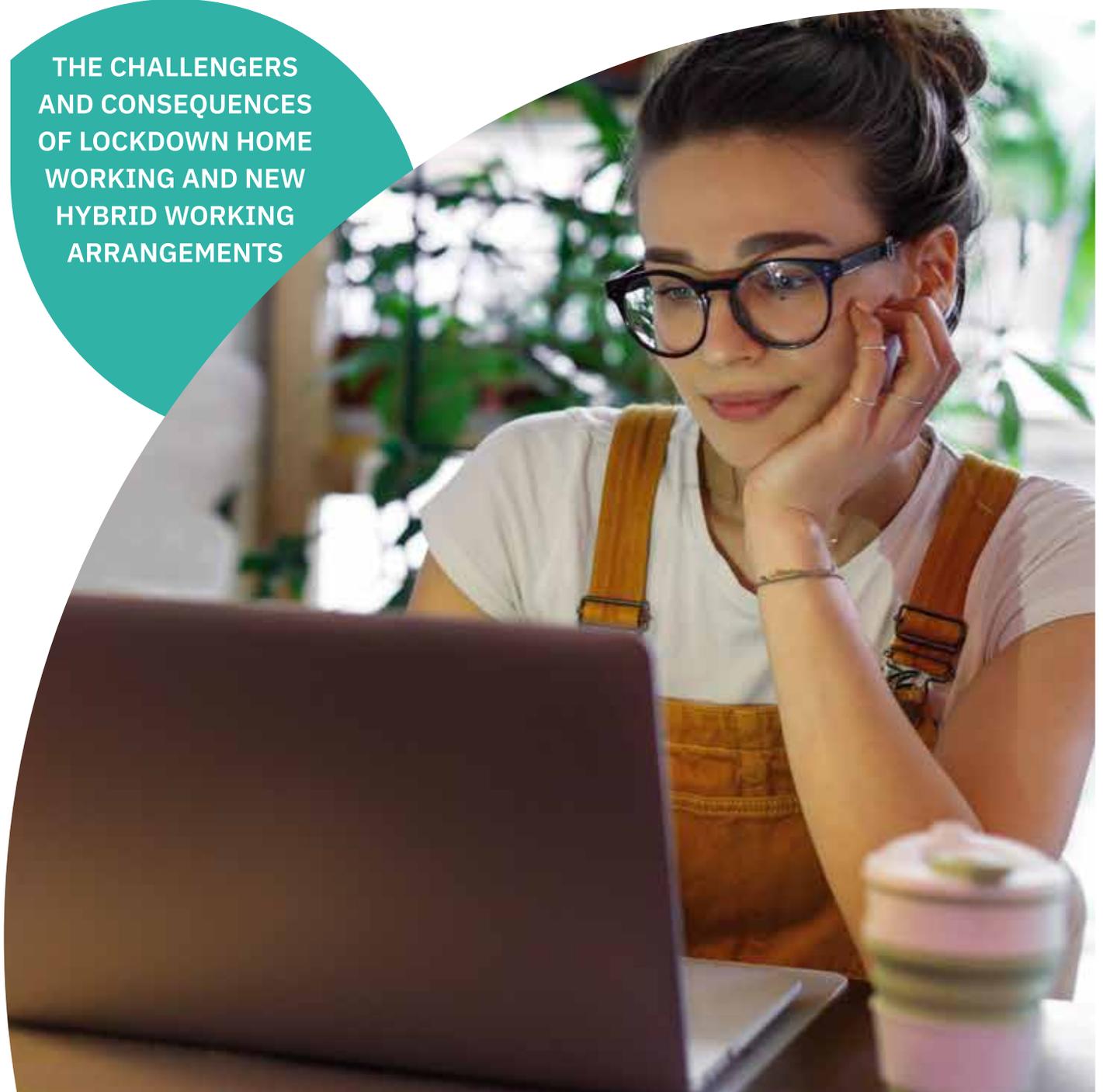


HYBRID WORKING SURVEY

A major survey of 451 employers to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of hybrid working.

THE CHALLENGERS
AND CONSEQUENCES
OF LOCKDOWN HOME
WORKING AND NEW
HYBRID WORKING
ARRANGEMENTS



HYBRID WORKING

How have we managed the risks?

Were employers able to prepare for the health and safety challenges of lockdown home working? What were the consequences? How are companies preparing for the related challenges of hybrid working?

The results of the EcoOnline survey are in, summarising what leading health and safety practitioners in Europe (451 respondents) across a range of sectors and sizes shared with us.

HYBRID WORKFORCE



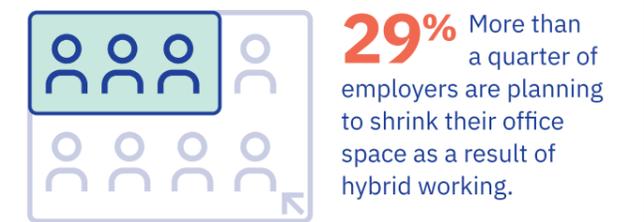
SOFTWARE TO SUPPORT HYBRID WORKING



HYBRID WORKER TRAINING

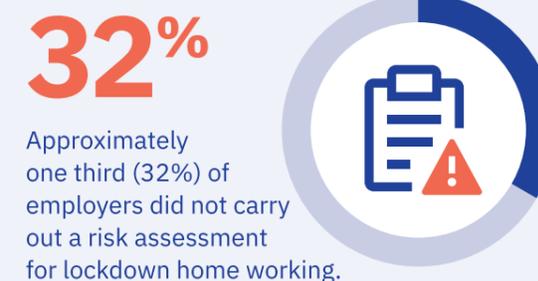


HYBRID WORKING SPACE SAVING



LOCKDOWN HOME WORKING

RISK ASSESSMENT



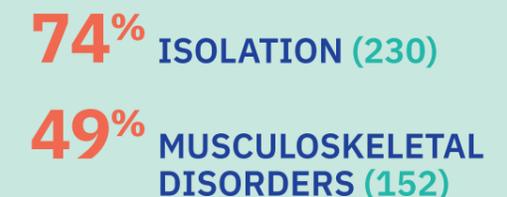
HOME-GROWN PROBLEMS



RISK ASSESSMENT COVERAGE



TOP TWO STAND OUT ISSUES



HYBRID WORKING PATTERN



The hybrid working pattern preference seems to be most commonly two days working from company premises and three at home.

HYBRID WORKING EQUIPMENT



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Introduction



In the early 1990s, faster data networks and cheaper personal computers led to a gradual ticking up of the number of UK office workers spending some time each week working at home. The number of home working knowledge workers – measured by the government’s Labour Force Survey - rose from 400,000 in 1994 to 1.8 million in 2019. It was a noteworthy shift, but a small one, accounting for only around 5% of the workforce.

Then, In March 2021, the global paroxysm caused by the Coronavirus pandemic forced a wholesale move to home-based working for office staff whose jobs could be carried out remotely. This switch, which saw almost 50% of the UK’s workers, for example, relocated to their living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, was made at short notice and little time for preparation.

The unexpected success of the massive forced trial of home working, and the continuing waves of government-imposed restrictions on return to workplaces as variants of the virus have emerged, has led most organisations to rethink their policies on where employees work. Many are now developing hybrid working programmes which involve employees mixing days at home and days in the office.

But how well were employers able to prepare for the health and safety challenges of lockdown home working and what were the consequences? And how well are they preparing for the related challenges of new hybrid working arrangements?

To answer these questions, EcoOnline has carried out a major survey of 451 employers to gauge issues such as risk assessment, training and equipment provision, to help identify the strengths and weaknesses in health and safety provision both during the initial period of forced full-time home working and in the “new normal” of a mix of office and home hours that many organisations are now adopting.

The results provide a valuable picture of the measures employers took to safeguard their workforces in the abrupt change necessitated by COVID-19 and their preparations for a much longer-term restructuring of work patterns.

Insights from the survey include:

1	Almost one in three organisations surveyed is moving at least half their workforce to hybrid working.
2	Almost half of organisations have provided no training to employees in issues such as home office ergonomics or remote communications and avoiding isolation.
3	More than a quarter of employers are planning to shrink their office space as a result of hybrid working and one in five who have made plans intends to cut more than 25% of their current space.
4	Three quarters of employers said one or more employees had reported difficulties with lockdown homeworking, most commonly isolation and musculoskeletal problems.
5	The proportion of employers relying solely on employee questionnaires (reviewed by managers) to risk assess home working arrangements fell from 74% for lockdown home working to 51% for hybrid working.
6	Almost half the employers surveyed have mandated the same weekly pattern for all eligible workers in their organisation, most commonly two days working from company premises and three at home.
7	Around a fifth of employers in our sample is providing no equipment for home working - apart from laptop computers - as part of their hybrid arrangements.
8	Where equipment is provided for hybrid home workers it is most commonly laptop docking stations and monitors and office chairs.
9	More than one in six of organisations with hybrid working programmes (17% or 64 respondents) have restricted some individuals to office working only, most often because their homes were unsuitable for work use.
10	Approximately a third of employers carried out no risk assessment for lockdown homeworking.
11	The most common topics covered in lockdown home working risk assessments were workstation ergonomics, stress, electrical safety and trip hazards.

The survey sample

Our online questionnaire, promoted on the Health and Safety Matters magazine website and via EcoOnline mailings generated 451 usable responses between 24 November and 8 December 2021.

As **Fig 2** shows, organisation sizes, measured by workforce numbers, range almost evenly from those with fewer than 25 employees (12% or 55) to those with more than 10,000 (10% or 45 respondents). The biggest individual category is those with 1001 to 10,000 workers, (25% or 111). The median organisation (the midpoint in the range of respondents) has between 201 and 500 employees.

Nine out of 10 organisations are based in the British Isles (**see Fig 3**). The remainder, 33 organisations, included two respondents in Turkey, two in India and individual entries from a range of states including Azerbaijan, Botswana, Lithuania, the Philippines and the Punjab. Retailers and leisure operators both contributed fewer than five respondents, while 41 organisations in activities such as defence and agriculture, fell outside our main categorisation and ticked the “Other” box

Almost three quarters of individual respondents (72%) are health and safety professionals, 9% are in operations and 3% each are human resources and facilities management practitioners. The remaining 13% were a wide assortment ranging from marketing executives and trade union shop stewards to finance managers and managing directors.

Fig 1: Business sector

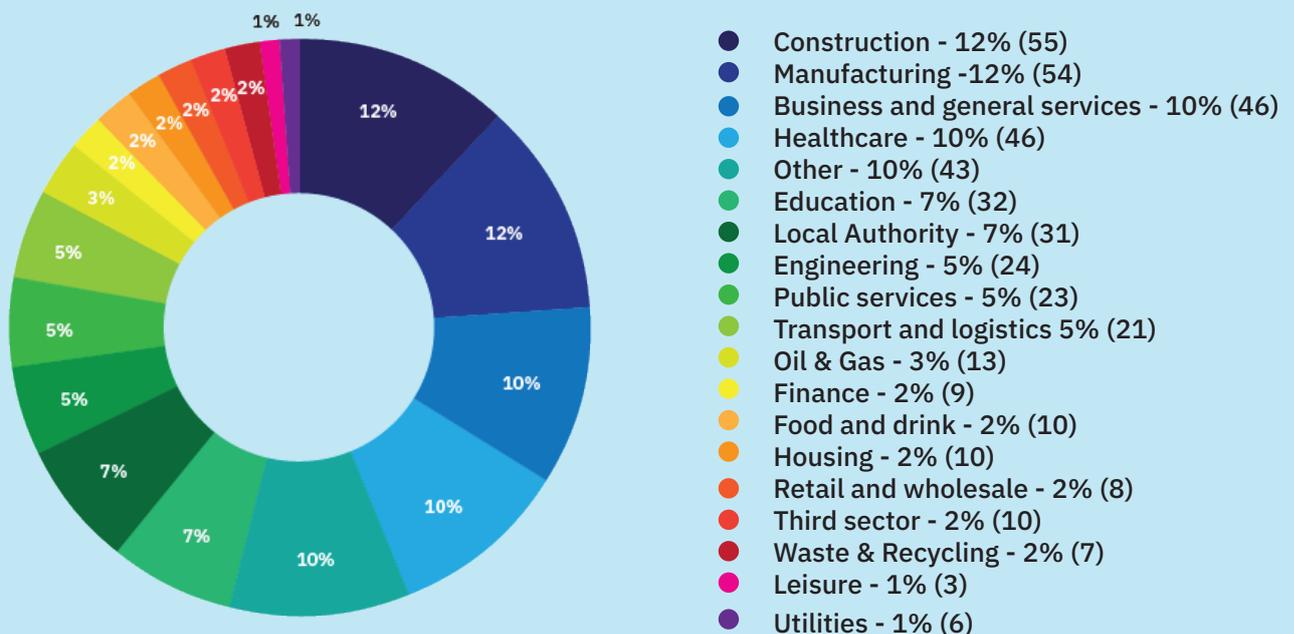


Fig 2. Organisation size

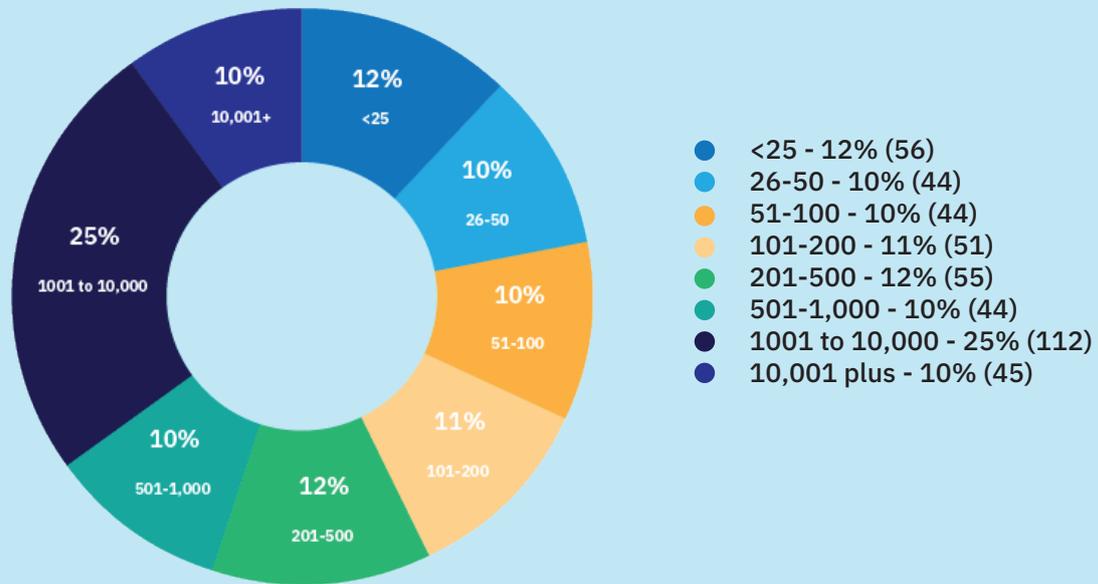


Fig 3. Location



Lockdown home working

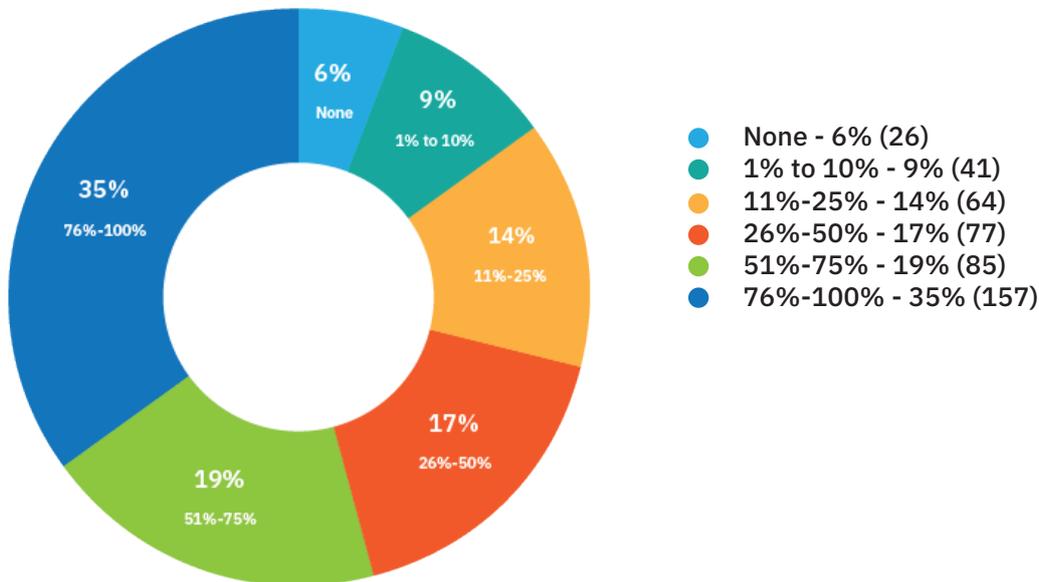


On 26 March 2020 the first government rules came into force requiring people to stay in their homes, with strictly limited exemptions, to slow transmission of the virus.

Though the exemptions included those whose jobs could not be performed from home and who were not furloughed by their employers. In April the UK Office for National Statistics estimated 47% of employees were working from home.

In our survey sample, 94% of organisations (425) moved at least some of their workforces to home working. Only 26 (6%) had no homeworkers; these were most commonly grouped in the construction, food and drink and general manufacturing sectors. These industrial categories, along with logistics and healthcare dominated the group with the lowest proportion - under 10% of their workers - of lockdown homeworkers - 11% of our sample. As presented in **Fig 3**, more than a third of respondents moved at least three-quarters of their staff to home working.

Fig 3. Proportion of employees home working in lockdowns



Lockdown home working risk assessment



We asked respondents whether they carried out any risk assessment of employees' homes as part of the move to home working during pandemic restrictions. More than two-thirds of those with homeworkers - 68% (292 organisations) had carried out assessments but 32% (136) had not.

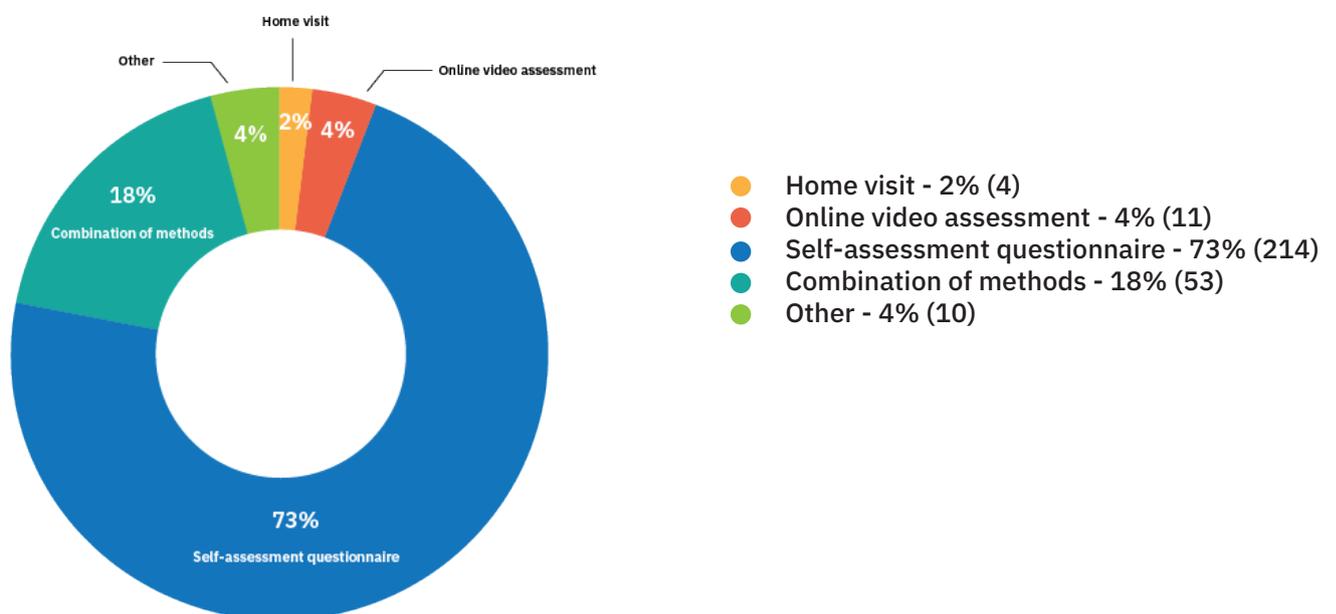
“Home is home, the employer only needs to provide a safe WORKPLACE, they don't provide employees a HOME,” said one health and safety manager in a medium sized business. This view seems at odds with the overall duty of care to protect employees wherever they are carrying out work for their employer.

Among those who carried out risk assessments 73% (182) asked employees to define an area of their home as workspace, so they could limit the scope of the assessment.

The most common method of assessment was to ask employees to complete a self-assessment form and then have this checked over by a manager or health and safety practitioner, this is presented in **Fig 4**. Only a fraction of our sample - four respondents - adopted the most onerous method of sending company representatives to inspect employees' homes. Three of these companies had fewer than 50 employees and two described their business as military security, which suggests they might have needed to check employees' homes for more than just trip hazards.

Though only 11 companies relied solely on online meeting platforms to carry out video-based assessments, another 51 used a combination of methods, which may have included a video inspection.

Fig 4: Lockdown home working risk assessment methods



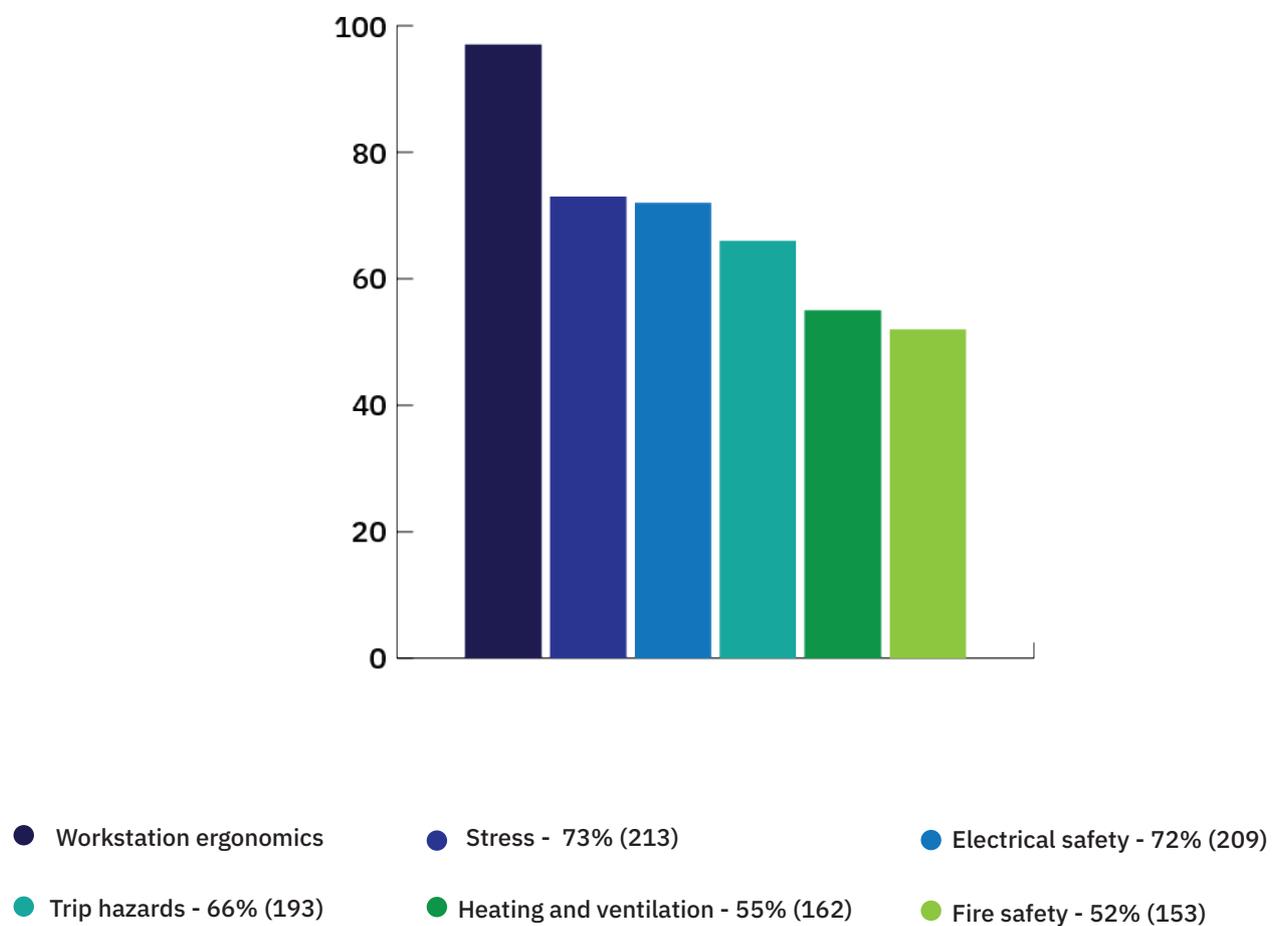
We asked respondents what they had covered in their lockdown home working assessments, offering them a list of common hazards. Ergonomics, checking that employees' home workstations and display-screen equipment (DSE) was arranged to reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders was included by almost all respondents.

Stress risk - checking that employees were not likely to become anxious or isolated at home - was the next most commonly assessed.

Fire safety, which was covered in half the risk assessments, obviously overlaps with electrical safety, since overloaded sockets and frayed wiring can cause fires but still deserves its own category because of the separate risk of electrical shocks.

In 37 organisations (13%) the DSE set-up was the only issue covered by the risk assessment. And smaller numbers restricted their assessments to other single issues. However, most respondents covered multiple items and more than a third of those with risk assessments - 37% (107) "collected the set" of the options we offered, ticking all six hazard areas.

Fig 5: Lockdown home working risk assessment coverage



Home-grown problems



More than one in four of our respondents (27%) with homeworkers said that none of them had reported any problems. **“Everyone loves working from home”**, noted an HR manager in a small facilities company. But a majority (73% or 310) reported that homeworkers had experienced difficulties. (This proportion differed little between organisations who had carried out a risk assessment for lockdown home working and those who had not.)

The results are shown in **Fig 6**, highlighting that separation from the organisation and from colleagues was the problem most commonly reported followed by back pain, neck and upper limb problems as the second most common cause of days lost to sickness in pre-pandemic years.

It is important not to overstate the significance of these findings, because respondents are not asked how many employees had experienced difficulties, so in many cases there may only have been one or two cases. Nevertheless, the proportion reporting at least some cases of isolation and musculoskeletal problems is high.

The findings suggest that the rapid switch to home working necessitated by the *force majeure* of the pandemic may have left some companies insufficient time to make the provisions to ensure employee physical and mental health were managed well.

There are lessons for the development of post-pandemic hybrid working programmes, even though the risks may be diluted in these arrangements by mixing days at home with ones in the office. It is interesting to note that though isolation was a clear concern, stress conditions among homeworkers more generally were only noted by 2% of our sample.

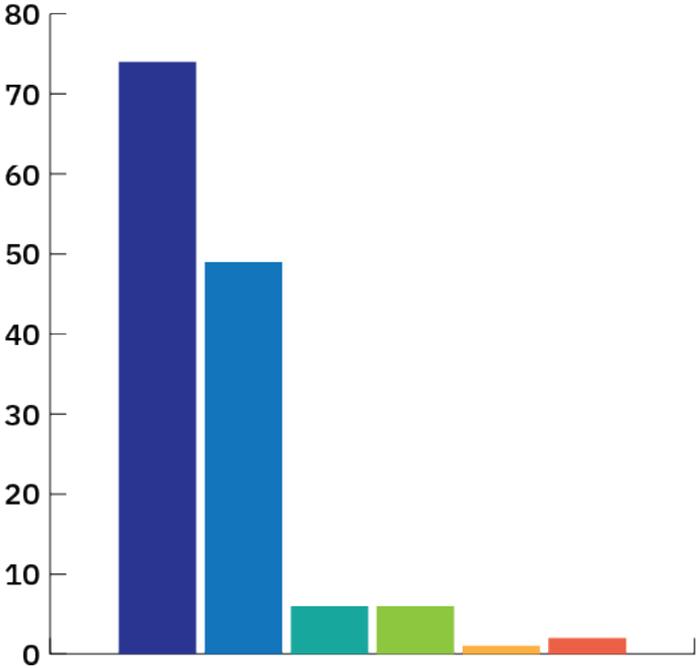
Mental health conditions, including stress and anxiety, have been the fourth greatest cause of sickness absence in the UK in previous years (after minor ailments such as colds, MSDs and “other” causes such as accidents and diabetes).

ADVISORY NOTE

Even where they are confident that employees are well prepared and equipped for new working arrangements such as hybrid working, employers should ensure there are multiple feedback mechanisms to pick up instances where individuals develop problems.

Regular surveys, team meetings, and checks by managers will provide opportunities for employees to say if they begin to struggle with the new workstyle and for the organisation to address the problem early.

Fig 6: Lockdown home working problems



- Isolation - 74% (230)
- Musculoskeletal disorders - 49% (152)
- Slips and trips - 6% (20)
- Electrical safety - 6% (19)
- Fire safety - 1% (4)
- Stress - 2% (8)

Hybrid working



Asked about their commitment to new hybrid working patterns whenever COVID-19 allows, our respondents ranged from those who want people back in the office full-time, to those who were expecting all staff to work at home at least part of the week.

As presented in **Fig. 7**, the distribution across the categories was almost even, with around 15% of organisations in each segment, from no workers transferring to hybrid working to between 75% and 100% of employees transitioning, showing the wide variety of approaches across business.

Among the 64 companies who are not adopting hybrid patterns for staff; manufacturing, engineering and construction firms dominate. A few took the opportunity to explain why: .

“Some selected office staff were working from home during lockdown. However, it was found that staff were less productive and issues were arising. Staff were brought back into work as soon as we were able to.”

“There is a big challenge with hybrid working not being properly defined with legal back up and guidance on how to effectively manage a hybrid workforce.”

“We service the offshore industry, so it is difficult to move to working from home.”

“Due to the uncertainty and potential costs the business is not really investing in the providing equipment e.g. desks, chairs and monitors to help with working from home. Working from home has prior to Covid has been seen as a benefit and one the employee would need to fund in terms of equipment.”

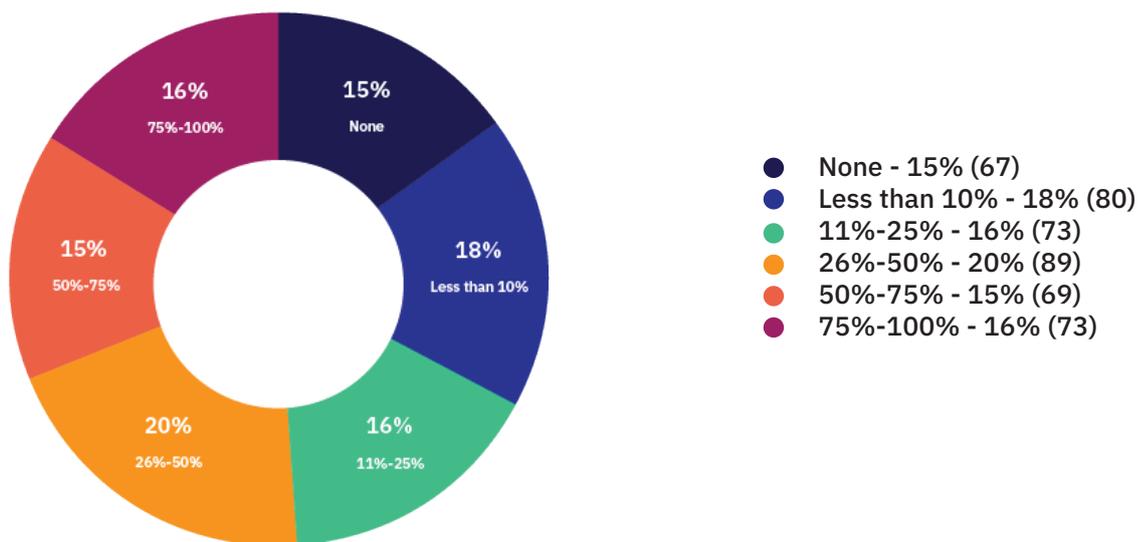
Nevertheless, the fact that almost a third of our sample of 451 organisations is moving at least half their workforce to hybrid working is an indicator of the step change the pandemic has caused in work patterns.

There is no hard stop between the move to hybrid working and the end of lockdown homeworking. In December the government announced more restrictions in England from the middle of the month to try to curb the Omicron coronavirus variant. “Go to work if you must, but work from home if you can,” said Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Similar messages from the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish administrations came shortly before or after.

As a result, employers who had already developed hybrid working schemes as previous restrictions eased may now have had to suspend them.

Fig 7: Proportion of employees moving to hybrid working



A small majority - 56% - have no fixed work pattern across their organisation. In almost a third of the sample, individual working patterns are being set by agreement between employees and their line managers, presumably based on a combination of work demands and individual preference.

Another one in five organisations (24%) is setting patterns at a higher level according to business need, perhaps section by section.

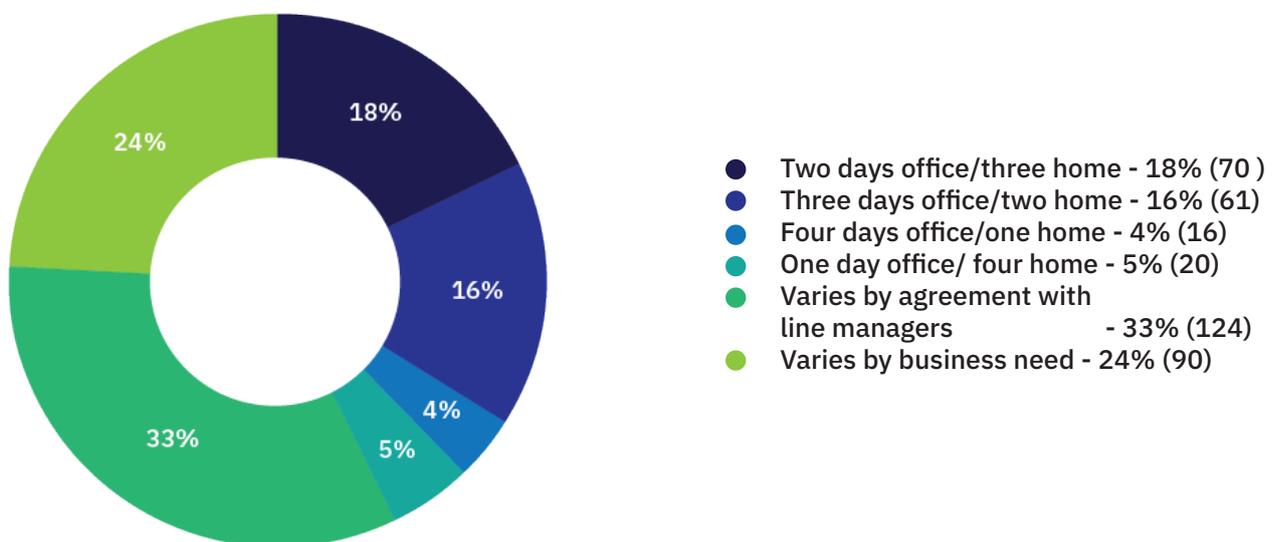
But almost half our sample have simplified their hybrid arrangements by setting a common pattern for all eligible workers, most commonly two days working from company premises and three at home.

ADVISORY NOTE

A “one size fits all” approach to hybrid working, mandating the same working pattern for all employees – two days at home, three in the office, for instance – is unlikely to produce the maximum benefit in terms of employee satisfaction and productivity.

Allowing local flexibility for teams to negotiate working patterns with their managers, subject to central guidelines, is more likely to achieve the best balance of organisational and individual requirements.

Fig 8: Weekly hybrid working patterns



Hybrid working risk assessments



Asked if they were planning new risk assessments for hybrid work arrangements - beyond the assessment they already had for pandemic homeworking, 162 respondents (42% of those with hybrid workers) said no. They were evenly spread between those who are only transferring a smaller proportion of their workforces to hybrid working and those who were moving a majority of workers to the new workstyle.

Notably there were 59 employers - 13% of total survey sample, around one in seven - who had transferred at least a proportion of their workers to lockdown home working without a risk assessment are planning to transfer some to hybrid working still without an assessment.

The UK HSE guidance on home working (including hybrid working) states that **“as an employer, you have the same health and safety responsibilities for people working at home as for any other worker,”** and that these responsibilities include carrying out a risk assessment.

As well as a potential breach of their duty of care, those that have not risk assessed employees' home working arrangements risk the costs of higher sickness absence and lower productivity among staff whose home workspace is unsuitable for working even part of the week.

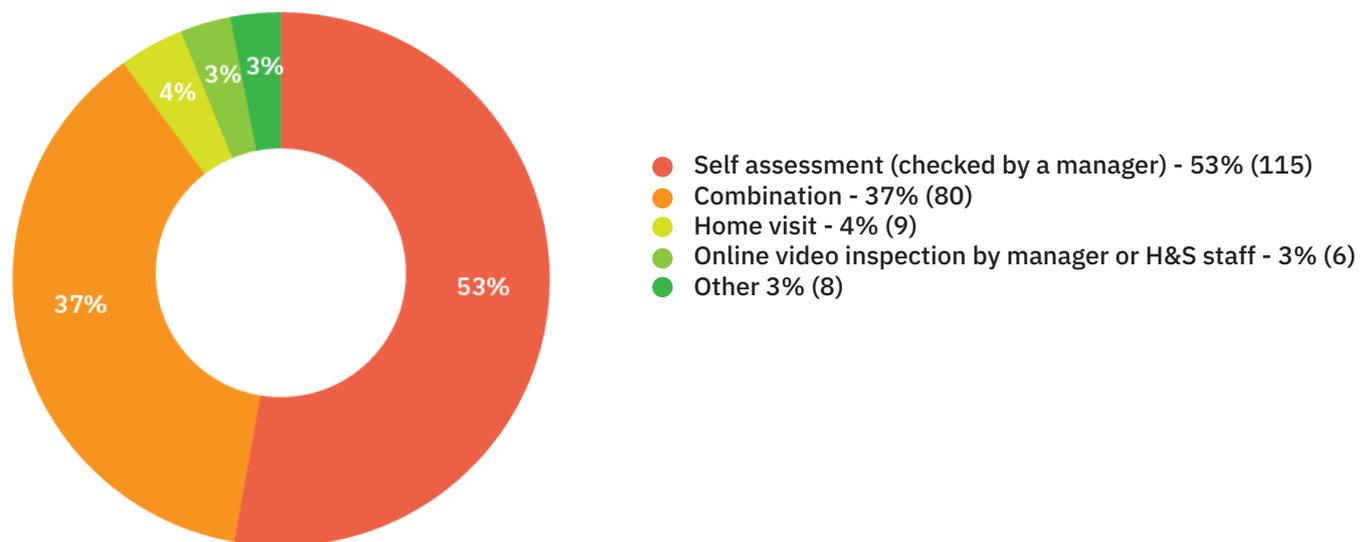
The health and safety practitioner at a Northern Ireland healthcare provider in our sample gave a warning based on personal experience: **“As a result of working from home I am significantly more productive; however, as a result of not using an ergonomic chair I developed sciatica [at the] end of 2020. Then [in] Summer 2021 I suffered two bulging and one herniated disc related to poor work posture ...I was off for 12 weeks in extreme pain. I do believe that musculoskeletal issues will rise if risk assessments are not provided for those working from home over the longer term.”**

Among the 218 organisations who said they do plan to carry out new risk assessments - 57% of organisations with hybrid working programmes, The most common methods are detailed in **Fig. 9**. The number of respondents relying just on an employee self-assessment checked by a manager has fallen to 53%, from 74% for lockdown home working.

The reason is not clear but it may be that the self-assessment technique was deemed adequate by some for a quick shift to temporary home working during the pandemic but is not seen as thorough enough for a permanent work arrangement.

The HSE guidance on risk assessment for home and hybrid working is clear, **“In most cases you do not need to visit [employees] to ensure their health and safety”**, but notes there may be exceptional cases such as employees with disabilities. Of the nine organisations in our sample who said they would visit hybrid workers' homes to make assessments only two had used the same method for pandemic home working, reflecting the movement restrictions during lockdown periods.

Fig 9. Hybrid working risk assessment methods



Almost all respondents who have carried out new risk assessments had checked workstation set-ups for ergonomic suitability, but 13 had covered nothing else.

Only six organisations out of 218 had not risk assessed home workstation ergonomics, leaving themselves in breach of the HSE’s clear guidance that: ***“Where workers use DSE in the home and office, the assessment should cover both situations.”***

More than 50% of those who had carried out a new risk assessment had included all the issues in our table, covering all aspects recommended by the HSE’s home working guidance.

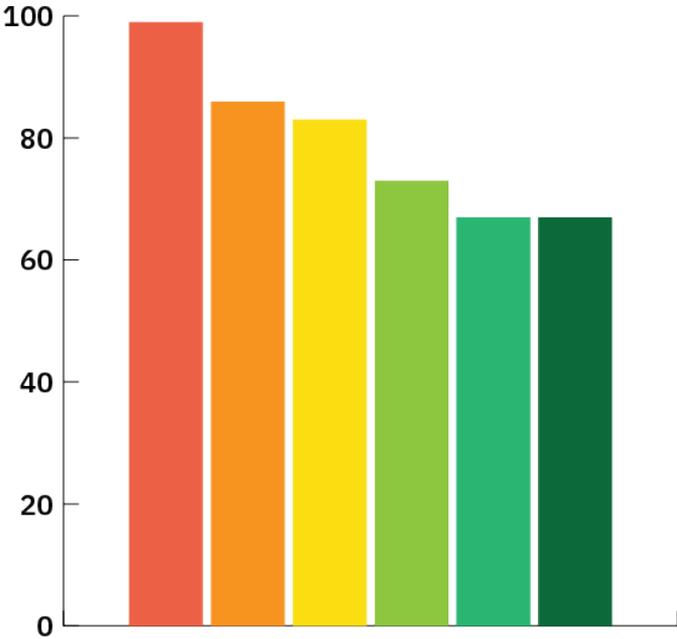
Three respondents added that they have included travel to and from home in their risk assessments, presumably reflecting the fact that employees will be carrying work equipment in the form of laptops, where they would not have been in their previous daily commute.

ADVISORY NOTE

Self-assessment by employees of the risks associated with their home workspace will be more robust if they are asked to provide photos or video clips of the space to the manager or health and safety practitioner tasked with checking the risk assessment questionnaire.

This allows the manager to spot hazards the employee may have missed.

Fig 10. Hybrid working risk assessment coverage



- Workstation ergonomics - 99% (212)
- Stress and isolation - 86% (185)
- Electrical safety - 83% (178)
- Trip hazards - 73% (157)
- Heating and ventilation - 67% (143)
- Fire safety - 67% (143)

Though a risk assessment will often flag issues that can be easily remedied, some problems identified by proposed home workspace are beyond the remit (or budget) of an employer to fix. More than one in six of those with hybrid working programmes (17% or 64 respondents) had restricted individual employees to office working only. Half of these mentioned the unsuitability of employees’ domestic set-ups as the main reason.

“Bedsit - cramped, no space,”

“Some staff with no suitable place to work (shared houses, living with parents, etc)”

“Two colleagues out of around 5,000, due to living in a bedsit style apartment so space limitations.”

“No suitable workstation and no room to position one safely.”

“Some people were using their laptops sitting in bed.”

Absence of internet connections or poor data rates were mentioned by a few respondents and three said there were staff whose pre-existing health conditions could be exacerbated by the change in working pattern. **“Suicide risk due to severe mental health issues,”** said one; **“limited space for specialist chairs and or rise and fall desk,”** said another.

Trained and ready?



Health and safety training is usually provided to employees to familiarise them with the risks associated with tasks or working conditions. Employees may not need training for living at home - though the annual toll of domestic accidents suggests otherwise - but arguably the requirement to work there, even part of the time, introduces a training requirement for the employer.

The HSE's home working pages refer specifically to DSE training: ***“You must provide workers with training in the use of their workstation and DSE equipment”***, suggesting that the requirement to risk assess home workstations also extends to home workspace. The Republic of Ireland's Health and Safety Authority also refers in its home working guidance to employers' duties including ***“providing information, instruction, training and supervision regarding safety and health to employees”***.

In all, just over half of our respondents (201 or 53%) with hybrid workers have carried out any training for them, leaving 181 who may be storing up problems for the future. Among the small majority who had trained hybrid workers, DSE use was the most common, followed by remote communications, see **Fig 11**. The latter is not exclusively a health and safety issue, but experience of large-scale homeworking projects suggests that recognising communications methods will change when workers are based remotely, even part of the time, and preparing them for the shift, is important to reducing stress and isolation. These two issues were addressed separately by smaller proportion of respondents with training.

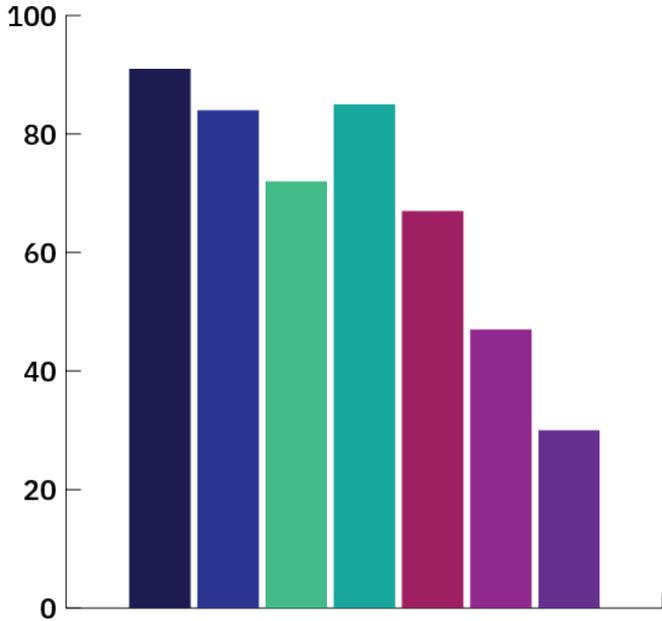
Three respondents noted their training extended to safe travel to and from the office. Since employees were presumably doing the same journeys before as commuters, the training probably covers security issues carrying computers out of the office.

ADVISORY NOTE

Training is an important administrative control for health and safety risks and should be arranged for any employees who are expected to change their work patterns. The absence of supervision in home workspace means the employee will have to be alert to changes in hazard levels.

For wellbeing purposes, training is also valuable to make employees conscious of the need to maintain remote communications while they are at home to avoid isolation.

Fig 11. Hybrid worker training



- Workstation ergonomics/posture – 91% (180)
- Remote communications – 84% (167)
- Avoiding isolation – 72% (143)
- Managing stress - 85% (168)
- Work scheduling (taking breaks etc) – 67% (133)
- Fire safety – 47% (94)
- Home security – 30% (60)

Home working equipment



The question of whether to supply workers who spend part of their week at home with office equipment is one with no clear-cut answer. With full-time homeworkers the answer may be simpler since the organisation only has to provide a single workstation. But with hybrid patterns, especially those involving a minority of each week spent at home there is not just the expense of supplying extra equipment to consider, but also whether placing corporate furniture in employees' domestic space - as opposed to letting them use their own home furniture, subject to a risk assessment - is detrimental to their work-life balance.

The HSE's guidance on this subject is pragmatic on this subject: ***“Make sure those working at home can achieve a comfortable, sustainable posture. They may not need office furniture or equipment at home to achieve this. But you should check if their own equipment is suitable.”***

More than one in five employers in our sample (84) are providing no equipment for home working as part of their hybrid arrangements. That total includes six organisations with more than 10,000 employees, three of which are transferring between a quarter and half their workforces to hybrid working and one, an English local authority, which is moving more than three-quarters of its staff to the new pattern. The health and safety manager at the authority says they are “somewhat confident” the authority is ready for the health and safety challenges involved.

But as shown in **Fig 12**, the majority of organisations surveyed - 78% or 295 employers - are providing at least one item of equipment for home use. The most common item supplied is a docking station and monitor, ensuring employees are not constrained by the fixed distance between a laptop keyboard and screen, which is not recommended for extended work periods.

Next most common is chair provision, again underlining the importance of a healthy DSE set-up to most employers.

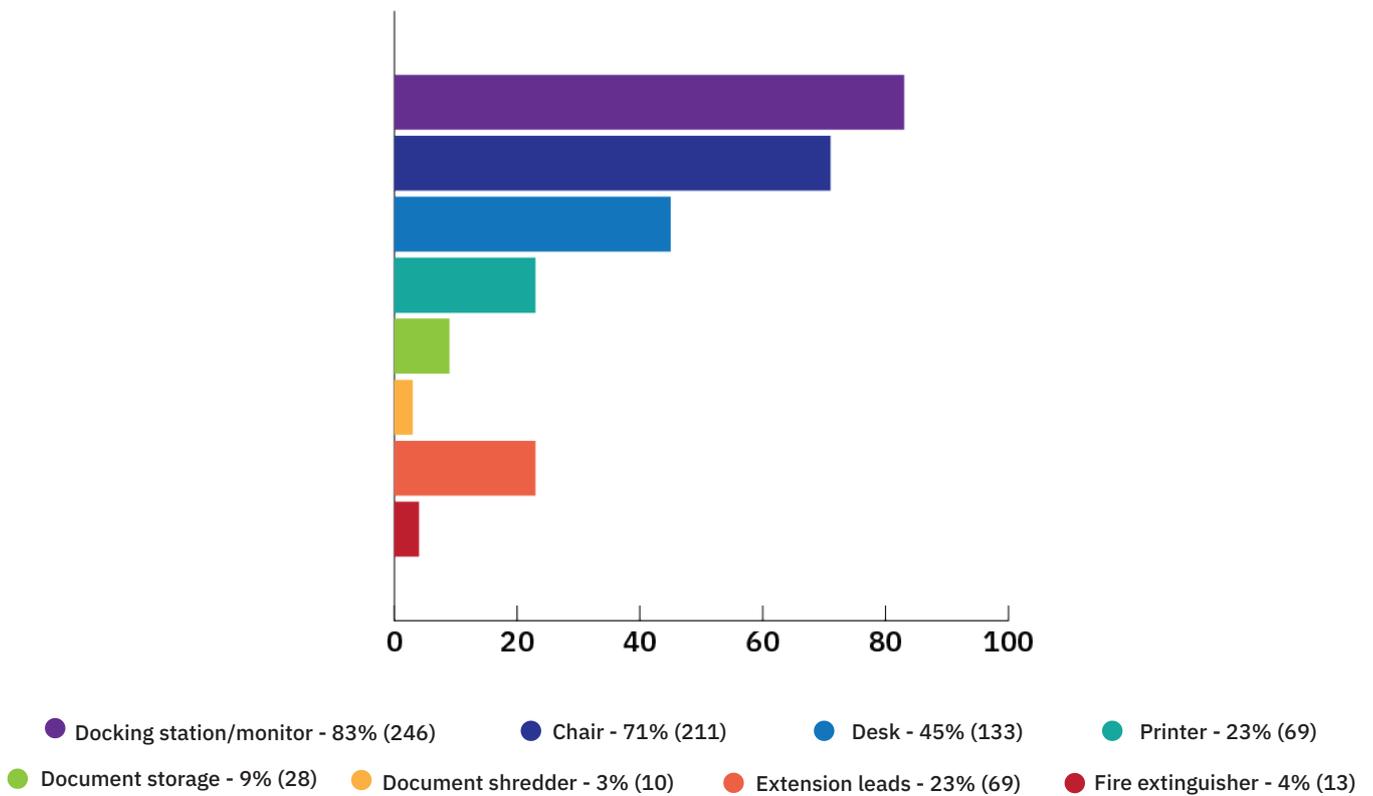
A small number (13) give employees document shredders to ensure company paperwork is disposed of securely. Almost three times as many - though still fewer than one in 10 of those offering any equipment - supply some form of document storage, which might also be for security purposes but also offers employees a way of ensuring that work can be shut away outside working hours, reducing its intrusion where they do not have a separate work room.

ADVISORY NOTE

Since musculoskeletal problems are among the most common work-related health conditions, a suitable DSE set-up is essential for any location where employees will work for extended periods. This includes an adjustable chair and a work surface at the correct height to allow good posture.

Supplying employees with furniture or paying for them to buy items that meet these criteria is not only a legal requirement, it is an investment in their continued productivity.

Fig 12. Home equipment provision



Since a substantial minority of employers are providing employees with electrical equipment for extended home use we asked whether they had made arrangements for portable appliance testing (PAT). PAT involves, at minimum, insulation resistance checks and in some cases, earth continuity and lead polarity tests, using a specialist meter.

In low-risk environments, the HSE does not insist on PAT for equipment such as computer monitors but does advocate a periodic visual inspection by someone competent (as well as routine visual checks by the user). However, insurers may take a different line in deciding whether to pay a personal injury claim brought by an employee who sustains an electric shock using a piece of employer-provided equipment with no PAT certification.

Of our sample of 381 organisations with hybrid workers, 120 providing monitors for home use have decided not to PAT them, 31 who provide printers and 22 giving out extension leads for other equipment have made the same decision, and nine respondents who provide all three.

Hybrid working software



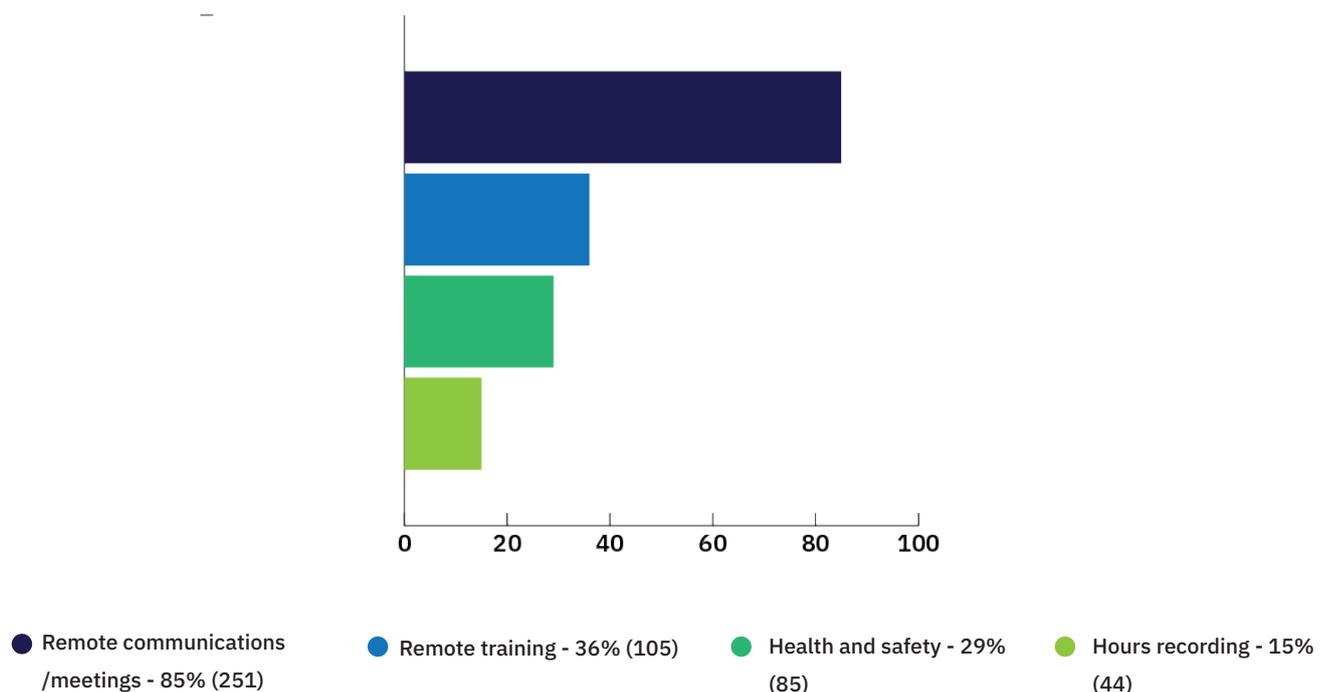
Remote working in administrative and knowledge-based jobs is made possible by information and communications technology. Of our 381 respondents with hybrid working arrangements, more than three-quarters (77% or 294) are using new software to facilitate them. As shown in **Fig 13**, the most common addition was remote communications and collaboration software - including programmes such as Slack, Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

In 114 cases, 39% of those buying new programmes, this is their only investment in software to support hybrid working. The 29% of employers investing in health and safety software almost all fitted into the category of those whose dynamic working risk assessments were based at least partly on employee self-assessment, so the software purchase is likely to support these assessments as well as any other purposes such as reporting incidents.

Software to monitor employees' working hours is a new addition for only one in six employers. Though it would be easy to assume such programmes are intended to let employers check employees are working adequate hours, it can conversely be used to flag up long hours working, which is more commonly a problem noted by employers of home workers.

“We’d be interested to know how many businesses have introduced hours tracking for WFH staff,” noted a senior manager from a small distribution firm. *“I wouldn’t imagine it’s a very popular suggestion, but it does help to alleviate ‘guilt’ and working more than necessary at home, trying to ‘prove’ you are doing your contracted hours.”*

Fig. 13 Software to support hybrid working



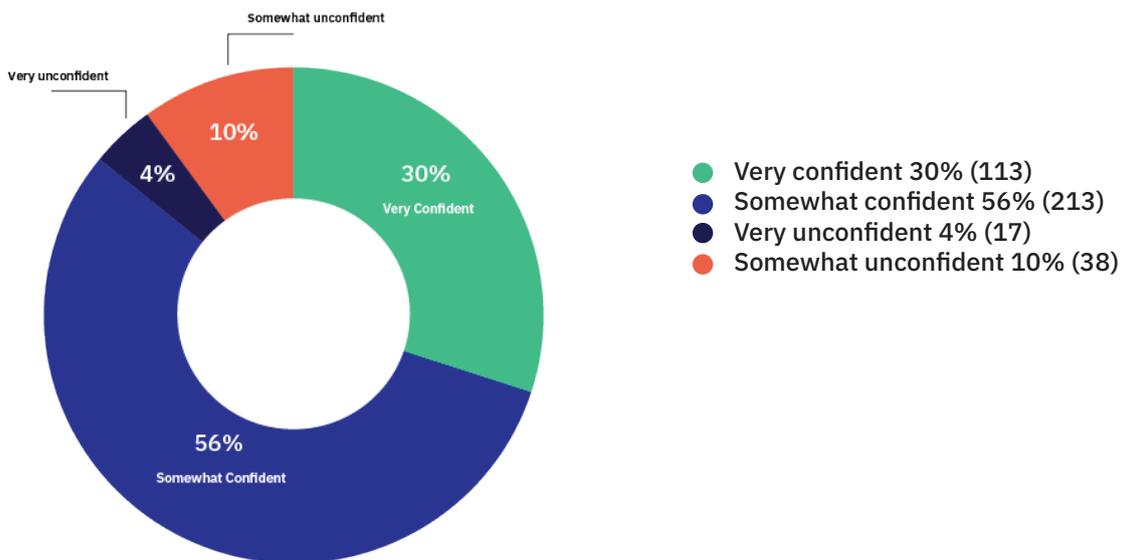
Are we ready?



We asked respondents how confident they were that their organisations were ready for the management challenges of hybrid work patterns including the health and safety issues.

As shown in **Fig 14**, they were mostly positive, almost nine out of ten (86%) saying they were reasonably or very confident their organisation could manage the changes successfully. This figure only dropped to 81% of those who said they had carried out no risk assessment for hybrid working.

Fig 14 Organisational readiness for hybrid working



Space-saving plans



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations with extensive part-time home working programmes often found that the increased occurrence of vacant desks - in addition to those left empty on any given day by staff on leave or travelling for work - prompted a review of office space use. The adoption of hotdesking - use of shared workstations on a first-come, first-served basis - allowed many to reduce their office accommodation.

In a time when many businesses have suffered the financial impact of disruption caused by coronavirus it would be strange if at least some were not considering taking advantage of a potential dividend offered by hybrid working in lower property costs.

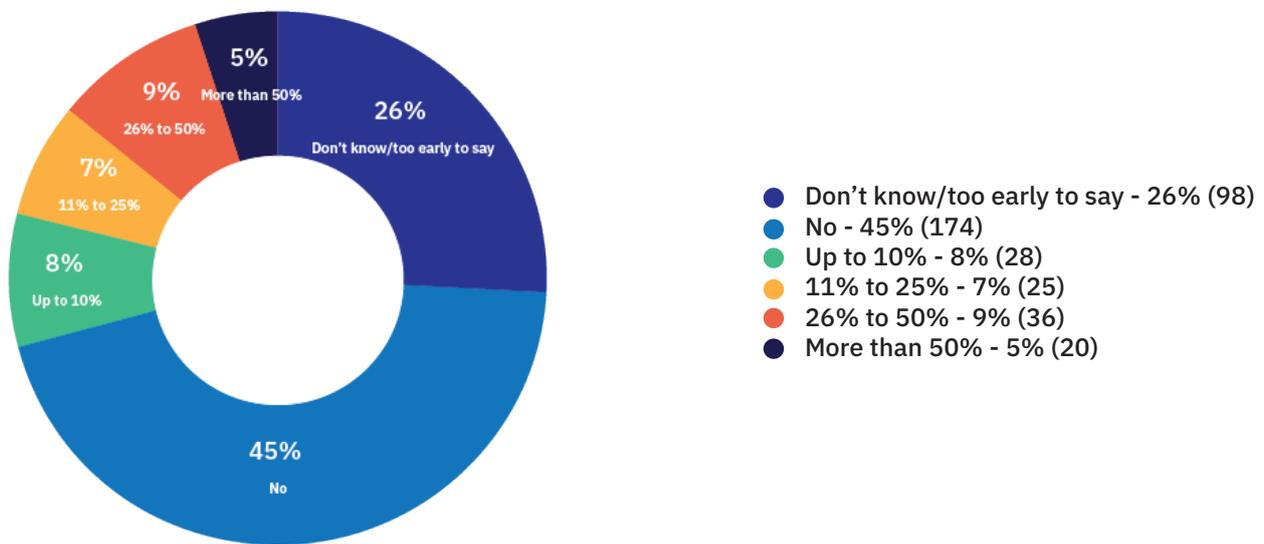
But our survey suggests they are in the minority so far. Approaching half the sample say there are no plans to shrink office space - unless their finance directors are yet to surprise them - and another quarter say they don't know of any. That leaves 29% who plan at least some reduction in their office use and one in five (of those who know their plans) who intend to lose at least a quarter of their current space. Four organisations with more than 10,000 employees expect to give up more than 50% of their offices.

If these figures are representative of UK employers' intentions, there will be profound effects on the commercial property market.

ADVISORY NOTE

If the adoption of hybrid working leads to increased vacancy in offices it will be tempting to realise potential property savings quickly. However, organisations should be cautious about reducing space until they are confident there are no unintended consequences of the new work pattern and that staff have settled into a working arrangement that suits them and the organisation.

Fig. 15 Office space reduction plans



Last words

Finally, we asked respondents if they had anything extra to add to their survey answers. ***“Only that there is apprehension that staff will have alternative motivation to work from home such as childcare, even looking after their grandchildren,” wrote a respondent at a bus company, so as an employer you won’t have confidence they are doing the hours.***

This is a common fear among managers in organisations setting up remote working programmes. Fortunately, in most cases the fears turn out to be unfounded and controlling overwork is more often a challenge than employees finding other claims on their time.

“Some staff have welcomed hybrid working but some have not”, reports a health and safety specialist in a local authority children’s services department. ***“One of the resulting issues is an unwelcome them-v-us feeling, where those ‘in work’ feel engaged but carrying the lion’s share of the workload; and those ‘at home’ feel free to work more flexibly but isolated.”***

But others were more hopeful that adjustment to a new way of working will not be too rocky. We will leave the last word to one of them, a health and safety practitioner from a healthcare provider: ***“This new approach will take a period of adjustment and a review of the main pandemic versus current practice with a long look to the future should hopefully give the hybrid solution that meets most employers’ and employees’ needs.”***

Conclusion



Most organisations had some experience of occasional home working by some employees before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the Coronavirus spread worldwide in March 2020, almost all have had to support administrative and professional staff working from their homes for extended periods. This experience has provided the impetus for a majority of employers to launch hybrid working programmes.

But our survey evidence indicates that some are doing so in ways that may not adequately ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of their employees. Almost half the organisations EcoOnline polled have not provided any training to workers moving to hybrid work patterns.

Managing the mix of home and office working will not come naturally to everyone. Companies who have not readied staff for the change could find themselves dealing with the same issues reported to have arisen from pandemic working, such as musculoskeletal disorders and poor wellbeing due to isolation.

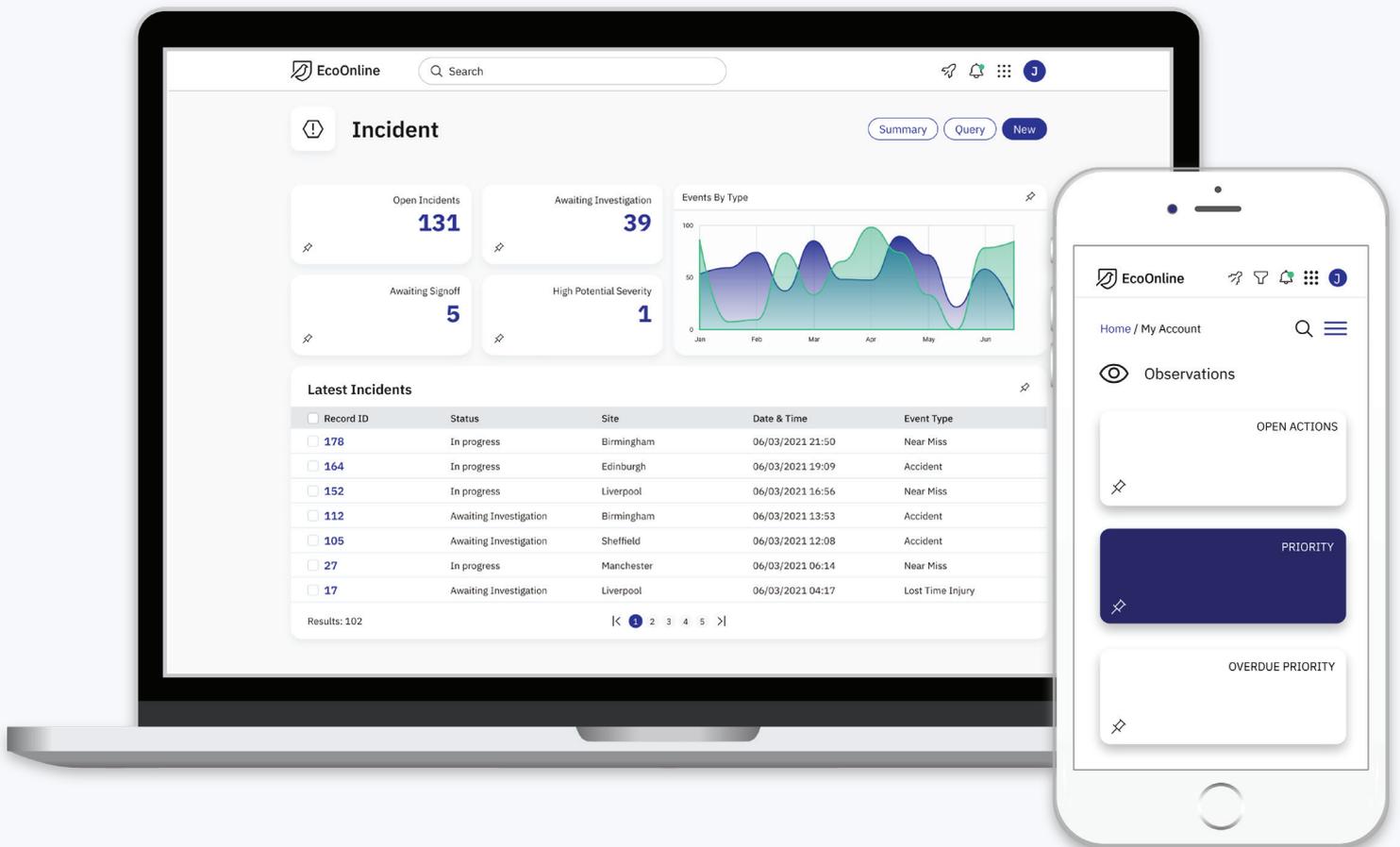
Risk assessment is an important precursor to any new working arrangement but it is only part of the necessary preparations. Most of the employers in our survey sample were confident that their organisations were ready for the management of challenges - including health and safety issues - that adopting hybrid working will bring. Mandatory home working during the pandemic has laid the foundation for a shift in work location but the experience of the past two years only partly prepares workers and organisations for the changes now underway.

Those businesses who are most likely to thrive in a hybrid working future will have; assessed the implications of a mixed company site/home model, risk assessed the suitability of individuals' homes for extended working, provided the right equipment and have prepared staff and management for the change with safety, health & welfare training and guidance.



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