



**BUSINESS
UNUSUAL**
THE FUTURE OF WORK PROGRAMME

REMOTE WORKING – CHANGING EMPLOYMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS



the **GEM**
programme

 **NORTHERN
HOUSING
CONSORTIUM**
VOICE OF THE NORTH

Executive Summary

At the onset of the pandemic the Northern Housing Consortium and the GEM Programme jointly agreed to take an innovative step into the future by initiating a time series of action research pieces to look at the changing world of work. Lots was being said by senior leaders and futurists about the impact of Covid, but we knew little about the lived experiences of upcoming housing professionals. The views of this often underrepresented group were engaged to provide a unique perspective in the future of work debate, as well as food for thought for housing's senior leaders.

The Business Unusual Research Group was formed from alumni of the GEM Programme to produce a series of bite sized research pieces starting with the impacts of remote working. The group, comprising former GEMs from Incommunities Group, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Northern Housing Consortium, PlaceShapers, West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Hume Community Housing in Australia, engaged with colleagues of a largely similar demographic.

The focus of the research group was the changing expectations experienced by upcoming housing professionals as organisations amended employment practices and their related social, emotional and psychological impacts.

Whilst recognising the efforts made by organisations to cope with the pandemic through increased remote working, the research highlighted some important related issues. There was almost universal support for reducing permanent office working but views were expressed about inadequate communication around the future of working from home and how organisations will adapt post pandemic. Communication was recognised as having been important and beneficial, but there is scope for meaningful engagement to support and trust staff at a time when 'organisational collectiveness' appears to have reduced. There was concern that frontline staff, who cannot work from home, and office based staff might be being treated differentially. Mental health and well-being was a thread running through the research.

Of particular interest was the view that the career progression needs of upcoming professionals had not been met as well over the eighteen months of the pandemic. There was also a realisation, that because of remote working, boundaries for job searches were no longer limited by the importance of geographical distance. Mobility amongst upcoming professionals in relation to career progression is being redefined and the challenges of retaining talented staff will probably be increased accordingly. With this in mind, and as the game changes, the Business Unusual Research Group will be turning its attention to this issue in the next bite sized research piece in the time series.

The GEM research team participants were:

Cara Loukes	Project Officer	Incommunities Group
Jacqueline Gaughan	Manager, Organisational Development & EVP	Hume Community Housing
James Bryson	Public Affairs Officer	Placeshapers
Joseph Elliott	Senior Housing Analyst	Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Matthew Wilson	Member Engagement Officer	Northern Housing Consortium
Rebecca Greenwood	Policy Officer	West Yorkshire Combined Authority



Introduction

The future of work looks very different to how it did just 12 months ago, and for many across the globe the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated plans to adapt and evolve, set in the context of unprecedented challenges for businesses.

The Graduate Employment Mentoring (GEM) Programme¹, in conjunction with the Northern Housing Consortium (NHC)², launched the **Business Unusual: The Future of Work** research programme to undertake a series of bitesized research pieces providing an insight into how the future of work has changed to inform the thinking of senior leaders and people of influence across the housing sector. The research is led by current and former GEM students who are working across the United Kingdom (UK) and Australian housing sectors. As the next generation of sector leaders, we aimed to provide a first-hand view of the future of work in the context of the drastic changes experienced over the last year.

The first project focuses on “**Remote working – changing employment and psychological contracts**”. The aim of this research piece is to explore how the emergence of Covid19, and the shift to more remote working, has changed how people feel about work and how their expectations of what the workplace is and should be, have developed over time.

This research report will share the views of a wide range of people working across the housing sector in different organisations (and countries!) who have all experienced the last 12 months in very different ways. It will conclude by offering a set of key reflections drawn from the views shared by over 30 housing professionals working in the sector in roles ranging from Housing Officer, Project Managers, HR, Repairs Operatives and more. We hope this research provides a platform to influence how the future of work may look in a post-pandemic world from a group of early career housing professionals.

Context

We undertook an initial literature review in the UK and Australia to explore some of the current thinking around remote working and its longer-term impacts on how we work. This provides a snapshot of some of our findings.

Surveys and Data

Most organisations have undertaken workforce surveys at some point (or multiple points) during the last 12 months to explore how people are adapting to remote and new ways of working. From our review of some of the larger surveys conducted we found that responses differed substantially, sometimes depending on people’s circumstances and characteristics. This provided us with a good basis to begin with, though survey work could not fully explain the reasons for such widely different views.

One of the largest international surveys undertaken by CBRE June and August 2020 with 10,000 responses from 32 companies across 18 countries³ produced five key takeaways:

¹ The GEM Programme supports graduates to access careers in the housing sector

² The Northern Housing Consortium is a membership organisation for local authorities, ALMOs and registered providers of social housing across the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions of the UK

³ Workforce Sentiment Survey: Insight Report, [CBRE](#) August 2020

- Remote work looks and feels productive to most: (90%+ of employees and company leaders felt productivity was the same or greater while working remotely)
- Remote work is here to stay: 85% of employees would prefer to work remotely at least two to three days a week in future. On average 6% said they would prefer to work fully at the office, and 10% said mostly at the office (3+ days a week)
- The office is here to stay too: 60% of respondents would return to the office in future for community and collaboration. Primary reasons for wanting to come into the office included (ranked): for team connection and community (62%); to collaborate face-to-face (61%); for access to tools, technologies or spaces that are only available at the office (44%); for physical boundaries between work and home (25%); for a better physical set-up (23%); to utilise amenities and services (16%); to focus and be productive (16%); or other reasons (10%).
- Real estate portfolios might look different: 43% of respondents would consider working from a company-provided location nearer to their home at least a few times a week.
- There is no one-size-fits-all for remote policies: 54% of company leaders prefer a hybrid arrangement for their team that combines working remotely and from the office.

UK housing sector perspectives

We also undertook a mini review of opinion pieces from across the UK housing sector in late 2020. Many of these were received from Executive Directors and Board Members. Unsurprisingly most of the opinion pieces we sourced suggested that a hybrid/blended approach to remote working and office working would be beneficial in a post-pandemic world for the housing sector. Interestingly, none of the pieces we sourced indicated what this would look like for employees, or suggested what that 'blend' might be in reality.

Opinion pieces varied greatly in terms of the positives and negatives of remote working, each picking up on different issues: the benefits included a better work-life balance with remote working, the ability to work from anywhere and reduced travel costs and business costs – all were cited regularly as positives. Some of the more detrimental impacts included the difficulty in building relationships in the virtual format, technical barriers, the impact on those whose jobs cannot be carried out remotely and, importantly, many suggesting the work-life balance had worsened for some due to remote working.

Some, though perhaps not as many as expected, raised concerns about mental wellbeing and the impact that the new ways of working and the struggle to adapt may have had on employees' emotional wellbeing and health.

Australian perspectives

Through our research group we also had the benefit of exploring similar views and impacts from across the seas in Australia. In some respects, businesses in Australia were better equipped to adapt to remote working as many areas of the country had put Business Continuity Plans into action during the Bush Fires of 2019/2020 and at other similar intervals of natural disasters in previous years. However, it is recognised that a country wide shift to 'lockdown' was still a new experience for many Australians as it was for people in the UK.



Our research review in Australia found that many organisations had demonstrated an acceptance that Covid-19 has changed the world of work for many, and whilst challenges do exist it has created a “new normal”. The expectations of work and the workplace have changed for both employers and employees, not necessarily by design but more because of an adapted and flexible response to the pandemic.

Some of the challenges noted included managing health and safety, and employee wellbeing and mental health support which will continue to be a theme of the future workplace. However, in general the view in Australia is that the sector has become more adaptable as a result of the pandemic.

Research Perspectives

From our literature review it became apparent that most of the thinking and literature on how work has changed during the Covid 19 pandemic has focussed largely on 2 areas;

- 1) Based on ‘mass’ employee surveys taken at a point in time. While these have provided useful insights to employers at a point in time, they do not necessarily track how people’s views have fluctuated over the period. The questions asked are led by the organisation, often limiting the freedom individuals have over what they would like to say on what has and has not worked well.
- 2) Thought-pieces and more in-depth viewpoints are written by people in senior positions, mostly Chief Executives or Directors. Whilst views can be informed by staff surveys, they don’t come first hand from employees who are working on the ground in day to day roles as officers or first line managers, who make up over 90% of the workforce.

Our research aims to bring in a new perspective from those working at on the ground, officer or first line manager levels and to use the platform from this research to allow people to openly share their views on the impact of Covid-19 on work and the future of work.

Our work tested a spectrum of perspectives on the remote working topic ranging from two contract views;

- **Perspective 1- ‘This is the new normal’** – the view that the way we are working is likely to be similar to how we will continue to work, and rather than waiting for a ‘new normal’ we should look at how employers and leaders can support employees in the new world of remote working.
- **Perspective 2- ‘When will things go back to normal?’** – the view that how we worked before suited a lot of people, and the positivity around how well-received remote working has been has perhaps led to a biased view that remote working will be the way forward.

Methodology

To explore the research perspectives, we ran 6 focus groups (5 in the UK and 1 in Australia) in February and March 2021. The sessions were run on web conferencing services facilitated by the Northern Housing Consortium. In total 27 people participated in the focus groups (20 in the UK and 7 in Australia).



Focus Group participants

We sought to recruit early career housing professionals working in entry-level or non-managerial/ first tier management roles to participate in our research. However, we also welcomed some more experienced housing sector professionals (particularly in our Australian focus group).

We circulated an invitation to participate in the focus groups via the GEM current students and former GEM alumni as well as through promotion via the Northern Housing Consortium. In Australia, participants were invited in a similar manner across the networks formed by our group. Respondents were invited to return a brief expression of interest to participate in the research.

Participants who took part in the focus groups represented a variety of housing associations across the UK and Australia, including representation from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Prior to the pandemic, participants worked predominantly in office-based roles, and several were partly or entirely site-based. Participants were mostly young with no dependants and living alone or with partners, although several had dependants. Most had been predominantly working from home since March 2020, though a small number were partly or entirely site-based. Some had been temporarily furloughed and/or had started new roles during the pandemic.

Most of the Australian participants were experienced housing sector professionals and included people leaders and people in senior roles, with some having dependants. The participants had worked from home and in agile work environments prior to and during Covid-19. The perspectives of these participants represented a different view to working remotely prior to the pandemic than the UK participants.

While the cohort of participants reflected the diversity of young professionals in the social housing sector, we are aware of the limitations of this approach, including potential impacts of self-selection and non-response bias.

Focus Groups

Participants of focus groups were advised that their results would be anonymous and would not be attributed to them or their organisation, and that no audio or video recordings would be taken of the sessions.

Members of the research group chaired the focus groups and took notes. Chairpersons were issued a briefing in advance which outlined key questions and prompts to direct the conversation. Chairs introduced the sessions, briefly explained the purpose of the research, discussed the research questions and explained how the focus groups would be run. The chairperson introduced the questions and prompted the conversation with the focus group sessions taking a relatively freeform, discursive approach.

Notes from the sessions were written up, anonymised and fed back to the research group for the reporting of results.

We are grateful to all participants who contributed to the research and to the Northern Housing Consortium for facilitating the sessions.

Focus Group Findings

Our focus group sessions covered a range of topics around changes to the working environment during the pandemic. We have distilled this into three core themes that were consistently discussed at our focus groups – Communication; Work Environment/Atmosphere; and Mental Wellbeing. The following sections will draw out the key findings from our discussions in the focus groups.

Communication

Communication emerged as a major theme during Covid-19 and featured in focus groups and in organisational surveys. Communication was viewed across different organisational levels, internally and externally, professionally, and personally.

Focus group participants acknowledged the effort and support provided by their organisations, particularly in the initial stages of the pandemic and the importance of communication with the wider organisation during periods of uncertainty.

Communication from Executives and Leaders at all levels was viewed as essential and positive, again particularly at the initial stages of the pandemic and during periods of change. The greatest impacts of communication were seen at the local level in teams, with colleagues, managers and customers. This differed between participants and their organisations but had contributed to both positive and negative experiences for employees.

In general, participants felt that **different mediums of communication used in the workplace were seen as positive**, including emails, intranet sites and organisation-wide communication platforms such as Workplace. Some participants noted that their organisations could do more to ensure communication methods were accessible to all staff members, with others reporting they rarely used intranet pages or shared communication points as they were seen as less relevant to performance.

Most people indicated that communicating with colleagues, particularly using online tools such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, had been challenging due to internet bandwidth issues and **when days were full of online meetings, alongside most of individuals' social lives moving to virtual platforms, there was a sense of 'Zoom Fatigue'**. Some participants noted that organisations had put in corporate or 'team' level working and communication practices that helped with achieving a balance - such as no meetings between 12-1pm, or no Zoom meetings on a Monday – and this was seen as positive and helpful where it was replicated by Senior Managers and Leaders who set the example to be followed.

One of the most consistent concerns raised was that **online and virtual communication was not always conducive to building relationships**, particularly for new employees during their onboarding and induction. As the ability to sustain natural rapport and exchange small pieces of information, (the 'water cooler effect') in the workplace changed, there was less opportunity for 'osmosis' that would be gained from anecdotal office interactions. The dynamic of 'bouncing ideas off each other' was missing. Despite this, many reported more frequent check ins were scheduled with managers and team members, and this not only helped with sharing information but also created a sense of connectedness, feelings of support and overall wellbeing.

One interesting perspective was that communication and time with family members whilst working from home had improved as households were spending more time together. This was offset in some circumstances where communication had been challenging as work environments and spaces at home were not always conducive to communicating with colleagues, managers, or customers where

children or others were in earshot. In addition, in the earlier days of the pandemic, it was challenging for participants who communicated directly with customers, but many felt their organisations improved their communication with customers as time went on.

Finally, despite sound communication from leaders and the wider organisations at the start of the pandemic, there was **generally a feeling of inadequate communication around the future of working from home and flexible working arrangements. Most participants did not have a clear understanding of how their organisation would be looking to adapt post-pandemic.** Expectations were still largely uncertain.

Communication is vital during periods of uncertainty and change. Covid19 was an unprecedented event that created an environment of uncertainty and fear. Whilst there were many positives to the role that communication has played during the pandemic, there are also lessons to be learnt to create a more consistent and positive experience for the future.

- Communicate more frequently with employees about a broader range of topics that are impacting the business - people need to feel connected.
- Use a variety of mediums to communicate from email, intranet updates, live posts, videos, and Q&A sessions.
- Establish communication and meeting guidelines across the business that incorporate the new world of work and ensure Leaders set an example in practising these.
- Make information about the business and events easier to find and access.
- Check in with people more regularly - formally and informally.
- Allow teams to set their own guidelines for meeting, sharing information and ensure that everyone is included in decisions.
- Learning and Onboarding - consider a blended option for learning and onboarding that involves a combination of face to face (where possible), online and virtual events run by many people.

Working Environment / Atmosphere

The shift in working environment and atmosphere, and the ways in which employers have adapted to this, clearly has an impact on individuals' feelings about being able to work effectively. **The first consistent theme is that, quite unsurprisingly, those organisations who had already switched to variable forms of agile working and made investments in IT infrastructure made smoother transitions into the impromptu 'working from home' model.** Participants in these organisations tended to say that they had been informed that home working was now going to be a permanent feature of their organisation's working model, often combined with reducing office space capacity/moving to new or smaller premises or in the support of existing agile working methods. Those who reported that they felt organisations had not made the transition well cited communication had not been clear at the beginning, as well as typically noting their organisation followed a more centralised structure, usually without hub offices.

There was a core of participants who stated they did not like working from home, or had found it challenging working from home for such sustained periods of time. When they had the option, they

A close-up photograph of a laptop keyboard with a multi-colored keycap design in shades of teal, purple, and pink, resting on a wooden desk.

had chosen to work at least some of the time back in office. In some cases working in the office was a choice made for their mental wellbeing and mental health.

Those who stated they would prefer to work permanently from the office acknowledged they were in a small minority and that this way of working may not be possible in future. Colleagues in Australia generally felt that they were well prepared to work from home and that the shift to this way of working universally had not been a taxing one, reporting that they felt more in control of their workload and had fewer interruptions. Most commented that their organisation had conducted surveys to assess people's attitude to home working now and going forward, which all participants felt grateful for, with most feeling their opinion would be well valued.

The move to reducing permanent office working has near universal support among all participants, who typically responded saying they would like to work in the office environment on two or fewer occasions per week – the consensus was that a blended working environment is the new normal but that there is work to do to ensure a healthy work/life and home/office balance is achieved.

Some participants reported a switch to trust-based working and away from a 'clocking-in' approach, citing this as a major benefit during lockdown measures. Multiple participants commented on how flexible working hours have allowed them to accommodate other responsibilities and aspects of their lives more easily, and on how this has benefited colleagues with children even if they themselves do not have any.

There were however many participants who reported working longer hours now than pre-pandemic, citing an increased workload or inability to 'switch off' from work. There was disparity on how the removal of traditional 'flexi' working had been received in different teams (suggested in the UK rather than Australia). This likely reflects on each organisation's internal policy and how such schemes were deployed, with those working for organisations with more liberal schemes (which would allow employees to accrue a larger number of days in lieu) typically more frustrated at its cessation. **Overall, high levels of satisfaction were reported in relation to how organisations have adapted their working patterns, with participants understanding that this was a difficult task to approach for any organisation.**

Participants working in smaller accommodation or flat shares spoke of the extent to which unsuitable workspaces have hindered not only their professional performance but also their general mood and work/life balance. A common theme across this group was the struggle to switch off and separate work from home as their desk/laptop was in their living space and always in the room with them after they finished work. Speaking on their confined accommodation at the beginning of the first lockdown, one participant stated, "If I hadn't have moved it would have been impossible to carry on with my role". This issue was echoed by others throughout the groups, either through personal experience or referencing colleagues. Lack of desks and working in hectic environments, i.e., children being home-schooled or partners who had been furloughed, were also cited as significant hindrances to performance. To mitigate against this to varying degrees most participants said that their organisation had sought to provide office equipment, either moving equipment from their sites or ordering new items to be delivered, where possible. **Another important factor to consider is that many participants commented that it is difficult to separate work and home life when assessing the period spent under lockdown, not necessarily just because the line between the two became more blurred due to working from home arrangements.** Space was discussed as privilege, and

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a pink folder or document, with a laptop and other office supplies visible in the background.



organisations should consider whether employees' preferred work style or home setup fits into the company's vision for the future workplace.

Despite limited numbers of tradespeople involved in the study it was clear that their experiences of lockdown working had been very different to office-based employees. Generally, less trust was reported, with line-managers less inclined to move away from an evidence-based approach to performance management or reduce inter-employee contact. One participant in particular spoke of a perceived 'divide' within their organisation, with health and safety provisions for tradespeople being lacklustre compared to office-employees, leaving them at times without suitable PPE or sanitising products. Generally, they believed that senior management were more focussed on provisions for office/home based employees than for those who work in the field, and that communication on current and future arrangements has been tailored toward this group.

Participants also reported that the current working model has differing impacts on their career progression and access to training and development. One person, who as part of their role works with senior leadership, said that they understood other colleagues would not enjoy this opportunity as current arrangements did not facilitate career progression well. In contrast however other participants stated that the trickle-down associated with an increased workload across organisations meant that they have had the opportunity to work 'up' a level temporarily. Some participants also mentioned that they see a permanent switch to working from home as beneficial to their careers, as it means that in future, they can seek roles that typically are not found in their region and which they would otherwise have to relocate to take up. **Overall, there was a pattern that participants felt that their career had not progressed as well over the 18 months since the pandemic started than they believe it would have done under normal conditions, but that they were understanding of the reasons for this.**

Mental Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing emerged as a major theme during Covid-19. Respondents in the focus groups referred to the blurring of lines about what is private/professional/public/domestic. Some respondents indicated that there had been challenges in raising issues, with one respondent worryingly stating that raising issues to their managers was like "flogging a dead horse."

Since lockdown measures were introduced in March 2020, the groups felt generally sad at the loss of what is universally acknowledged as 'water-cooler' conversations (referred to in the communication section) that include break-out chats, tea breaks, and informal socialising at work. Many respondents saw these moments as opportunities to get support from colleagues during a bad day and a place to seek guidance without seeming to escalate a situation. For one respondent however, there was relief from their perceived discomfort in these side conversations.

There was consensus that mental-health first aiders were not a substitute for a conversation with a close colleague as there were questions over whether they would act in confidence and in the individual's best interests.

Participants cited a perception of a loss of "organisational collectiveness" and a new division between frontline operatives, who cannot work from home, versus office employees who are currently home-based. This was further exacerbated by those who enjoy home-working and do not want to return to the office, versus those who have struggled to work from home and want to return to the office either partially or fully.

Social isolation was another major theme to emerge from Covid-19. This may have been due to a range of variables such as living arrangements, personal responsibilities, or individual personality types.

Prior to the pandemic the office was seen as a natural place to build friendships that could continue beyond the workplace. One suggestion from a focus group was for organisations to prioritise support for their employees to create friendships online, and to enable spaces where this can organically occur such as through exercise classes, team quizzes, and hobby clubs. However, there is an opposing view that this could contribute to the 'Zoom Fatigue' described earlier, which many are experiencing.

There appeared to be a sentiment of difference in the expectations of working from home for those people with dependants versus those without dependants. This included:

- A feeling from some that employees with children and home-schooling duties had greater visibility across the organisation, and received greater sympathy and concessions from the executive.
- Starting earlier and finishing later or a "just do what you can" mentality enabling those with dependants to perhaps do less of their paid role than those without dependants, who had to pick up the extra workload causing stress.
- Differences in the ways childcare issues were managed within the constraints of annual leave

Some participants reported finding it particularly difficult to take adequate breaks from work as the laptop is 'always there'. **The approach to work life balance by leaders differed - those who role modelled and communicated flexibility, for example taking lunch breaks and not working through them, encouraged employees to take care of themselves.** There was agreement that the etiquette of online meetings needed better enforcing - as previously the 'mini-commute' between physical, in-person meetings ensured some respite. Some respondents found themselves always answering 'one last email' and regularly found themselves logging back onto their devices even after the working day had technically finished, due to anxiety about ensuring they were working as required.

Leader check-ins or lack thereof contributed to feelings of anxiety or unbearable mental health, particularly for those who were furloughed for much of last year. This was different to those who were allowed to return back to the office, who reported feeling "lucky". **These responses suggest the need for more open top-down discussions; this is because misunderstanding feeds an unhealthy and disjointed 'us and them' mentality between colleagues.**

More flexible working is predominantly perceived as a good thing by respondents. There was particular reference to the mental, physical, and financial benefits of not having to commute on a regular basis. One respondent said that they used to have an 800-mile commute each week and not having to do this encouraged them to focus more on things they enjoy doing, such as walking in the local countryside.

However, as referenced in the Work Environment section, there were concerns over changes to 'flexi time' policies across organisations which appear to cause anxiety amongst individuals. Some respondents felt that abolishing flexi-time encouraged a healthier work pattern as working overtime was no longer rewarded by the company, but others felt that flexible working threatens to victimise employees as there is increasing acceptance that people can and should expect responses outside of the historic core hours of 9-5. Employees are now expected to turn on their out of hours responses when previously it would have been considered unnecessary.

For many this seemed to come down to the level of trust their organisations placed in them and how changes to flexi policies had been embedded in an organisational culture. If there was trust to

get the job done and that trust was genuinely reflected in the different tiers of management, people were more welcoming of changes.

All participants still working from home value the blending of personal and professional spheres on occasion and are appreciative of the nuance many organisations now apply to their employees' work routines. Whereas one respondent would have previously needed to take a whole sick day once the commute to work was factored in, they can now afford a more 'wait and see' attitude. The same respondent said they had anxiety about needing to return to the office even part-time because they loved home-working so much. Another participant said they were excited about the blended world of work and home and cited the working holiday visa scheme by some countries as a holistic benefit to agile working. Employees also welcomed the ability to take snippets of time from the day to do household chores, which is now more widely accepted.

Several respondents said that lockdown has been the pressure cooker to bring their family closer together and were thankful of the opportunity to see children and partners. **Finally, many participants were grateful to be able to work from home during the pandemic due to their fears relating to safety concerns in the office and in order to reduce any possibility of contracting or spreading Covid-19.**

Many of those who took part are in the early stages of their careers: this means that not only are they constrained by pandemic lockdown rules, they also have little influence over their organisation's response and decisions. Individual responsibility in the workplace is on many occasions superseded by organisational responsibility to recognise the first signs of distress in employees or to collectively foster what is augmenting workplace wellbeing and satisfaction.

In order to promote holistic wellbeing in full, there may need to be a paradigm shift - but first, all echelons of an organisation need to digest the tumultuous events of the past year. One respondent discussed the "sink or swim" mentality they have encountered since starting their career in lockdown. Another respondent from the same organisation was critical of society's rhetoric at moments throughout the past year that suggested people should be "thriving"; the same rhetoric had caused the respondent to put pressure on themselves to exercise and learn new skills. They commented that there **should be no pressure to excel in a time of crisis and that simply "surviving" was an aspirational aim in itself.**

Conclusions

The ways in which organisations have adapted to the challenges presented by Covid-19 have had a considerable impact on employee wellbeing during the past year. Whilst all organisations have made significant changes to how they work, the focus groups highlighted how these approaches differed both between and within organisations. Throughout these sessions the themes of communication, employer expectations and physical environment were repeatedly highlighted as the key issues which influenced the way in which participants experienced working from home.

All of the participants' organisations have, to some extent, created a more flexible way of working and emphasised the importance of individuals finding a way of working that 'works for them'. However, it is important that as the employment and psychological contracts of work change post-pandemic, employers also recognise their responsibility for employee wellbeing and to provide the information, resources, and environment where employees feel able to enjoy and take control of their own work.

Whilst employees should be encouraged to take time for their mental wellbeing, employers need to put practical measures in place that mean work does not over-extend its reach into people's personal

life. Organisations should also be careful of not expecting (consciously or unconsciously) too much from their staff because of a perceived increase in productivity.

It is apparent from nearly all participants that their relationships with teams and colleagues is the most enjoyable aspect of work. The loss of the social side to work has been the biggest challenge for most, and the way in which organisations communicate with their employees is crucial in mitigating this loss. Formal communication from senior leadership, through regular updates and opportunities to feed back, can create a sense of identity where everyone feels 'in the loop'. Creating platforms for informal communication is equally important to allow employees to maintain friendships and cohesive relationships. Participants gave multiple examples of both good and bad communication initiatives used in the last year. Employers should consider supporting space for informal communication to develop organically and understand when communication methods are not effective.

Overall, more participants enjoyed the changes to the way they work, and most have felt the benefits outweigh the negatives. However, this does not mean that people are in favour of a completely remote way of working and most would be in favour of having offices open and available for use when it suits them. Most participants suggested they would ideally use the office 2 days a week, but some would use it more often and others less. The key preference was the ability to choose when and where they work without this being dictated to them.

Discussion with Senior Leaders

As a research group we shared the report and focus group findings with a roundtable of senior leaders from the housing sector, convened by the Northern Housing Consortium. The group was made up of Chief Executives and Executive Directors and offered a chance for decision makers to reflect on the findings and on how they themselves had adapted to the changing world of work.

Our report findings were well received and endorsed by the leaders who attended. Many recognised the concerns and the opportunities that were highlighted by our focus groups, and it was acknowledged that each organisation had taken slightly different measures and a different approach to introducing new ways of working. The roundtable offered an opportunity for leaders to share good practice and take on board the wider sector's response to new ways of working and the changing contracts of work as we emerge from the pandemic.

Following the session, we collected views from attendees on their key takeaways from the research. In response to a presentation delivered by the Business Unusual group to leaders from the housing sector, one participant echoed the continued focus on flexibility, stressing that their organisation is seeking to extend the working hours of customer services staff to give them more flexibility in when they work, and in turn creating more availability for customers. Others agreed with the finding that those organisations who already had flexible homeworking arrangements in place adapted very quickly to the new working conditions, stating that they had enjoyed this transition. Several leaders said that changes to the pre-existing accumulative flexible working systems, many of which had been in place for significant periods of time, were often unpopular.

Leaders agreed they could now potentially access a wider pool for recruitment and that career opportunities for colleagues were evolving with increased home working and digital means. Another participant agreed that leaders must not forget that not everyone has space to work from home comfortably, with some still working on their lap. Leaders stressed that it is important to remain aware of this, with those in managerial roles typically having space to work efficiently at home.

Tracy Harrison, Chief Executive of the Northern Housing Consortium, praised the work, stating its significance, relevance and value to NHC members. She said:

“I am acutely conscious that in responding to the challenges raised, senior leaders can assume they have got the right solutions in place – it’s vital that the voice of young professionals in the housing sector is heard and acted upon, and we must work to make sure that continues to happen.”

Geraldine Howley, Chair of GEM Programme, commented:

“This is an excellent piece of work reflecting the experiences and views of our upcoming housing professionals. The report offers a unique perspective on the impact of the pandemic on our younger employees, and gives us insight into how we can shape working life to meet the needs of our whole staff team. Working with the Northern Housing Consortium on this project has meant that we have been able to involve senior leaders from across the sector to shape, review and comment on the research, and I look forward to the outcomes of the next report.”

Closing Remarks

As a group of former GEMS, we hope that this research report helps to provide representation from new and early career housing professionals providing views on how Business Unusual and the changing ways of working have had a real impact on the current and future workforce.

Whilst our research only represents a small sample, we believe that what we have presented is unique as we provided a completely unbiased and non-judgemental platform for our colleagues to openly air their views and share their thoughts and feelings on the future world of work.

The Business Unusual Research Group aim to take forward further research pieces in the months to come that explore key themes that have changed how we work following the pandemic.

Finally, we would like to thank all the participants of our focus groups, participants at our leaders’ roundtable and colleagues at the Northern Housing Consortium and GEM programme for their input and support to guide our research.





BUSINESS UNUSUAL

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