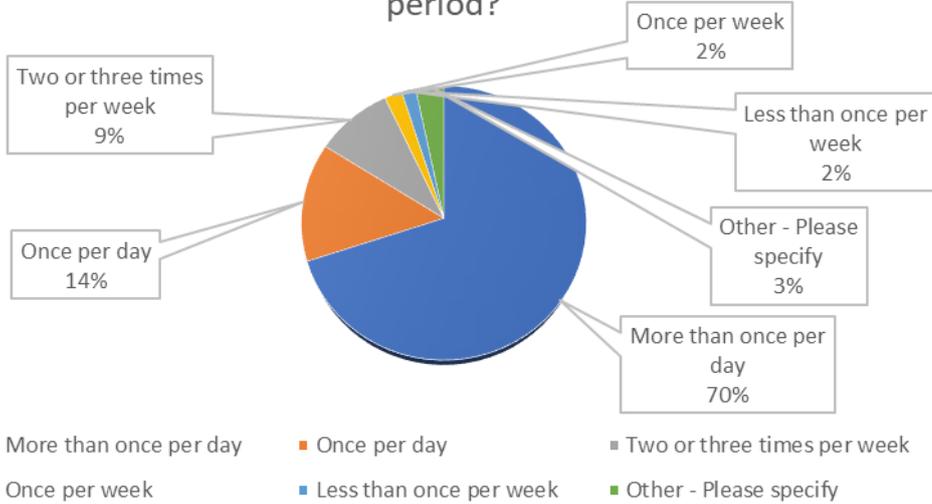
11. How often have you been in contact with your manager for help and support whilst working from home?



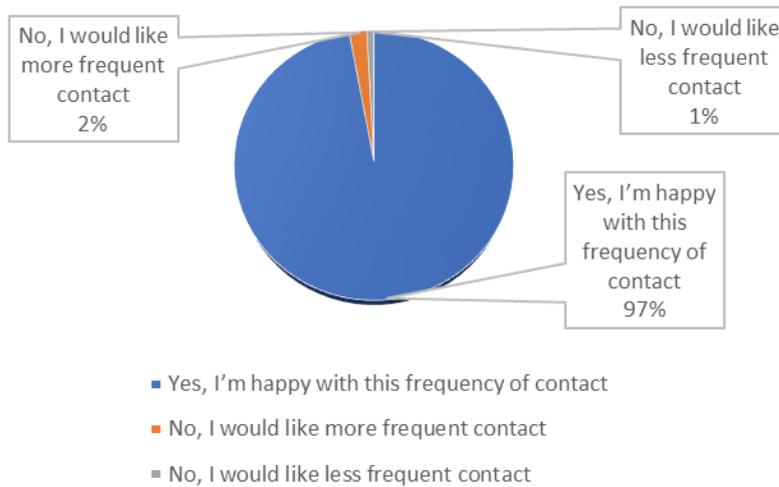
12. Is this enough for you?



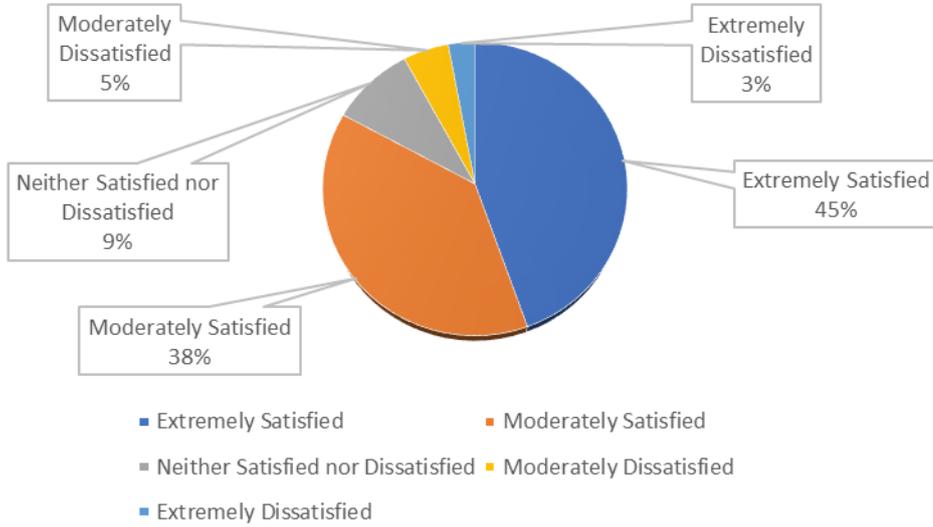
13. How often have you been in contact with other members of your team for help and support during this period?



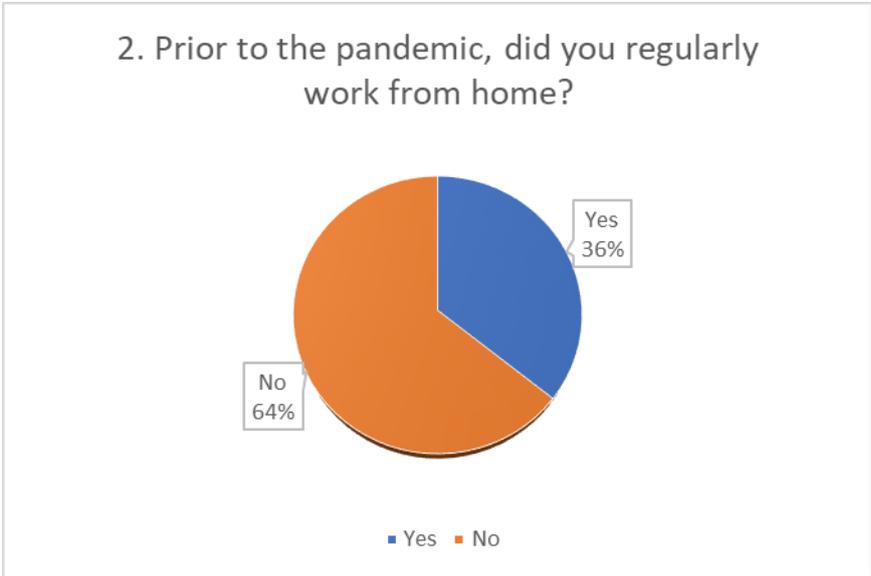
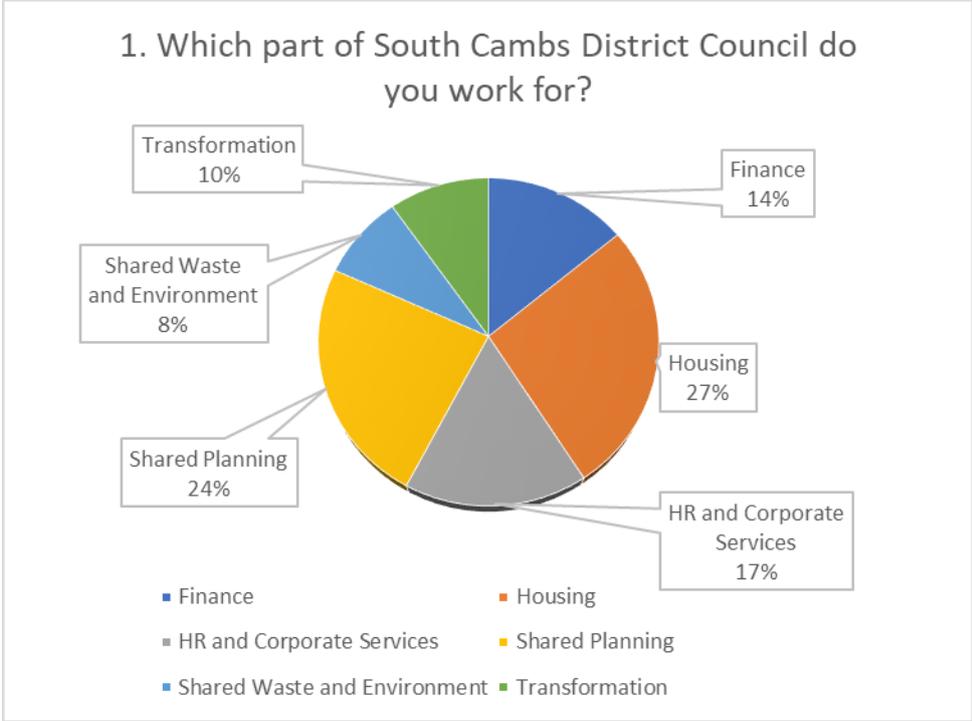
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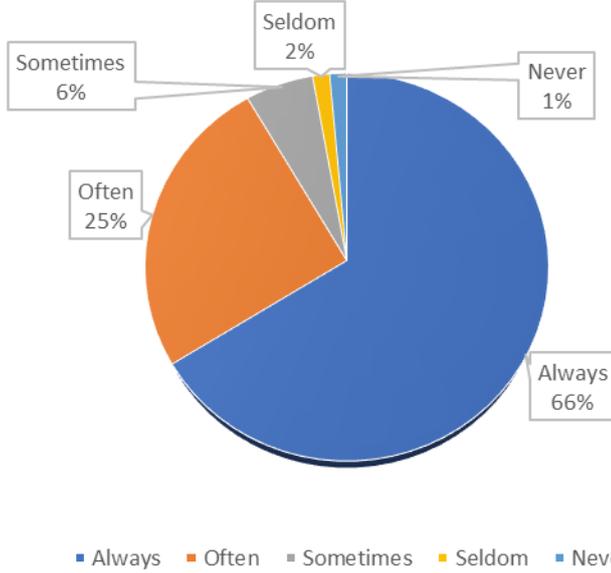
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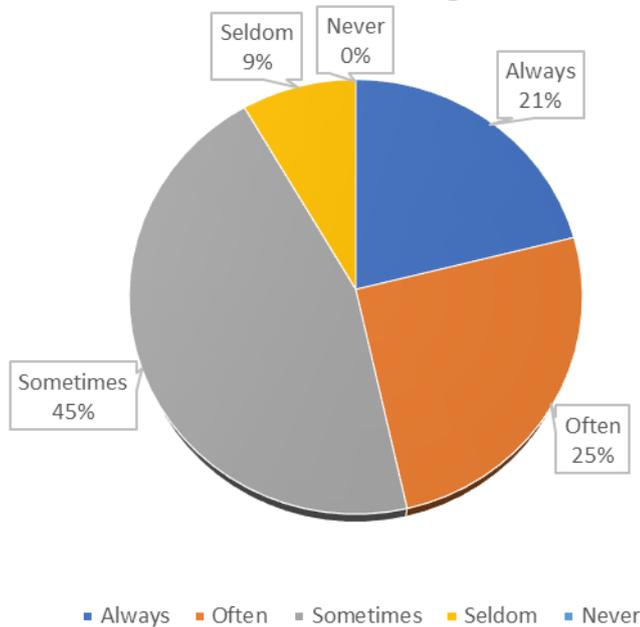
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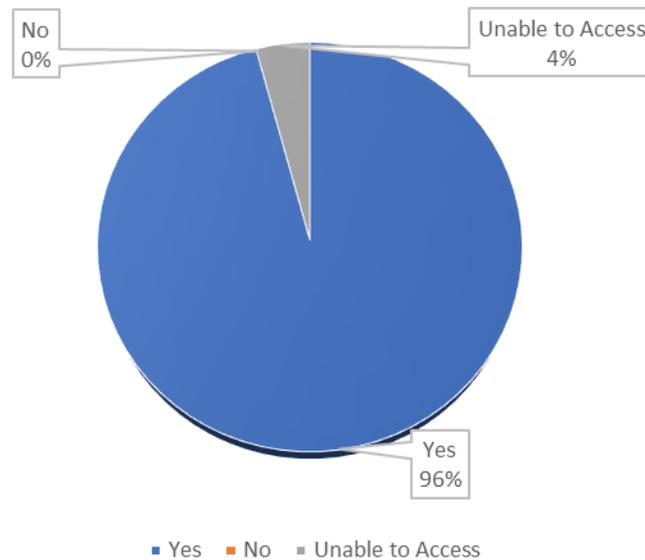
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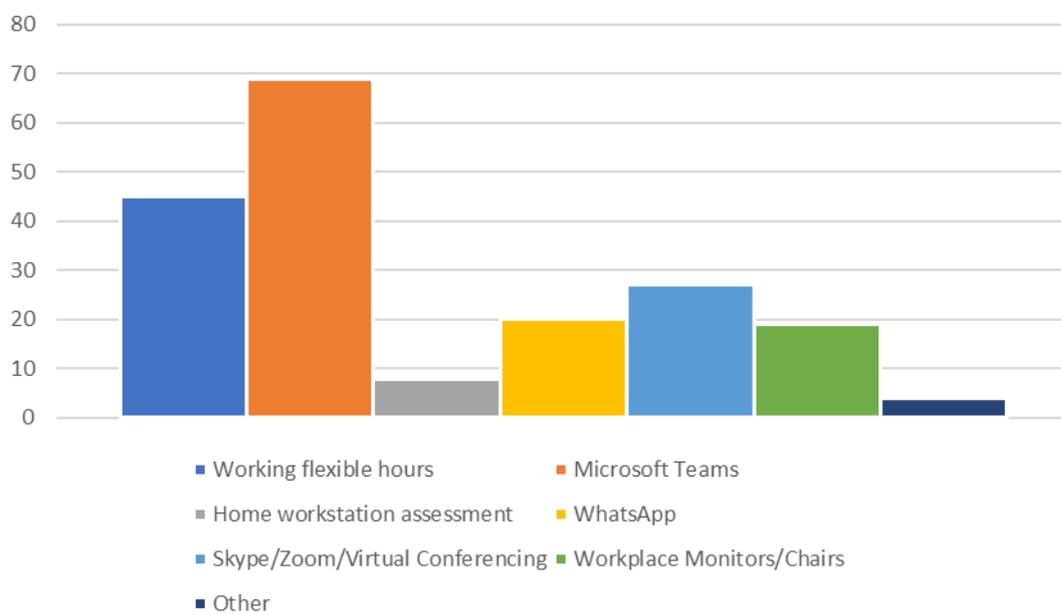
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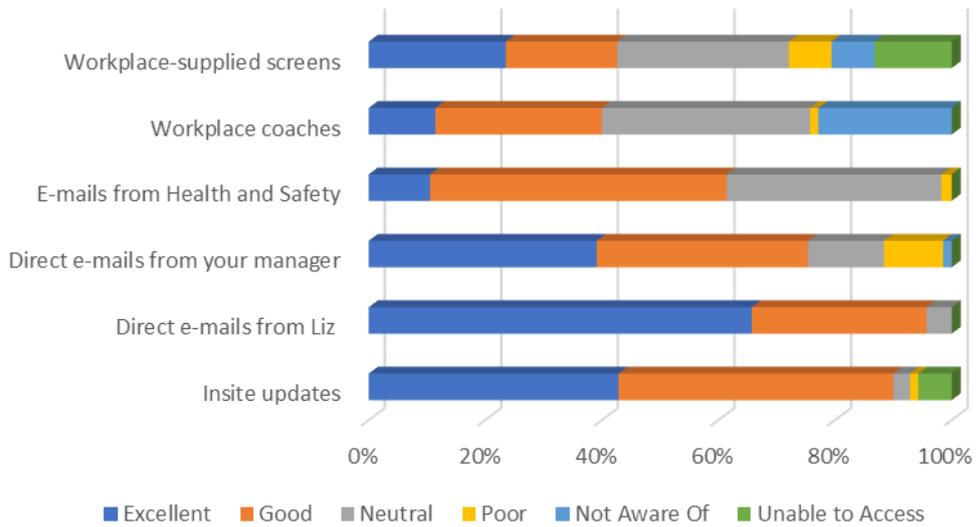
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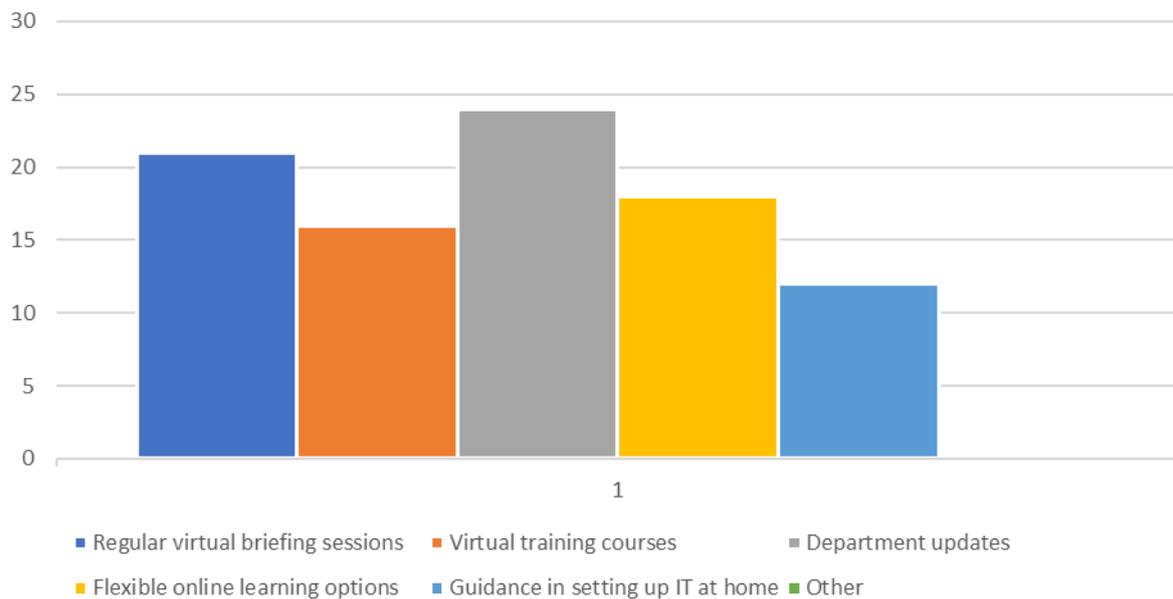
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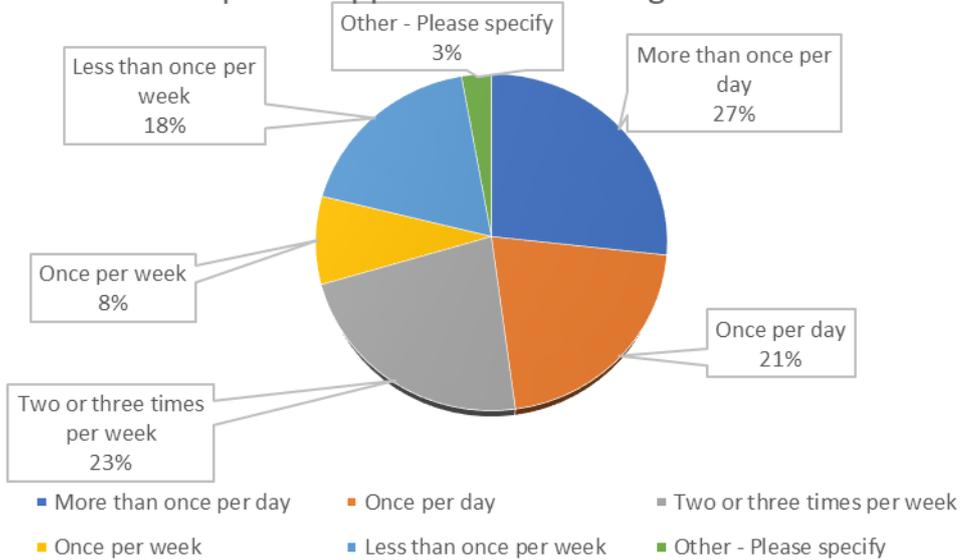
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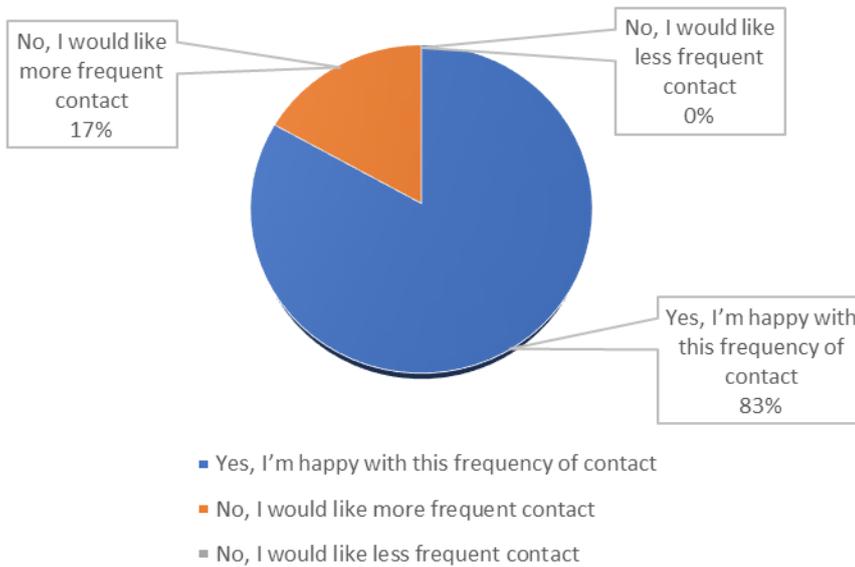
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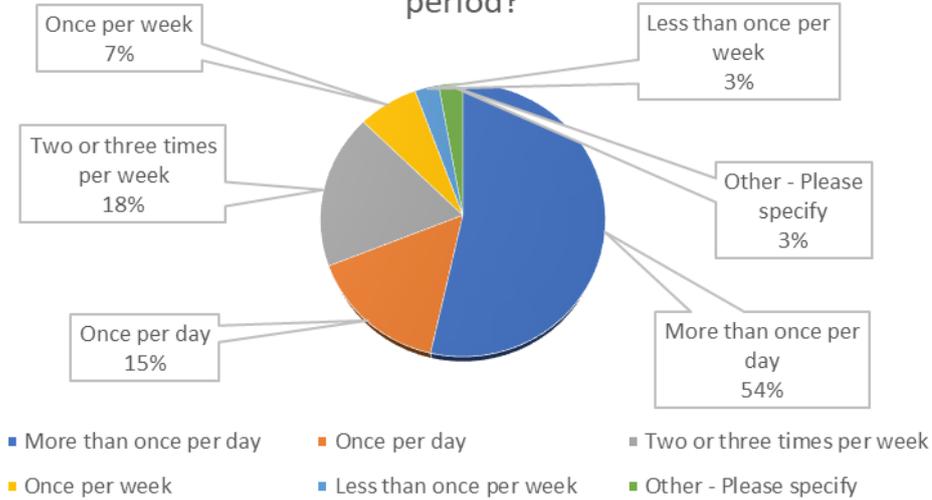
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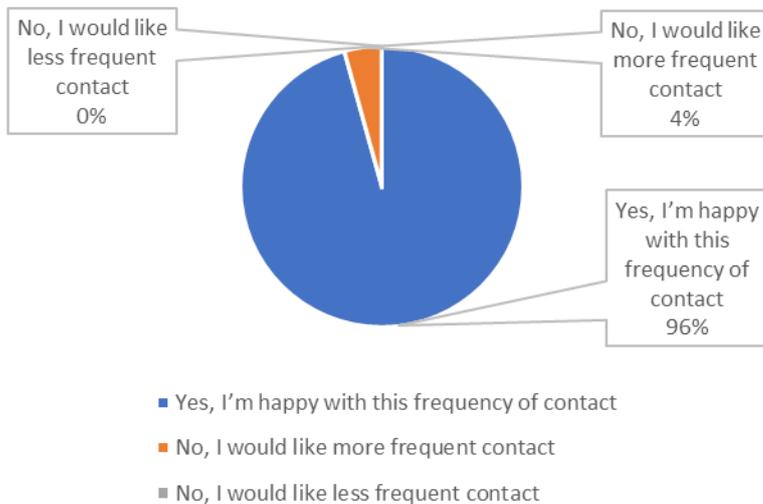
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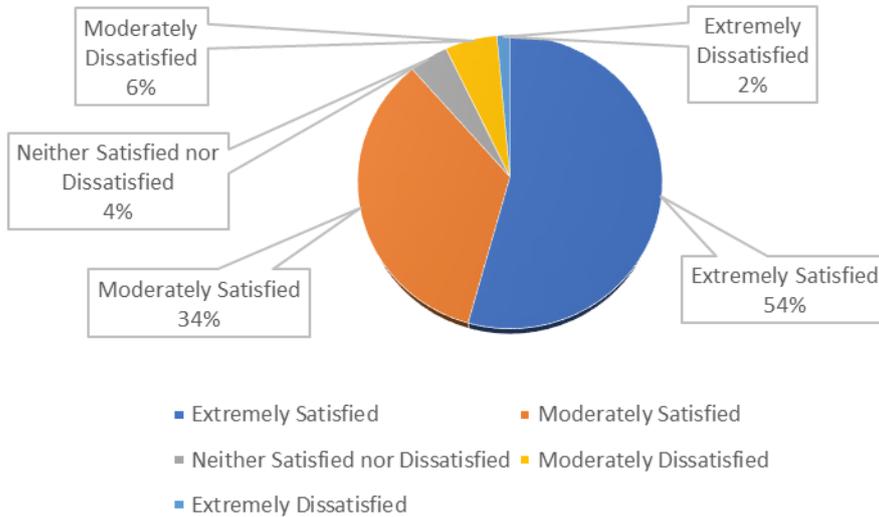
13. How often have you been in contact with other members of your team for help and support during this period?



14. Is this enough for you?

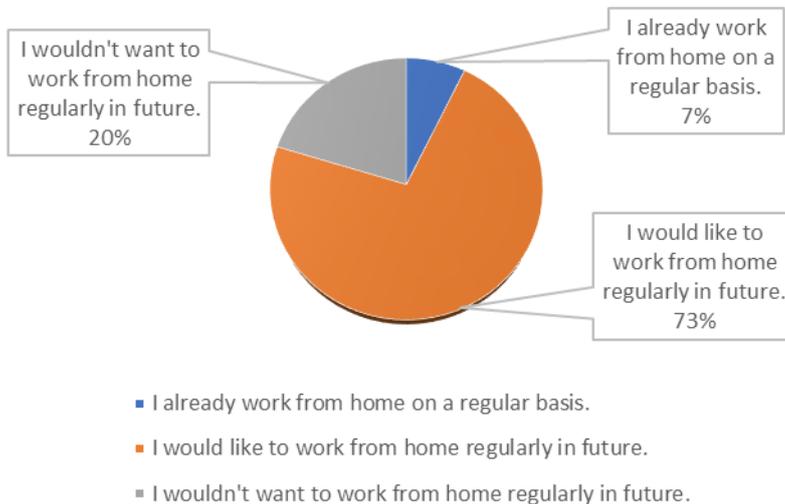


How satisfied are you with the Council's IT systems and support whilst home working (Council Anywhere etc.)?

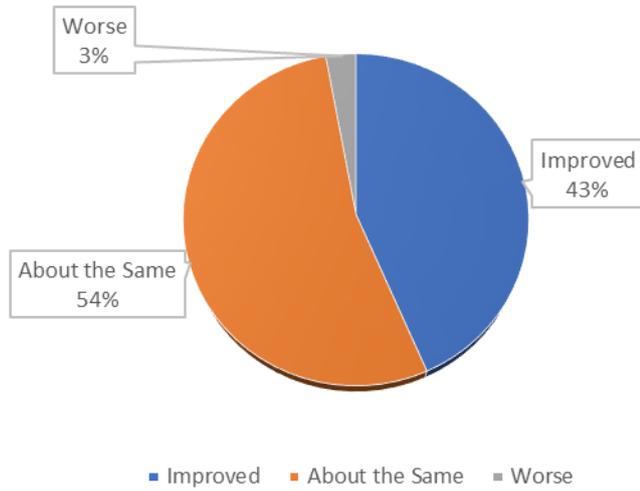


NEW QUESTIONS IN APRIL:

Once the Council is able to reopen its buildings, how would you feel about continuing with regular home working?



Overall, how would you rate the different aspects of home working since the previous survey?



Appendix C

Summary of changes between the March and April surveys and narrative around measures taken to respond to both

- The first homeworking survey ran from 25 March 2020 to 27 March 2020 and had 243 respondents whilst the second homeworking survey ran from 20 April 2020 to 28 April 2020 and had 71 respondents.
- The groups that responded most frequently to the survey were Housing (29% of all responses in March and 27% of all responses in April) and Shared Planning (25% of all responses in March and 24% of all responses in April). Shared Waste is one of the most under-represented groups (10% of all responses in March and 8% of all responses in April). This is largely due to the large number of refuse workers that have continued to work throughout the lockdown and wouldn't have responded to the survey.
- The proportion of staff that already worked from home is similar in both surveys - 40% in March and 36% in April. However, the small number of respondents in the second survey make it difficult to draw comparisons down to the service level.
- The most common tasks that respondents said they couldn't perform at home were discussions with colleagues and meetings with customers. There were several comments in March about not being able to use multiple screens or print documents at home, but this reduced by the time of the April survey.
- There were a number of comments about how it was hard to get extra IT equipment quickly and that additional equipment like a work mobile phone or stationery would make some tasks more useful.
- There were consistently high numbers of staff who said they know what is expected of them whilst working from home. In March 69% of respondents said they always know what is expected of them and 25% said they often know what is expected of them. In April 66% said they always know and 25% said they often know. There was only a slight increase in those who either

seldom or never know what is expected of them from 1% in March to 3% in April.

- There was a decline in the proportion of staff taking regular breaks between the two surveys. In March 54% of respondents always or often took regular breaks compared to 46% in April. There were three areas that declined significantly. In March 50% of Corporate Services, 40% of Finance and 53% of Housing took regular breaks. However, in April only 33% of Corporate Services, 30% of Finance and 31% of Housing always or often took regular breaks.
- In March 8% of all employees said they were unaware of the health and well-being resources on Insite. However, all employees who responded to the April survey confirmed they were aware of this information.
- In March 91% of employees used Microsoft Teams which increased to 97% in April. Similarly, in March 58% of employees worked flexibly which increased to 63% in April. When additional options were added to the April survey, employees said they used a wide range of homeworking tools such as workplace monitors and chairs (27%), WhatsApp (28%), home workstation assessments (12%) and virtual conferencing (38%).
- In relation to existing support measures, the highest level of satisfaction was related to Chief Executive updates that increased from 94% in March to 95% in April. Similarly, satisfaction with Insite updates increased from 80% in March to 88% in April. The highest level of dissatisfaction was related to contact from line managers that increased from 2% in March to 7% in April. More employees said they were unaware of how to access workplace screens than any other option in March at 30%, although this declined to 13% in April. More employees were not aware of workplace coaches than any other option in March at 29%, although this declined to 22% in April.
- In relation to additional support measures, 34% of all respondents expressed an interest for department updates, 30% wanted regular virtual briefing sessions, 25% preferred flexible online learning, 25% wanted virtual training and 15% wanted guidance to set up their IT at home.

- The proportion of employees who were in contact with their manager at least once a day was 67% in March, declining to 48% in April. The proportion of those who were in contact with their manager less than once per week rose from 5% in March to 18% in April. This pattern was also reflected by an increase in the number of employees who wanted more regular contact, rising from 6% in March to 17% in April. This is particularly the case in Finance where 50% of respondents said they are in contact with their managers less than once per week and 50% want more regular contact.
- The proportion of employees who were in contact with their team at least once a day was 85% in March compared to 69% in April. However, over 96% of employees in both surveys said they were happy with this level of contact. There were several comments about potential disagreement within teams over the hours they worked during lockdown when everyone returns to work.
- There was an overall increase in satisfaction with IT from 83% in March to 88% in April. The level of dissatisfaction remained steady between March and April at 8%. Many respondents gave constructive feedback about the availability of equipment and being able to contact IT by telephone more reliably.
- There has been a very positive reception to the idea of working from home more regularly in future, with over 70% of respondents selecting this option. Many employees expressed concern about not being able to continue flexible working after the pandemic.
- When employees were asked about any worries or concerns they cited a lack of manager awareness of work pressures due to additional responsibilities such as caring for children, a loss of team morale due to being overstretched, guilt over not being able to work full-time hours, reverting to old working practices and fewer opportunities to work from home in future.
- When prompted about the overall experience of home working from March to April, 43% of employees said they had improved, 54% of employees said they felt the same about them and 3% said they were worse.

Of those who thought it had improved, the following comments were made:

- There is more information on Insite.
- There is an appreciation that office equipment is more available to use from home, although some people have purchased their own items.
- There has been much better communication recently.
- Working from home has become easier due to more experience using Microsoft Teams.
- Working from home has reduced travel and some respondents hope to work from home more frequently in future.

Of those who thought it had stayed the same, the following comments were made:

- Some respondents said they missed face to face interaction with colleagues.
- There was appreciation for the rollout of ICT equipment and software to home workers.
- There was low mood due to concerns about the coronavirus.

Of those who thought it had gotten worse, the following comments were made:

- There have been strains of not being able to provide meaningful home learning for children whilst working full time from home.
- The time spent alone in isolation hasn't been helping. People seldom express their actual thoughts in workplace, and this is multiplied when the situation becomes more like a lifestyle than a job.
- When asked for any additional comments about their experiences of home working employees said reduced pressure of the daily commute and more flexibility on hours was a significant benefit. However, it can be too easy to get stressed, work longer hours and struggle to use slow IT systems. There was a feeling that it's harder to learn from colleagues if you're not in the office with them. Further, receiving more e-mails and using Microsoft Teams is jarring as it can feel that more is demanded of you and you may be disturbing others by contacting them.

Management Actions

- The results of the homeworking surveys have been shared with Heads of Service including advice on how to address specific concerns raised in the surveys by their teams.
- The Chief Executive vlogs twice a week (with contributions from the wider Leadership Team and our new Chief Operating Officer on one occasion) which have addressed concerns raised in the homeworking surveys such as the difficulty of balancing work with home schooling.
- A tip of the day e-mail created by Chloe Smith (HR) is shared with all employees to enhance awareness of mental health issues and support employees during the lockdown. Feedback has been very positive.
- Many of the training courses that were due to take place during the lockdown such as minute taking, PDR and stress management for managers have been organised as virtual online courses. HR have worked with the providers to adapt the designed courses to meet our learning needs and employee working patterns whilst home working.
- A series of virtual training courses have been organised to support employees during the lockdown such as Reducing the Impact of Enforced Homeworking on Mental Health, Maintaining Good Mental Health During a Crisis and Personal Resilience.
- An SCDC Learning Resources group has been setup on MS Teams to enable all employees to post and share articles, training courses, videos and other resources on a variety of work-related topics. Greater Cambridge Planning Service employees now have access to MS Teams.
- IT have publicised how to request and pick up additional equipment for home use.
- HR have adapted pro formas and working practices to enable all formal meetings to take place virtually using MS Teams. This has maintained high levels of customer service and improved efficiency in case management.