

# THE CHANGING WORKPLACE: ENABLING DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE HYBRID WORKING

Heather Taylor, Rebecca Florisson,  
Melanie Wilkes and Paula Holland  
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We believe everyone should have access to secure, rewarding and high-quality work. By engaging directly with workers, employers, policymakers and leading academics, we deliver rigorous applied research to tackle structural inequalities in the labour market and improve working lives across the UK.

We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.

## ABOUT CITY BRIDGE TRUST

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## FOREWORD

This is the first piece of independent, substantive research City Bridge Trust has commissioned, and it couldn't be more timely or topical. Our funding strategy, Bridging Divides, aims to create a more equitable London, and Deaf and disabled communities have been at the heart of our work for many years.

Our Bridge To Work programme brought together several sector partners to transform access to employment for the 1.4 million people with disabilities in the capital at working age. This project saw great successes including: establishing an online training resource for autistic young jobseekers; a bursary fund (ChangeLondon) to support disabled young Londoners into paid work experience/internships and follow-on support for young people completing Supported Internships. But much remains to be done if we are to achieve equity.

As we are all too aware, the Covid-19 pandemic transformed our lives in many ways, not least in how and where we work. Undoubtedly, this had an even greater impact on Deaf and disabled people. This research demonstrates that flexible working, which many companies and organisations have now adopted, has particularly far-reaching benefits for disabled employees.

This report outlines how remote and hybrid working not only empowers disabled people to manage their health and wellbeing, but also increases the likelihood of their securing work, staying long-term and progressing in their careers, to the benefit of employee and employer alike.

I sincerely hope this report will be of great interest to policymakers and employers as they continue the work to provide the flexibility and support that disabled people need. It is our great hope that in doing so, they might also address the shocking pay and employment gaps which still exist.

One clear message came through loud and clear: that it is vital that the voices of disabled people are heard when decisions which affect their working arrangements are made. We can only hope that the experience gained during the pandemic is at least put to use to ensure that, even when working remotely, disabled people are treated inclusively, as valued members of the team.

I hope you find this report useful.



**Paul Martinelli**  
CBT Grants Committee Chairman

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our working lives have transformed since the onset of Covid-19 in the UK in March 2020. Well over 30% of the working population shifted to remote working during the first wave of the pandemic, and the UK has witnessed sustained high rates of remote working afterwards. Many workers have valued the increased flexibility that remote working has to offer, though there are also associated risks around the isolation of workers.

A well-established evidence base has made clear that flexibility over location and working hours can be crucial for enabling disabled people to enter, stay in, and progress in work. For many disabled people, the recent shift in working practices has resulted in increased autonomy and control, making that flexibility possible for the first time.

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of thousands of workers have left the labour market, largely due to ill health. Coinciding with this participation problem, we have seen record numbers of vacancies resulting in a real skills crunch for employers. Disabled workers form a massive talent pool that has for decades been underappreciated and underused. By working with disabled people, employers can access a valuable talent pool. It is therefore imperative that employers and Government get remote and hybrid working right for disabled workers.

But all too often, the ambitions and perspectives of disabled people haven't been a part of conversations about our changing working lives. This research aims to address that. Through a survey of 406 disabled people, interviews with 20 disabled workers, and two roundtables with employers and other stakeholders, we have developed new evidence about disabled workers' experiences of remote and hybrid work.

We've used this evidence to develop recommendations to Government, as well as practical suggestions for employers on making remote and hybrid work inclusive for disabled workers.

### Key findings

**The majority of disabled workers who took part in this project valued the opportunity to decide where they worked, and this had positive impacts for them and their organisation:**

- 70% of disabled workers said that if their employer did not allow them to work remotely, it would negatively impact their physical or mental health
- Survey respondents and interviewees highlighted clear benefits to working from home, including having more autonomy and control over when and how they work, which in turn allowed them to better manage their health and wellbeing.
- This brought wider benefits for their organisations too; 85% of disabled workers surveyed felt more productive working from home.

**But despite the shift to remote working being well-established, some were still missing essential support to do their job at home**

- Of all survey respondents who requested additional support or new adjustments while working remotely, close to 1 in 5 (19.1%) had their request refused, with no alternative arrangements put in place.
- While the majority of survey respondents (89%) reported they had access to specialist equipment or software at home, interviewees often reported that they had purchased equipment themselves, using their own money.
- just 48 of the 406 disabled workers that we surveyed said that they had used Government's Access to Work scheme to fund support, with more than two-thirds (70.8%) said that this had been a positive experience, and nearly one in three (29.2%) saying this had been a negative experience.

- Some interviewees were put off applying to Access to Work, either because they had heard about other people's negative experiences, or because they were overwhelmed by the lengthy forms and assessment process.

**Some disabled workers were facing real challenges as a result of a poorly-managed transition to remote or hybrid work, and this could limit progress in reducing the disability employment gap:**

- Both survey respondents and interviewees highlighted concerns that they might lose access to opportunities at work if they need to be based at home, and these concerns were greatest among individuals with multiple impairments or conditions.
  - 70.3% of survey respondents with multiple impairments agreed that opportunities to stretch and grow might go to those in the office, compared with 52.8% of respondents with a single impairment.
  - 63.2% of survey respondents with multiple impairments said that their pay and career progression may be negatively affected, compared with 46.9% of respondents with a single impairment.

Outdated cultures meant that some disabled workers felt left out or isolated while working at home, particularly when colleagues used different working patterns. We have developed a series of steps non-disabled people can take to be an ally to disabled colleagues.

### Recommendations

Evidence from this research has informed the following recommendations for Government to support an inclusive transition to hybrid work:

1. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) should make flexible working the default position for all employees, with flexible options included in all job adverts.
2. BEIS should require large employers to publish information on their approach to flexible and hybrid working.
3. Government should increase funding for the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to enforce and protect disabled workers' rights.
4. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should reform Access to Work, providing better funding and resourcing so that it works effectively for individuals and employers, and breaks down barriers to accessing occupational health expertise.
5. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should refresh the Disability Confident Scheme to reflect our changing working lives.

The findings of this report also highlight opportunities for employers to support their disabled employees:

6. Invest in training and supporting line managers to embody organisational values and promote an inclusive culture, as well as ensuring that they are equipped with the tools and confidence to respond to reasonable adjustment and flexible working requests.
7. Consult with staff to develop an inclusive approach to remote work via staff surveys, engaging with staff disability networks, and holding regular information and feedback sessions.
8. Explore how you can support wider forms of flexibility within the organisation, including compressed hours, staggered hours and job sharing.
9. Introduce workplace adjustment passports for all staff, to help support everyone to thrive at work and destigmatise the adjustment request process.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally shifted the way in which we work, most significantly due to a rise in remote and hybrid working. This study explores the specific benefits and challenges that disabled workers face in remote and hybrid working, and what employers and policymakers need to do to enable and support inclusive hybrid and remote working practices.

It does so against a highly challenging backdrop, with disabled workers continuing to face a number of structural barriers in the labour market, and specific risks associated with the economic headwinds that the UK currently faces.

### The Disability employment gap

Disabled people continue to face substantial disadvantages in the UK labour market:

- Disabled workers are more likely than non-disabled workers to be working in lower skilled occupations.<sup>1</sup>
- Recent research by the Work Foundation also found that disabled workers are more likely to experience multiple forms of potentially harmful forms of insecurity simultaneously, such as involuntary temporary, low paid work.<sup>2</sup>
- Disabled people earn substantially less than their non-disabled peers. This disability pay gap has widened in recent years. In 2021, the disability pay gap was 13.8% compared with 11.7% in 2014.<sup>3</sup>
- There's been a surge in people leaving the labour market due to ill health and disability, and this is creating a participation problem, as the UK's labour market participation rate overall remains well below pre-pandemic levels.
- The employment rate for disabled people is 52.7% and 81% for non-disabled people. The difference between the two rates, termed the disability employment gap, is 28.3 percentage points.<sup>4</sup>

Government has made commitments to address this gap in its Improving Lives Green Paper and Strategy,<sup>5</sup> and more recently its National Disability Strategy\*.<sup>6</sup>

Over recent years, the disability employment gap has narrowed slightly. However, it is difficult to gauge whether this is a strong indication of progress in that it is at least partly driven by an overall expansion of the UK workforce and an increasing employment rate since 2013. Additionally, people in work are more likely to report or experience a health condition or impairment than in the past. One in five of the working-age population are now disabled, and this marks an increase on recent years, largely driven by an increase in mental health conditions among the UK population.<sup>7</sup>

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\*The actions in the National Disability Strategy are currently on hold following a judicial review.

### What is a reasonable adjustment?

The Equality Act says there's a legal duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers who are placed at a substantial disadvantage because of their disability compared with non-disabled people or people who don't share their disability.

Examples of reasonable adjustments include:

- Home working
- Different shift patterns to enable someone to travel at quiet times if they experience anxiety at rush hour
- Widening a doorway, providing a ramp or moving furniture for a wheelchair user
- Giving more time for someone with dyslexia to do any written or reading tests that are part of an interview process
- Giving more one-to-one support to help prioritise the work of an employee with anxiety.

### Workplace inflexibility drives the disability employment gap

A key driver of the disability employment gap is inflexible work, such as rigid working hours or patterns.<sup>8</sup> Taking a generalist approach in building working practices to meet the needs of non-disabled people, can mean that the distinct needs of disabled people are not considered. For example, commuting, working in a noisy environment, and short notice changes to meetings and events can all have distinct and much greater impacts for disabled workers. Truly inclusive work is not just about eliminating discrimination, it has to be about proactively tackling the range of barriers disabled people continue to face throughout their working lives.

Accessible working environments and specialist equipment can play an important role, and autonomy around when and where they work can also be essential for many disabled people.

Previous Work Foundation research highlighted that while greater flexibility could help address the disability employment gap, remote and hybrid working must be appropriately managed and fully inclusive to prevent the creation of further inequities. Recent joint Work Foundation and Chartered Management Institute (CMI) research underscores this risk. This research found that disabled workers, women, parents and those with caring responsibilities were identified by managers as at risk of facing particular challenges when working remotely, including isolation from the office and potentially missing out on opportunities for learning and development.<sup>9</sup>

There currently isn't enough evidence about disabled workers' experiences of the shift to remote and hybrid working, and with employers and government now making key decisions about future ways of working, that is a problem. Recent homeworking surveys were limited to experiences of workers in the broader workforce during lockdown in 2020<sup>10 11</sup> or in specific sectors.<sup>12</sup>

The limited evidence that does exist suggests that remote working presents distinct benefits for disabled people over and above the wider benefits for all remote workers that are already well documented. A survey of disabled workers' homeworking experiences focussed on lawyers. This research found that during the pandemic, homeworking offered greater flexibility, autonomy, access to training and networking opportunities, the ability to work around medical needs, and improved health and wellbeing.

However, it appears that some disabled workers weren't able to get the support that they needed through the shift to remote working during the pandemic. Homeworking challenges included lack of computing and adaptive equipment (e.g. chair, desk, software), difficulties participating in online meetings and social isolation.<sup>13</sup> UNISON conducted a survey of disabled workers' homeworking experiences in June 2020, when Government advised people to work



entirely remotely where possible. This survey revealed that more than half (53%) of respondents had not been given any reasonable adjustments to support them to work from home, and only 5% reported receiving support from Access to Work, a government scheme that funds adjustments and support for disabled workers.<sup>14</sup> UNISON also found that a lack of reasonable adjustments, IT and workstation issues caused pain and fatigue and led to reduced productivity, while inaccessible communication systems increased isolation and loneliness among disabled staff.<sup>15</sup>

In light of this, we have developed new research to build a more comprehensive picture of disabled workers' experiences to inform changes in policy and practice.

## Emerging from the pandemic

While many workers, businesses and sectors have benefited from changes in ways of working during and since the pandemic, disabled people bore the brunt of the economic consequences of Covid-19, experiencing higher rates of unemployment and redundancies than non-disabled people.<sup>16</sup>

With forecasts of a potential recession to come, the current economic context is concerning. The UK recessions of the 1980s–2000s increased the disability employment gap; employment fell among workers without long-term conditions but soon recovered, but in contrast, the employment rates of people with long-term conditions continued to fall through each economic recovery.<sup>17 18</sup>

Considering this evidence, the growing participation problem during Covid-19, which is partly driven by people with long-term health conditions leaving the labour market,<sup>19</sup> is likely to have a longer-lasting impact on the employment of disabled workers and workers with long-term health conditions.

Different forms of flexible working, such as remote or hybrid working, have the potential to contribute to better retention of disabled workers. Pre-pandemic, many employers were reluctant to allow remote or hybrid working, even as a reasonable adjustment for disabled workers. However, having experienced the shift to compulsory remote working for most desk-based workers, many employers now appear more open to offering flexibility in working hours and locations.<sup>20</sup>

The priority now is to understand the ways in which this is playing out in the post-pandemic period, and how changes can be implemented to ensure more disabled people have access to the flexibility that they need.

## About this project

To address this evidence gap, we have conducted new research to learn about disabled workers' perspectives and experiences of remote and hybrid working through the pandemic. This involved:

- A survey of 406 disabled workers
- Interviews with 20 disabled workers
- A roundtable discussion with employers
- A roundtable discussion with frontline advice services

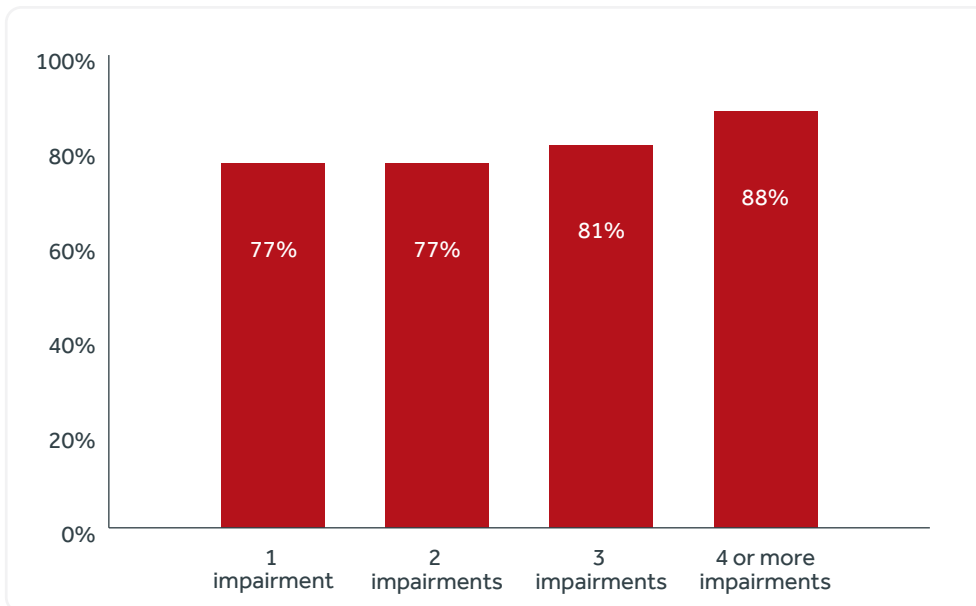
More information is included in the methodology section.

## 2. FINDINGS: THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK

Our survey and interviews have confirmed that access to remote and hybrid working can be particularly important for disabled people: 80% of disabled workers surveyed said that working from home would be essential or very important if they were looking for a new job.

Disabled workers who have multiple impairments were more likely to say this, with 88% of those reporting four or more impairments agreeing that being able to work from home would be essential or very important if they were looking for a new job. Existing evidence indicates that the employment rate is lower for people with multiple impairments, so access to remote working is particularly important for people who face the greatest barriers to entering or staying in work.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 1: Disabled workers with multiple impairments are more likely to view access to remote working as essential or very important**



Source: Work Foundation survey, N= 403. The easy-read surveys did not include a question about the importance of access to remote working.

Working environments and practices that were the norm in 2019 were not always inclusive of disabled workers, and did not work for everyone. Many interviewees highlighted that prior to the pandemic, they were experiencing burnout caused, or exacerbated by, their working patterns and environment.

**‘I was kind of coping with face to face working because I was at home three days a week and then going in a couple of days a week. And so that was manageable, but I would crash every few months. I’d have to take a couple of weeks off sick to recover.’**

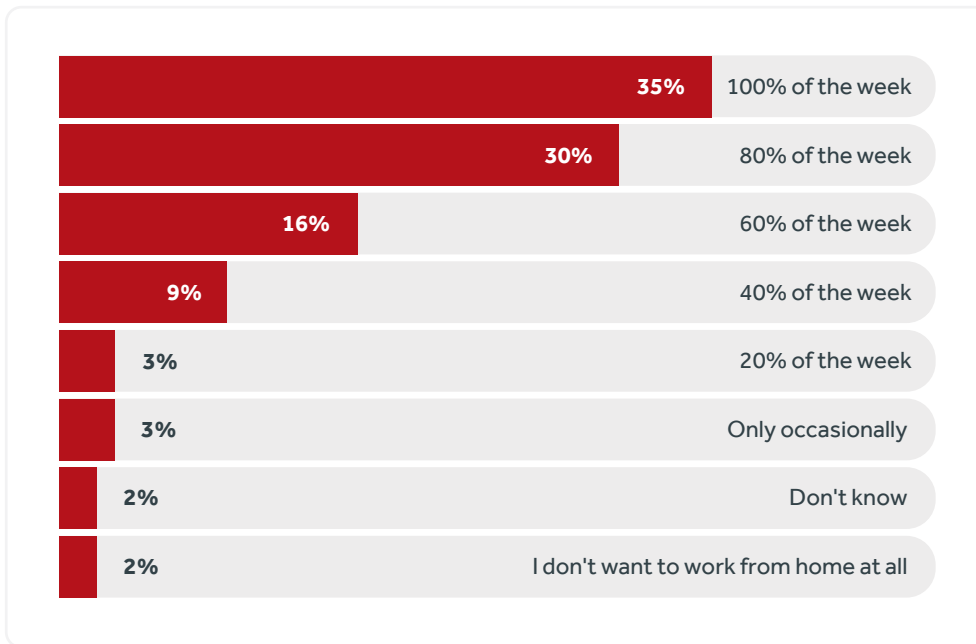
Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that a majority of disabled workers don’t want to return to pre-pandemic working patterns. As figure 2 below indicates:

- 65.8% of disabled workers we surveyed ideally wanted to work remotely 80-100% of the time, or 4-5 days a week.
- Another 16% wanted to work remotely 60% of the time, or the equivalent of 3 days in a full-time working week.

- The remaining 18% wanted to work remotely less often than that, but only 1.7% of respondents (7 people) indicated they did not want to work remotely at all.

**‘When the pandemic made the lockdown necessary I realised how burnt out I had been, having secluded myself already pre-pandemic at home in bed on the weekends. This can get you to the point when you feel like your life is not worth living, you wake up thinking what’s the point?’**

Figure 2: Preference for time spent working remotely



Source: Work Foundation survey, N=406

### 3. BENEFITS OF REMOTE WORKING FOR DISABLED WORKERS

#### Increased autonomy and control

The overriding theme in our research is autonomy and control. Having autonomy at work has previously been shown to have a positive impact on employees' wellbeing and job satisfaction,<sup>22</sup> and this was reinforced by our research findings. Where remote working has worked well for disabled workers who took part in this research, having autonomy and control over where they work was key. Where workers reported a lack of decision-making over their working arrangements, this was associated with less favourable outcomes for individuals and organisations, including staff feeling disengaged, undervalued and experiencing burnout.

Having more control over where they worked gave some participants other forms of flexibility. Some disabled workers interviewed for this project found that they had more autonomy over their working hours while working remotely than they had when they were commuting to work. Interviewees found this greater flexibility was particularly useful in helping to manage caring responsibilities and maintain a good work-life balance.

**'I get quite a lot of autonomy around my diary, so I can kind of choose what to do, I might do more one month and then slightly less the next month... I've got two children, they are five and six. And so being able to work flexibly and mostly working from home means that I can go do the school run, and it means that I've got more energy to spend time with them when they get back from school and after work.'**

Within the survey, participants used free text responses to highlight the importance of being able to control their own working environment, and emphasised that this was easier to do at home than at the office. While some responses were more general, for example highlighting the benefits of their home being *'quiet so I can concentrate'* and offering *'personal space and privacy'*, others referred to disability or condition-related reasons as to why control over their own environment is important. For example, autistic respondents and those with conditions that affect sensory-processing mentioned the benefits of being able to control lighting and noise levels while working from home, which is more challenging to do in an open-plan office environment.

**'It gives me more control of my own life. I do not miss being on the tube for 40 minutes a day, and that's when there are no delays on it. So, it gives me more control of my life and my condition. And you can't really put a price on that, can you?'**

#### Positive impacts on productivity, health and wellbeing

Part of the ongoing debate about future working practices are unhelpful assumptions and stereotypes about remote workers being less productive than those based in the workplace. However, the evidence base contradicts this. Research conducted prior to, and during, the pandemic has shown that homeworking can increase productivity.<sup>23 24 25</sup> The survey conducted for this project reinforces that finding, with 85% of disabled workers surveyed reporting they felt more productive working from home than at the workplace.

Some research participants highlighted that gains in productivity were linked to their home environment being more suitable, with one individual commenting that *'less unexpected interruptions than in an open plan office means I'm so much more productive.'* The most common reason contributing to increased productivity levels, however, was positive impacts on health and wellbeing.

**'I have a quiet and comfortable environment. I can concentrate much better, I eat better and I can rest when I need to. This has had a major positive impact on my health, mental health and confidence in my work. I am much more productive with my work and have a much more positive attitude about myself and work in general.'**

According to our survey, 70% of disabled workers said that if their employer did not allow them to work remotely, it would negatively impact their health. We also found that disabled people who are affected 'a lot' by their impairments are more than three times more likely to say that being unable to work remotely would impact on their ability to do all of their job, compared to those who are affected 'a little'.

The positive health impacts of remote working were reinforced by interviewees, many of whom linked this to the fact that they find it easier to rest and take regular breaks when working from home than in the office. Research participants with fluctuating conditions expressed that working remotely gave them the ability to better manage their condition.

**'I can be flexible with the times that I work as well. And so if I have a night where I'm in quite a lot of pain and maybe don't sleep very well, I can sleep in a little bit in the morning and start a bit later or work a bit later into the evening.'**

Many interviewees noted that working in the office can negatively impact their health. For some this is linked to a lengthy or tiring commute, while for others the office environment itself is not conducive to good health.

**'If I had to go in once a week, I would spend one day in and spend the rest of the week really unwell and recovering and unable to work... In terms of managing my health, going in just exacerbates it and just isn't realistic on any kind of regular basis. And in terms of managing my work, I just wouldn't be able to work, and particularly because I'm on hourly paid contracts I don't get sick pay, so I'm not paid when I'm not working, so if they ask me to go in for something, they're effectively asking me to then take off a bunch of unpaid sick leave to recover. So, I just can't do that. It's just not manageable.'**

Others explained that working at home allowed them to take steps to manage health conditions in private, such as administering medication, changing a colostomy bag and taking medical appointments over the phone, rather than having to justify or explain what they were doing to colleagues, as they might have done at the office.

### **Increased support from managers**

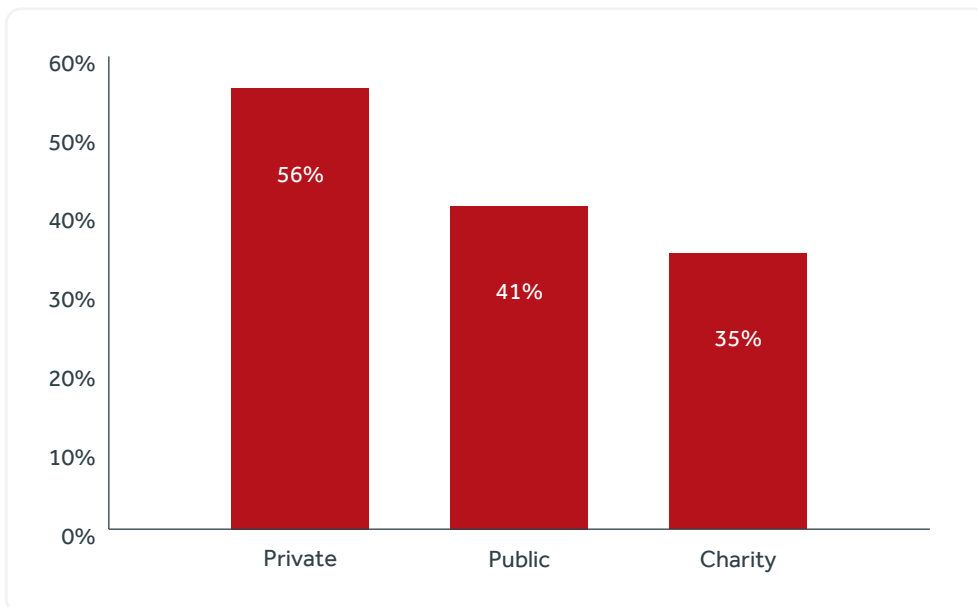
Previous research has demonstrated that employers providing practical and emotional support can play an important role in supporting disabled workers to return to and/or stay in work.<sup>26,27</sup> While some interviewees reported experiencing a lack of support from their employer or manager through the shift to remote working during Covid-19, many reported positive experiences, noting that they felt that the support they received had increased while working from home during the pandemic.

One highlighted that *'my employer is very conscious and helpful as far as they can [be]'* when it came to ensuring that they have enough support and the right set up to work at home. Another made clear that their line manager had been pivotal in ensuring that hybrid working works well for their team, noting that they have developed clear guidelines around communications and disconnecting from work;

**'We have to make sure that the meetings we do have are planned well... and we have the recognition that we can leave a message and have no expectation that the person is going to get back to us immediately.'**

This is backed up by findings from our survey, with the majority of respondents reporting the support that they received from their organisation either stayed the same or increased during the pandemic. As figure 3 below indicates, disabled workers in the private sector were most likely to say that the support they received during the pandemic increased. Conversely, public sector workers were 10 percentage points more likely than private sector workers to indicate support had remained the same. This might indicate that the public sector already had higher levels of support for remote working prior to the pandemic, or it could indicate that the increased pressure on service delivery impacted the sector's ability to enhance support.

**Figure 3: Disabled workers in the private sector reported a greater increase in support during the pandemic than those working in the public and charity sectors**



Source: Work Foundation survey, N=356. Our easy-read surveys did not include a question on the relative change in organisational support. Additionally, 11.7% of respondents declined to answer and are therefore excluded from the figures reported.

## 4. CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORKING FOR DISABLED WORKERS

### Gaps in communication and leadership around future working practices

While many interviewees felt that their employer's future hybrid working plans would accommodate their needs and preferences, some reported being forced to attend their office or take on a working arrangement that does not suit them. Others were concerned regarding a lack of transparency about what the future holds for them in terms of ways of working.

'I have heard that some organisations are going fully remote, and for me that would just be my worst nightmare... it's making me think about the future of the organisation and if they will go down that path, I can't see myself being a part of it. I can't be positive and upbeat about it.'

### Attitudes and perceptions of managers

Some of our interviewees felt that while their managers allowed them to work remotely, this was done reluctantly, and consequently they felt concerned about whether they'd continue to be able to work from home in the future.

One interviewee highlighted that they felt that they were 'on the naughty step' for continuing to work remotely now that their office had re-opened. While they haven't formally been asked to return to the workplace full-time, their weekly one-to-one meetings with their manager have been cancelled. They are feeling isolated and concerned about what this might mean for their development in the role.

'It is difficult, I feel that sense of alienation. We will see what I get for my Performance and Development Review this year, but I wouldn't be surprised if I get a bog-standard mark for it because I'm not visible in the office, which is totally wrong.'

Another commented that 'while I've had my requested adjustments honoured (to be in the office just one day a week when it reopens) my manager was reluctant and I feel I'm having to prove my worthiness of support.'

Challenges in accessing adjustments were also reflected through the survey. Of all survey respondents who requested additional support or new adjustments while working remotely, close to one in five (19.1%) had their request refused, with no alternative arrangement put in place.



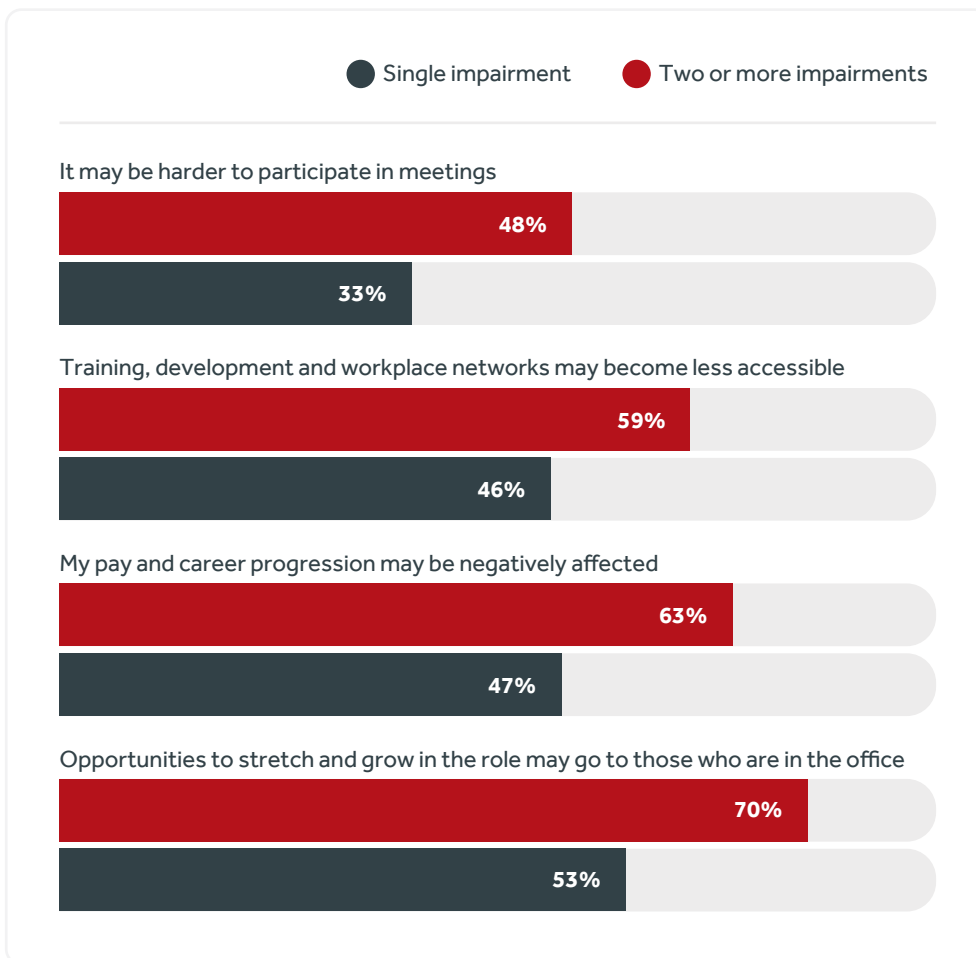
'Although the adjustments needed for remote working were provided, it took several months to do so and needed me to remind and chase several times. You always seem to have to push and push to get what you need, it's never provided easily.'

### Concerns about career progression and access to opportunities

Working from home can mean disabled workers are less visible to their colleagues and senior staff, and previous evidence has found this may result in more limited opportunities to progress into higher paid and more senior roles.<sup>28</sup> Previous Work Foundation research found that legacy attitudes towards remote working and what it means for career development may persist, which presents real risks for employees who do pursue remote or hybrid options as we emerge from the pandemic. We found that many managers were concerned that remote work could mean that disabled workers *'miss opportunities due to being out of sight'* and experience a *'lack of social contact and support in the workplace'*.<sup>29</sup>

Findings from this survey also suggest that disabled workers themselves are concerned about what choosing to work remotely could mean for their opportunities to develop and grow in the workplace. Respondents with two or more impairments are more likely to anticipate negative impacts from working remotely, than those with one impairment, as shown in figure 4 below.

**Figure 4: Disabled workers with multiple impairments are concerned about how remote working could impact their working lives**



Source: Work Foundation survey, N=372. The easy-read surveys did not contain questions on the potential impact on working somewhere different from peers. Further, 7.7% of respondents declined to answer these questions and are therefore not included in the figures reported.



These findings are concerning given that disabled workers with multiple impairments were also most likely to report that access to remote working is important for their health and wellbeing, suggesting some may feel they face a trade-off between their career progression and wellbeing. But this does not need to be the case; organisations that proactively align their approaches to staff development and hybrid work should be able to ensure that all workers are able to access training and progression opportunities.

## Equipment and using Access to Work

While our survey found that 89% of disabled workers have access to the specialist equipment and software that they need, either at the office, at home or both, many interviewees had purchased equipment themselves, using their own money. This was usually because the process for arranging payment through work was too complicated or took too long, or in some cases (for example that of an agency worker) because their employer did not take responsibility for sourcing equipment for workers who weren't direct employees.

### What is Access to Work?

Access to Work is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work.

The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on an employer to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled employees. Access to Work funding cannot be used to support these adjustments.

Access to Work will also not fund items which are regarded as standard equipment, standard business costs or standard health and safety requirements.

It covers a wide range of interventions beyond 'reasonable adjustments' associated with overcoming work-related barriers resulting from disability. The support package is agreed based on individual need.

Examples of the kind of help available through Access to Work are:

- A support worker, such as a reader for somebody with a visual impairment; communicator for a deaf person; a specialist job coach for a person with a learning difficulty; or a helper for personal care needs at work
- Specialist equipment (or alterations to existing equipment).
- Help towards the additional costs of taxi fares for individuals who cannot use public transport to get to work

There is no set amount for an Access to Work grant

There is an annual cap on the total amount of support that can be provided under Access to Work, which is currently set at £65,180.

The DWP Access to Work service can help to fund work adjustments for disabled employees where organisations are unable to, but our research has found this scheme to have mixed results, with some disabled workers experiencing extended delays before support is made available. It's well-evidenced that Access to Work has not been sufficiently promoted, with awareness of the scheme low among both disabled workers and employers.<sup>30</sup> While not all disabled workers will need to make use of the Access to Work scheme, and not all employers are eligible for full cost recovery (eligibility tapers related to an organisation's financial turnover) or choose to use the scheme, it is concerning that just 48 of the 406 disabled workers that we surveyed said that they had used it. Among them, more than two-thirds (70.8%) felt it had been a positive experience, and nearly one in three (29.2%) had a negative experience of using the scheme.

Many interviewees hadn't used Access to Work before, and most of those who had used it reported negative experiences including delays, poor communication and unnecessary repetition in processes. Some were put off by the assessment process, or feedback from others who had used the scheme.

The scheme is not sufficiently joined up with wider employment policy. As an example, the first lockdown began in March 2020, and many workers were required to work from home, but changes to Access to Work reflecting this new way of working were not announced until May 2020.<sup>31</sup> Employer facing engagement, such as Government's Disability Confident scheme, health and occupational health services and employment support could all offer routes for raising awareness of the scheme.

### Experiencing isolation and a lack of understanding from colleagues

Relationships with colleagues, social events and professional networks are often a core part of our working lives. Several interviewees mentioned that they missed the social interactions with colleagues they used to have at their workplace. Others who hadn't felt that way during the pandemic, when their whole organisation was remote working, reported feeling more left out now that hybrid arrangements are becoming the norm and more of their colleagues are spending an increasing amount of time in the office while they continue to work remotely.

This is particularly concerning given that a recent study found disabled people experienced significantly higher rates of loneliness, low social support, and social isolation than non-disabled people.<sup>32</sup>

**'Last year I felt supported because everybody was working from home, but now we've moved into this hybrid model of "you've got to be in for at least three days a week." Now I feel like I am on the outskirts and that perceptions of me and what I'm doing is going to change as well.'**

This quote highlights that many participants were concerned about how their working pattern was seen by colleagues who worked in a different way. A survey respondent reinforced this view, noting that *'I have had difficulty in getting my colleagues to understand my needs and the impact of being forced to come back to the office.'*

As we return to some form of on-site working there's a need to think carefully about the social aspects of work. It's key that individuals who need to work away from the office are still able to take part in social activities and events if they want to.

## 5. WHAT CHANGES ARE NEEDED TO MAKE REMOTE AND HYBRID WORK INCLUSIVE?

As we adapt to new modes of working, it is key that organisations are supported to make sure that their working patterns and environments are truly inclusive, so that choosing to work from home really is a choice for disabled workers and not an inevitability resulting from poor accessibility.

The Government's National Disability Strategy includes a welcome commitment to 'make the world of work more inclusive and accessible'.<sup>32</sup> It's essential that commitment is supported with targeted action that reflects changes in our working lives.

Hybrid working offers disabled workers flexibility and autonomy to manage work around health conditions and impairments, while also providing opportunities for face-to-face contact with colleagues. Maintaining access to remote and hybrid working, and ensuring it is designed to be inclusive of disabled workers' needs, would help address the disability employment gap, promoting job entry, retention and progression.

However, it is important that a greater use of hybrid working does not lead to the exclusion of workers who continue to work remotely. There are a number of steps that government and employers can take to ensure that future hybrid working practices are inclusive.

### Next steps for policymakers

**Recommendation 1: The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) should make flexible working the default position for all employees, with flexible options included in all job adverts**

Government carried out a consultation on a day-one right to request flexible working in 2021, with a response pending.<sup>34</sup> However, as we have noted before, a right to request flexible work is not a right to have it.<sup>35</sup>

Considering that it's unlikely Government will legislate for a right to have flexible working, it becomes increasingly important to narrow the range of reasons employers may give to refuse making a job more flexible., and workers in post should be adequately supported to appeal decisions without fearing reprisal., While employers already have limited reasons to refuse flexible working requests that are considered reasonable adjustments for disabled workers, barriers still remain for some people who would benefit from increased access to remote, hybrid and other flexible options. To access reasonable adjustments, an employee must first identify as disabled, and with some employers requiring proof of disability, this can be seen as medicalising and stigmatising. Furthermore, some people would benefit from adjustments but don't meet the Equality Act definition of disability – this is a particular issue for people with new or fluctuating conditions who might not know whether they will be affected for 12 months or more.

**Recommendation 2: BEIS should require large employers to publish information on their approach to flexible and hybrid working**

Employers with more than 250 staff should be required to publish their flexible and hybrid working policies externally, monitor take-up of flexible working practices within their organisation across different worker groups, including disabled workers, and regularly publish this data along with action plans to drive improvement.

**Recommendation 3: Government should increase funding for the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to enforce and protect disabled workers' rights**

The government should increase resourcing for the EHRC and widen its remit to allow it to constructively challenge employers who do not provide adjustments for disabled workers. This would allow the EHRC to increase the volume and the visibility of its enforcement work, which would boost compliance, serve as a strong deterrent, and make it worthwhile for people to report violations of their rights to the EHRC.

The EHRC should also open an enquiry into reasonable adjustments for disabled workers in the

context of remote and hybrid working. One in five of our survey respondents who requested adjustments or support for remote or hybrid working had those requests refused by their employer. It is possible that some employers do not fully understand what their responsibilities are towards disabled workers. The EHRC should open an inquiry into the challenges that organisations face when assessing reasonable adjustment requests by disabled workers who are remote and hybrid working, and use the findings to develop comprehensive guidance for employers.

**Recommendation 4: The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should reform Access to Work, providing better funding and resourcing so that it works effectively for individuals and employers, and breaks down barriers to accessing occupational health expertise**

Our research has made clear that when it works, Access to Work can be transformative for disabled workers and their employers. However, for too many applicants and potential applicants, barriers remain. Reforming Access to Work was a key priority in the National Disability Strategy. DWP should focus on streamlining processes, and provide a step-by-step guide which outlines the different stages, the expected timescales, and explain who is responsible for what at each stage of an application. This would increase understanding among applicants and their employers, and could reduce stress on the applicant and the likelihood of deadlines being missed. Additionally, processes should be implemented to allow and encourage a collaborative application between employer and employee. Ensuring employer engagement from the start of the process could encourage more constructive dialogue and that they are aware of the full recommendations made, not just the elements that they need to contribute to financially and also ensure that any recommendations made are compatible with the employer's infrastructure (e.g. IT systems). As some interviewees reported experiencing unnecessary repetition in processes, the general experience of engaging with Access to Work could be improved if there was a named Access to Work contact for each applicant, and staff made use of case notes for re-applications and re-assessments.

**Recommendation 5: The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) should refresh the Disability Confident Scheme to reflect our changing working lives**

Government is reviewing the Disability Confident Scheme as part of plans announced through the National Disability Strategy. This presents an opportunity to develop a more ambitious approach that is better aligned with current ways of working, particularly in setting requirements for Level 2 and 3 accreditations. This could include assigning a date to when accreditations are awarded, which makes clear the accreditation is for practices assessed at a point in time. The date for the next reassessment could also be added to the public accreditation logo.

## Next steps for employers

**Recommendation 6: Organisations should invest in training and supporting line managers**

Equality training is essential for individuals with leadership or management responsibility, as managers and senior leaders have a critical role in embodying organisational values and culture.

Employers must also make sure managers are equipped to run hybrid teams so they are productive and inclusive, regardless of where and when their teams are working. Line managers should be trained in best practice around dealing with reasonable adjustment and flexible working requests and to know the practicalities of where and how to get support within their organisation. They need to be empowered to think flexibly and creatively in responding to requests and equipped with the tools and confidence to "have the conversation" and ask every employee what they need to be their most productive and to do their job well.

Crucially, this training should be delivered in an inclusive way, focusing on developing awareness, understanding and disability allyship throughout the organisation.

**Recommendation 7: Consultation**

This research has underscored the importance of autonomy, so it is vital that decisions about hybrid working practices are not made via a top-down approach. Consultation should be a continuous exercise aimed at developing a thorough understanding of employees, and the kinds of responsibilities and pressures they deal with that impact their work. This will help managers

and leaders to better adjust conditions to help workers be more productive, happier and healthier. This could involve regular information and feedback sessions, additional questions in staff surveys and engaging regularly with staff disability networks.

**Recommendation 8: Explore wider forms of flexibility**

Not all jobs can be done remotely, and remote working is not for everyone. Employers must consider that for some employees, remote work can cause isolation or anxiety, and those without an appropriate workspace at home may need access to the office. As we emerge from the pandemic employers should look beyond hybrid or remote working and see the shift in working practices as an opportunity to support the full spectrum of flexible work, including job-sharing, flexitime and compressed hours.

**Recommendation 9: Workplace adjustment passports for all**

Adjustment passports or “Tailored Adjustment Plans” are a valuable tool to record and communicate needs and preferences about how and where we work. They are particularly useful for the types of flexibility that don’t warrant a contract change, like formal flexible working does, but rather that supports small adjustments or supports, such as dim lighting, or ‘focus time’ for intensive tasks. This is a live document that can be regularly reviewed as well as handed over to a new line manager or department if the manager changes, or if the worker moves to a new role. While traditionally these documents have been used as a tool to support disabled workers and people with health conditions, we have heard examples of employers who have used adjustment passports for all workers, and this was widely welcomed and seen as a way of destigmatising the adjustment request process.

**Being an ally to disabled colleagues**

Changing the experiences of disabled people at work means that you have to change the culture, and to do that successfully, all employees at every level need to recognise the problems and be part of the solutions. Having all of the right policies and procedures in place at the organisational level is just one step towards building a disability-inclusive culture. To be effective allies, colleagues should:

**Educate themselves**

Learning, and in some cases, unlearning, is an essential first step in allyship. While mandatory workplace equality and diversity training can be useful in gaining an understanding of appropriate use of language and the barriers and challenges faced by disabled people regarding accessibility and reasonable adjustments, our learning should not stop there. It is important that non-disabled people listen to their disabled colleagues, engage with employee networks (or set them up and resource them if there aren’t any) and identify a champion to drive this at the most senior level.

**Communicate with colleagues rather than making assumptions about their needs or preferences**

Assuming a disabled person needs help reinforces harmful stereotypes and prejudices about disabled people’s capabilities. Indeed, what one person needs in terms of allyship may look different from another, so asking is an important step. It is also important that when organising meetings or social events, non-disabled colleagues don’t make assumptions about how their disabled colleagues work and what they will want to do.

**Listen, support, self-reflect and change**

Allyship is about being conscious and intentional, and that means learning to truly listen to others. The onus should not be on disabled people to tell their non-disabled colleagues what to do to help, but for allies to discover by listening, understanding and practicing empathy. While confronting privilege and internal biases can be an uncomfortable process, it is not enough to simply identify as ‘not ableist.’ We must all continually work towards equity for everyone, striving to undo discriminatory attitudes and practices in our own minds, environment, and the wider world.

Disabled people are a massive talent pool, and we know that diverse teams made up of individuals with different lived experience bring better creativity, problem solving, innovation and ultimately better products and services for all their customers and service users. With skills shortages in so many sectors, employers can simply not afford to get it wrong. Getting it right is good for disabled people and good for employers too.



## METHODOLOGY

Our study sought to identify how remote and hybrid working can be designed to be more inclusive so that it supports disabled workers' labour market entry, job retention and return-to-work. We aimed to address the following questions:

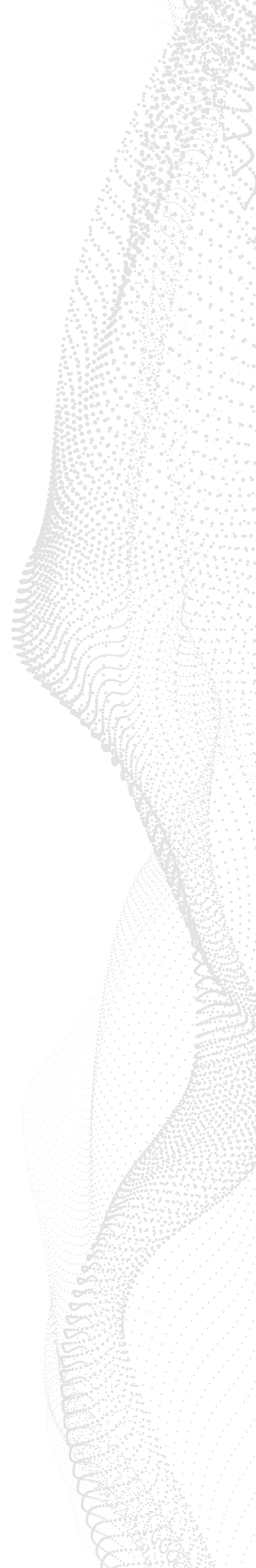
1. What are disabled workers' experiences of remote and hybrid working?
2. What challenges and opportunities do remote and hybrid working pose for disabled workers' labour market entry job retention, progression and productivity?
3. What factors do disabled workers and employers report as enabling inclusive hybrid working and homeworking?
4. How are employers considering disabled workers' needs in their plans for hybrid working to ensure it is i) inclusive of disabled workers needs and ii) ensures parity between remote and in-person workers, including equitable access to workplace opportunities?
5. What further resources or support do employers need from the government or business organisations when planning or implementing hybrid working?

We took a mixed-method approach.

Between 9<sup>th</sup> February and 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022, we surveyed 406 disabled workers living and working across the UK about their experiences of remote and hybrid working before and during the pandemic.

The survey findings are supported by 20 qualitative interviews with disabled people living and/or working in Greater London.

We also held two roundtable discussions, one with employers and business organisations, and another with advice and support organisations including trade unions, disabled people's organisations and charities.



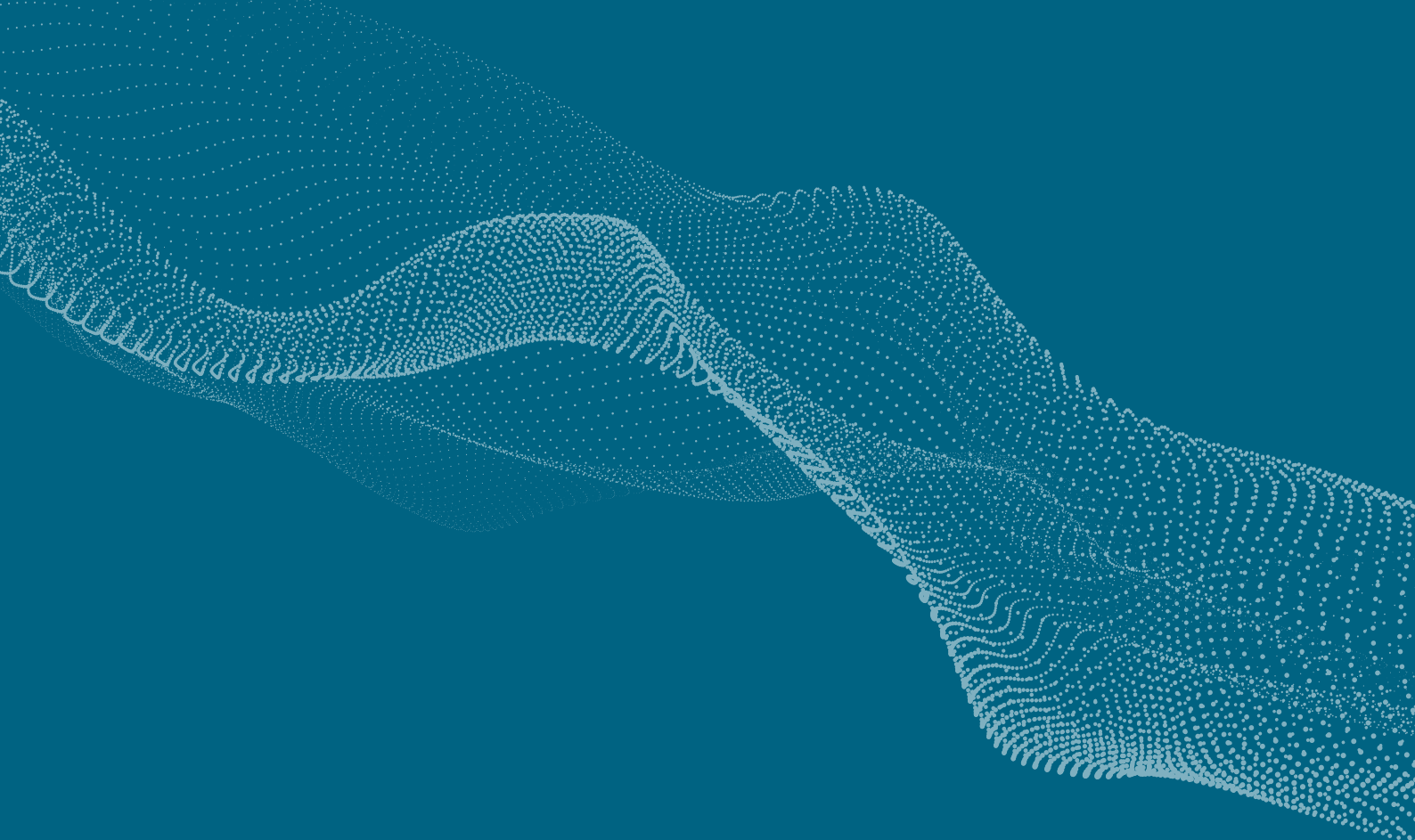
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