



# Embracing Flexibility.

How can L&D service new hybrid working and learning models in the public sector?

April 2022

**PSE**  
PUBLIC SECTOR EXECUTIVE

The Open University

# Contents.

Foreword	04
Executive summary	05
Key findings	06-07
The rise of the remote public sector worker	08
The role of flexibility in attraction and retention	10
Aspiration, learning and the hybrid working life	12
Learning at work, training needs and skills gaps	14
Learning for current and future work	16
Desire for digital	18
Progress and ambition	19
Learning to manage	20
Managers aim for inclusion	21
Barriers to learning	22
Type and format of training	24
Accredited and professional training	25
Learning preference: remote, in-person or a blend of both	27

The future is flexible	29
<hr/>	
The expert view...	31
<hr/>	
A shift to remote working	32
<hr/>	
Adopting blended learning practices	33
<hr/>	
Collaborating with employers	35
<hr/>	
Creating equal opportunities for black and minority ethnic colleagues	37
<hr/>	
The future of public sector learning	39
<hr/>	
About The Open University	41
<hr/>	
References	42
<hr/>	

# Foreword.

Through my role at The Open University, I've been lucky enough to work alongside public sector leaders and organisations for many years. It has always been apparent how they have embraced flexibility in the workplace – giving people from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to build a career and serve the public. That flexibility has come in many forms and The Open University has always been a natural partner to assist with learning and development needs.

The pandemic was a huge test for both employers and learning providers. New model of remote and hybrid working became the norm for many roles. This opened up new opportunities for both learning providers and employers – and presented challenges too.

Our new employee survey and report in partnership with Public Sector Executive looks in detail at these challenges for learning and development professionals. What stands out is a real desire from employees to learn and progress. This presents an opportunity for us all to tap into that ambition. But we need to consider how shifts in working have changed the way we deliver



learning and development, and how we can all become more adaptable, flexible and effective.

We have also interviewed experts from within the public sector and The Open University to share some of their experiences and learnings.

The public sector in 2022 looks very different. I hope some of the insights contained in this report can inform your future planning.

**Balvinder Johal**

Director - Sector Business Development  
The Open University

# Executive summary.



**Remote working is here to stay, and this has huge implications for attracting and retaining staff, and for ensuring they have the right skills to provide services of the highest quality. Employees' dedication was plain to see during the pandemic, with many of them going beyond the call of duty. This commitment is underlined by a strong desire to learn at work, as evidenced by our survey, carried out by YouGov.**

The survey questioned 2,687 UK public sector workers in different industries, levels of seniority and job types. It aims to give a comprehensive view across the public sector and highlights considerations on how learning and development is offered, which employers can bring into their thinking. Respondents were asked about current and preferred working patterns and how these would influence employment decisions, as well as learning and development and how this affects job satisfaction.

Hybrid working – partly from home and partly in the workplace – is likely to become the dominant pattern of employment, as the Office for National Statistics has reported. This is reflected in our survey, with more than three-quarters (76%) of public sector workers wanting to work remotely at least some of the time.

Employers will need to continue to adapt to what is a significant shift in working patterns over a short time

Hybrid working, once relatively uncommon, has become a major factor in recruiting and retaining staff. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of employees in our survey would be more likely to accept a job that offered remote or hybrid working, and the same proportion would be more likely to stay in a job with this arrangement.

The public sector is well placed to adapt to this, as it has long been a pioneer of flexible working. Such arrangements allow people to succeed and boosts equal access to jobs. And, of course, flexible hours are essential when you are providing vital services around the clock and have to meet fluctuating demand.

Public sector staff are committed to their work, as the past two years have shown, and many respondents wanted training relevant to their role and to progress in their career. It is therefore no surprise that they are eager to engage in learning and development to gain and strengthen skills, and realise their potential.

A key finding in our survey was that eight out of 10 respondents saw learning and development as central to job satisfaction. This rose to 86% in healthcare staff, where formal learning pathways are a requirement of many roles and have historically lead people to more senior opportunities.

This major shift in working patterns – an average of 37% of people worked at home at least some time in 2020, up from 27% in 2019 – combined with the need to attract, retain and motivate staff, means public sector leaders will have to rethink, carefully and thoroughly, how they deliver learning and development in the workplace.

There is a genuine risk that if an employer does not offer a degree of remote working along with good opportunities for learning and development, another organisation will. Those with most attractive working and learning practices will invest and keep the best staff.

# Key findings.



## Remote retention

Hybrid/remote working was very attractive. Three quarters (73%) would be more likely to stay in a job that allowed remote or hybrid working; this rose to nine out of 10 of those working in the government and local authorities sector.



## Digital desire

The combination of digital services and remote working makes technology skills essential, and more than a third (35%) of public sector employees would like to improve their digital skills.



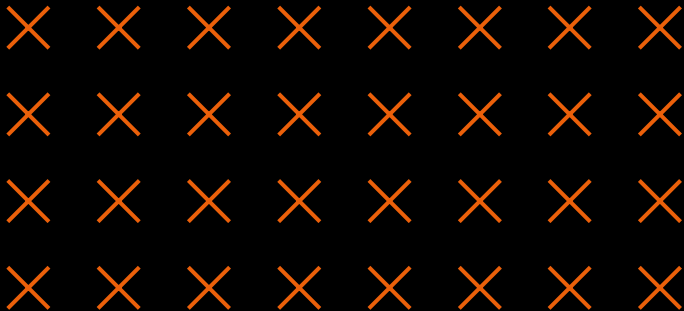
## Progress preferred

Nearly half of respondents (48%) wanted to get ahead in their careers. This ambition was most evident in emergency services (58%) and defence (57%) workers.



## Key to job satisfaction

Eight out of 10 public sector staff said learning and development were central to job satisfaction, which is essential to retaining people; this finding was consistent between the UK nations. Learning was particularly important to those in healthcare (86%).



## Managerial ambition

Aspiration was apparent, with training in management and leadership the most popular area of learning in our survey, favoured by 29% of public sector employees overall and rising to 48% in Wales, 48% in Scotland and 54% in Northern Ireland.



## Diversity at the top

More than any other group, senior managers and directors want more opportunities to learn about diversity and inclusion, with a significant proportion (29%) saying this was important or very important.

# Key findings.



## Professional/industry accreditation

More than one in four public sector workers (26%) were interested in gaining an accredited professional or industry qualification, but did not know whether this was possible. A higher proportion (34%) said the same about microcredentials (professional short courses).



## More time, please

A lack of time was a main reason for not taking part in training at work, cited by 44% of respondents. Almost a third (29%) said inflexible working hours prevented them from participating.



## Flexible learning needed

More than half of respondents (55%) preferred blended learning, where people learn via online learning as well as in person. This indicates employers need to take a flexible approach when planning learning and development activities, and may wish to ascertain what could be delivered remotely and where staff would benefit from interacting with others.



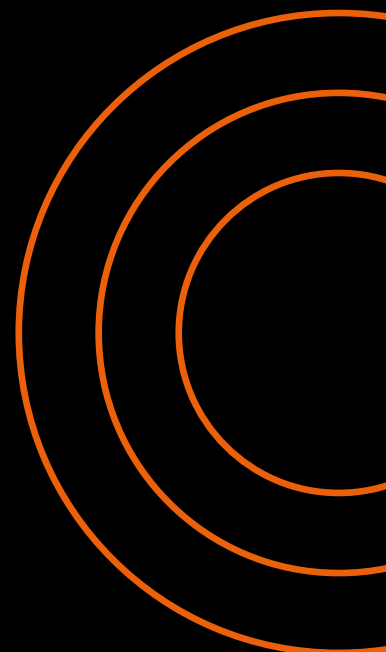
## Support to learn

A clear majority of staff (59%) feel supported in learning and development by their organisation. While most (78%) had training factored into their objectives to some extent, 47% did not understand where their skills were lacking.



## Tell your staff about training

It appears that employers may need to be more proactive about informing staff about learning opportunities. More than one in four respondents (27%) were not sure what training was available for their role and 17% did not know what formats of training were offered.







# The rise of the remote public sector worker.

A majority of staff prefer to work remotely for some of the time, with a larger proportion saying this would influence their decisions to take up or remain in a job .

62%

Are currently working remotely

76%

Would like to work remotely

89%

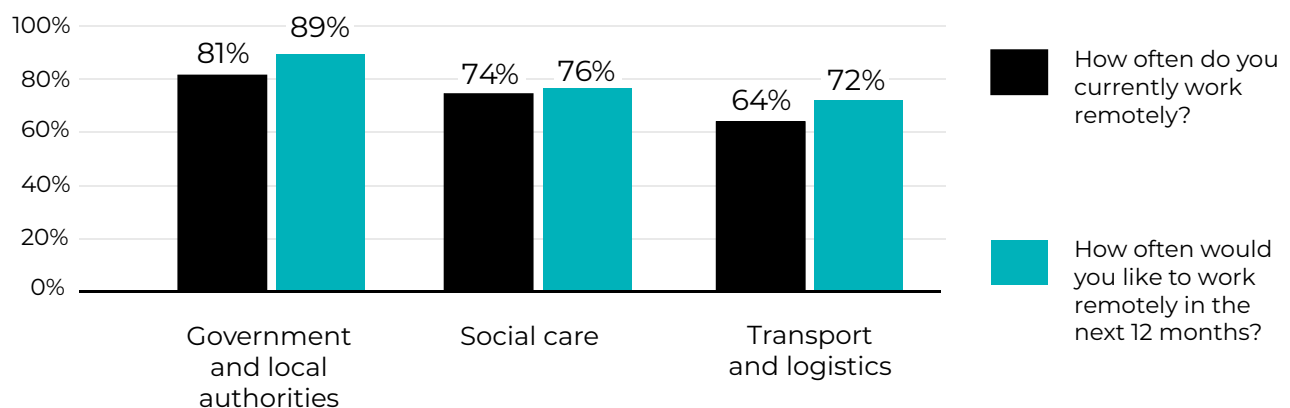
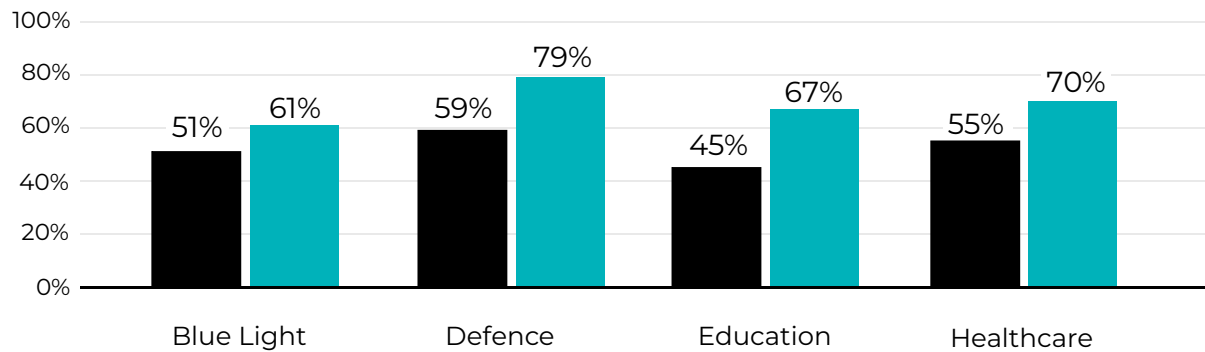
Local and national government employees want to work remotely

80%

People with disabilities are more likely to stay in a job that allows remote or hybrid working



The difference between currently working remotely and working remotely in the next 12 months



After its widespread forced introduction in 2020, remote working is now part of life for many roles, and most public-sector staff who work with the public wish to continue to be able to work from home, if they aren't working face-to-face.

However, discussions on what workers themselves think has been largely missing (Philips, 2022).

Our survey found a majority of staff (62%) now work remotely for one or more days per week, but 76% would like to do this.

There is a preference for hybrid working – some of the time remotely and some in the workplace – rather than working remotely all the time. While 29% of respondents were working remotely full time, only one in five wanted this to be permanent (21%).

This reflects the broader UK picture, with both organisations and staff preferring a hybrid working approach in the future (ONS, 2021).

However, employees were keen to maintain in-person links with their workplace with nearly a quarter (24%) said they wanted to be based entirely at their workplace.

The highest proportion of those wanting to work remotely wished to do so for 1-2 days per week (29%), with just more than one in

four wanting to do this 3-4 days per week (26%).

Within every sector and every nation, the proportion of people who wanted to work remotely was higher than of those working remotely already.

Figures were similar for women and men, and people with disabilities (81%) were more likely than others to want to work remotely, regardless of whether their disability limited them a little or a lot.

“

**In every sector, the percentage who wanted to work remotely was higher than the percentage working remotely already**



# The role of flexibility in attraction and retention.

Being able to work remotely was shown to influence people's decisions to take up or remain in jobs; when it comes to being motivated and productive, employees in general rank flexible working above financial incentives (Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021).

Nearly three out of four (73%) of public sector workers said they would be more likely to accept a job that allowed remote or hybrid working. Half of them said they strongly agreed this was the case.

The same overall proportion said they were more likely to stay in a job that allowed remote or hybrid working, with 49% feeling strongly that they would. People with disabilities were particularly influenced by this (80% of those who were limited a lot and 79% of those limited a little).

Those keenest on remote working were those in the government and local authorities sector with nearly nine out of 10 workers (89%) wanting to do this, and 81% working remotely now. Likewise, they were more likely

to accept a job that allowed remote hybrid working (85% compared to 77% overall) and to stay in a post that allowed this (87% compared to 73%).

People in Wales and Northern Ireland were more likely than those in other countries to accept (75%) or stay (77%) in a job that offered remote or hybrid working. Those in Scotland were least keen on remote working, but still a majority, with 69% saying they would be tempted by a job that offered remote working and 68% being more likely to remain in a job that did.



People in Northern Ireland were most likely to stay in a post that offered remote or hybrid working.

The preference for hybrid working shows that people recognise there are advantages and disadvantages being based at home or in the workplace.

Employees based at home have reported missing social interaction and feeling lonely or isolated (CIPD, 2020; Phillips, 2021).

Working from home has been reported to improve productivity, health, family and work-life balance, and reduce time spent commuting (ONS, 2021; Phillips, 2022). However, staff fear they may lose impromptu and informal learning opportunities (Felstead, 2022).

In our survey, the majority of people (77%) found they had more time because of remote working, with women agreeing slightly more than men (79% versus 74%).

Half of our respondents agreed that they did not want to 'commute often' after the pandemic, with 27% feeling strongly about this. However, around a quarter (26%) were not concerned about having to commute. This is in line with research by the CIPD (2021), which found that avoiding the commute was the most commonly cited benefit of working from home, mentioned by nearly half of employees.

Businesses deciding to increase homeworking in the long term have cited improved staff wellbeing, less sick leave and higher levels of productivity for this decision (ONS, 2021).

While the pandemic forced homeworking, it has proved to be not only practicable but also effective and popular across the public sector.

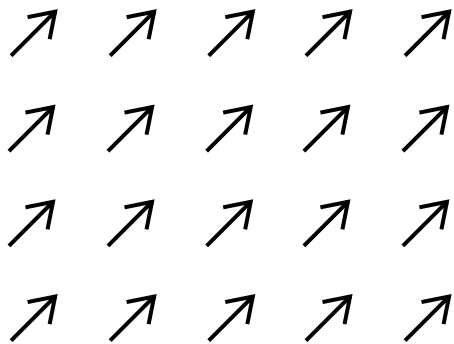
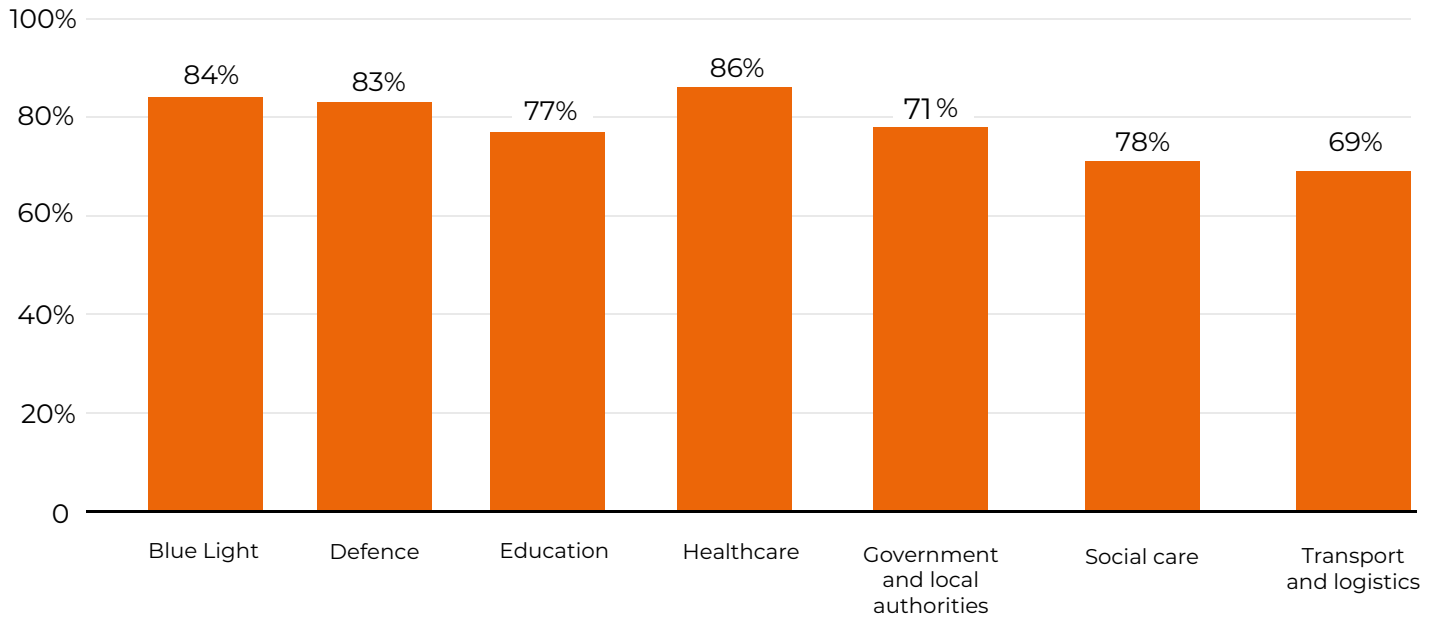


# Aspiration, learning and the **hybrid** working life.

Learning and development are key to job satisfaction, according to a large majority of our respondents. They also told us about the training they wanted, what they wanted it to achieve, barriers to learning and their preferences over remote, blended and in-person delivery.



Workplace training and the opportunity to develop new skills is important for job satisfaction



80%

Public sector staff said learning and development is key to job satisfaction

86%

Healthcare workers said learning and development is key to job satisfaction

Most public sector staff say (80%) find learning and development are central to job satisfaction, a finding consistent between the UK nations.

Job satisfaction is not just about staff wellbeing – it is strongly correlated with productivity and lower staff turnover across all industries and regions (Krekel et al, 2019). In this survey, learning was particularly important for job satisfaction for those in healthcare (86%), blue-light services (84%) and defence (83%).

“

**Digital service delivery, already a priority for many public services, became more important than ever over the past two years**

# Learning at work, training needs and skills gaps.



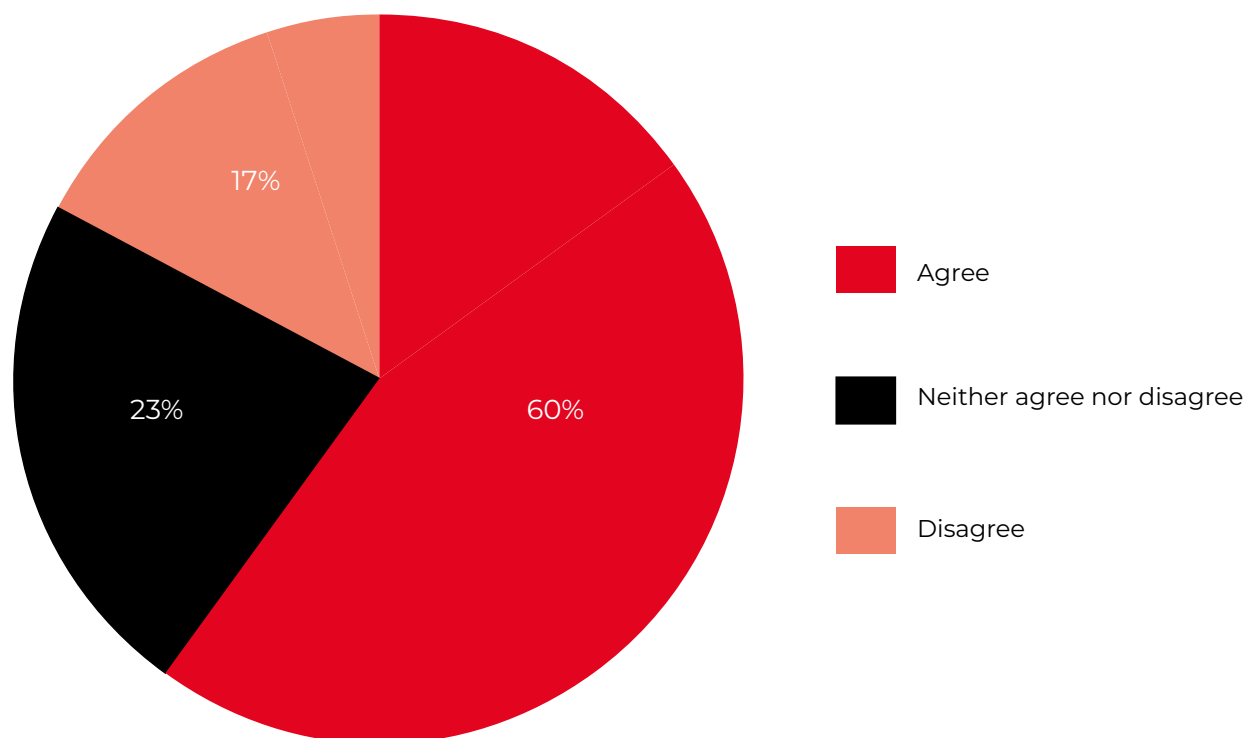
**One in five (20%) senior managers and directors did not understand their personal skills gap**

While nearly four out of five respondents (78%) said learning and development were factored into their annual objectives, skills gaps were evident.





I feel supported and encouraged to participate in training by my organisation



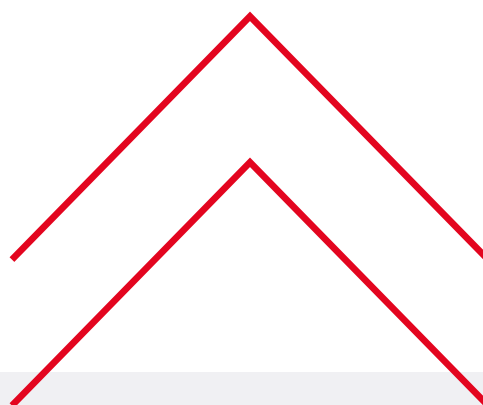
A similar proportion (21%) in the education sector did not understand their own skills gap, compared to 18% in defence and government and local authorities, and 9% in healthcare. The low healthcare figure could be accounted for by defined career paths and requirements for CPD and routine reflection on practice.

A majority (59%) of staff, especially those in managerial roles, felt

their employer supported them to take part in training. However, nearly one in five (18%) did not feel supported. While the 'not supported' figure was slightly higher for those with a disability that limited them a lot (22%), fewer than half of this group (45%) felt that they were actually supported.

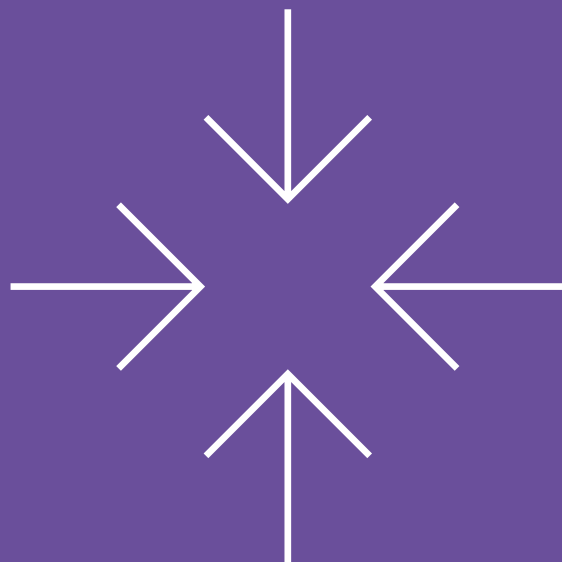
Just under half (45%) of respondents wished they

were offered more learning opportunities by their employer, while 24% did not. However, a similar proportion (44%) did not feel they needed more training since the pandemic, with fewer than one in four (24%) feeling they did. A further 34% were impartial.





# Learning for current and future work.



Interest in training was clearly evident, with 77% overall wanting to build on their existing knowledge. More women than men wanted to do this (79% versus 73%). Most people wanting to expand their existing abilities were either middle or junior managers (27% and 31% respectively).

Did people want training to support their current jobs or something else? Most of our respondents wanted training that was specifically (50%) or somewhat (30%) related to their current job, and a further 28% wanted training not related to their current job but within the same sector, industry or profession.





Almost four out of 10 (39%) wanted to learn new skills for a different role in the future, especially those in blue-light services (50%), although nearly three out of 10 (29%) did not.

However, almost one in six (16%) wanted training in a different sector/industry/profession for work that was not related to their current job. Junior managers/team leaders/supervisors were the most keen to want this (43%).

Regionally, people in London (21%) most wanted to do this and those in the West Midlands (11%) the least.

The reasons for wanting to train in a different area were not examined – were the junior managers frustrated at a lack of progress, or did another area of the organisation appear more interesting or have better prospects? For example, local authorities work with organisations such as health,

police and fire and rescue services as well as private companies, which can take careers in any number of directions (LGA, 2014).

The pandemic made people in some sectors feel less secure in their jobs. One in five workers in Britain believed that their job was at risk because of the coronavirus pandemic, although healthcare and education were among the “most secure” sectors (AAT, 2020).

# Desire for digital.

Digital service delivery, already a priority for many public services, became more important than ever over the past two years.

When this is combined with the rise of remote working, it is not surprising that more than a third (35%) of public sector employees would like training in technology skills.



# Progress and ambition.

48%

Want career progress with a new job or a promotion

63%

People limited a lot by disability who want to progress in their career



Appetite for progress was visible, with nearly half of respondents (48%) saying they wished to move up within the next 12 months, for example by taking up a new job or securing a promotion.

Ambition was marked in people who had a disability that limited them a lot, with 63% of them wanting to get ahead. By sector, blue-light service employees (58%) were most keen to progress, followed by defence staff (57%). Women were slightly more eager to move up (49%) than men (47%), and

more likely to want this strongly (19% versus 17%).

There was some agreement that progress was related to taking part in training, with 38% of respondents saying this was the case.

More than half of healthcare workers (52%) acknowledged this, which may be linked to the nature of healthcare careers, where practitioners progress to an advanced level of practice through education (Health Education

England, 2022), and by the NHS recognising it has to develop the skills of its current workforce, particularly non-medical staff, if it is to support new models of care (Imison et al, 2016).

This figure was also high for defence workers (47%), as well as for people in London (47%) and the West Midlands (46%).



# Learning to manage.

29%

**Employees would like to receive training in management/leadership in the next 12 months**

Learning was seen as key to securing more senior roles, with respondents wanting training specifically in management and leadership to enable this.

Almost one third (29%) of public sector employees would like to receive training in management and leadership in the next 12 months – a higher proportion than for training in any other areas.

Education on leading teams remotely became more relevant when staff met only via video conferencing. Skills in building trusting virtual relationships,

active listening in a digital space and empowering people are becoming more important (Moules, 2022).

A mass shift to remote working might normally involve training and support for managers to deal with issues of team members' wellbeing, productivity and learning and development. Despite the acceptance of hybrid working, however, only 28% of UK organisations plan to train managers in how to manage remotely (CIPD, 2021).

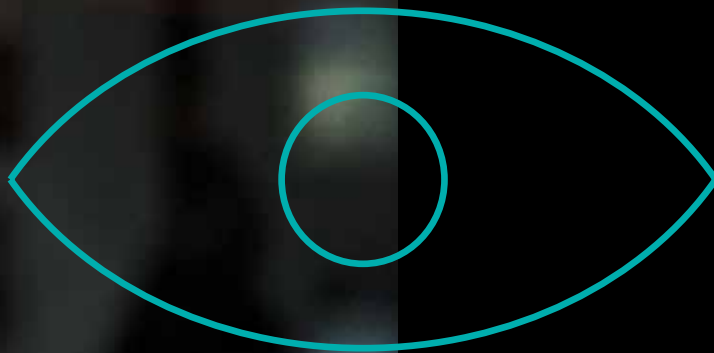


# Managers aim for inclusion.



29%

Senior managers and directors who want to learn about diversity and inclusion



More than any other group, senior managers and directors were keen to learn about diversity and inclusion (29%).

The social, organisational and productivity benefits of diversity and inclusion are well recognised, and many public sector bodies want their workforce to reflect the communities they serve at all levels.

Diversity has additional implications for managers in public service – the public sector has legal obligations under the public sector equality duty, and not complying with this can leave them open to legal action.

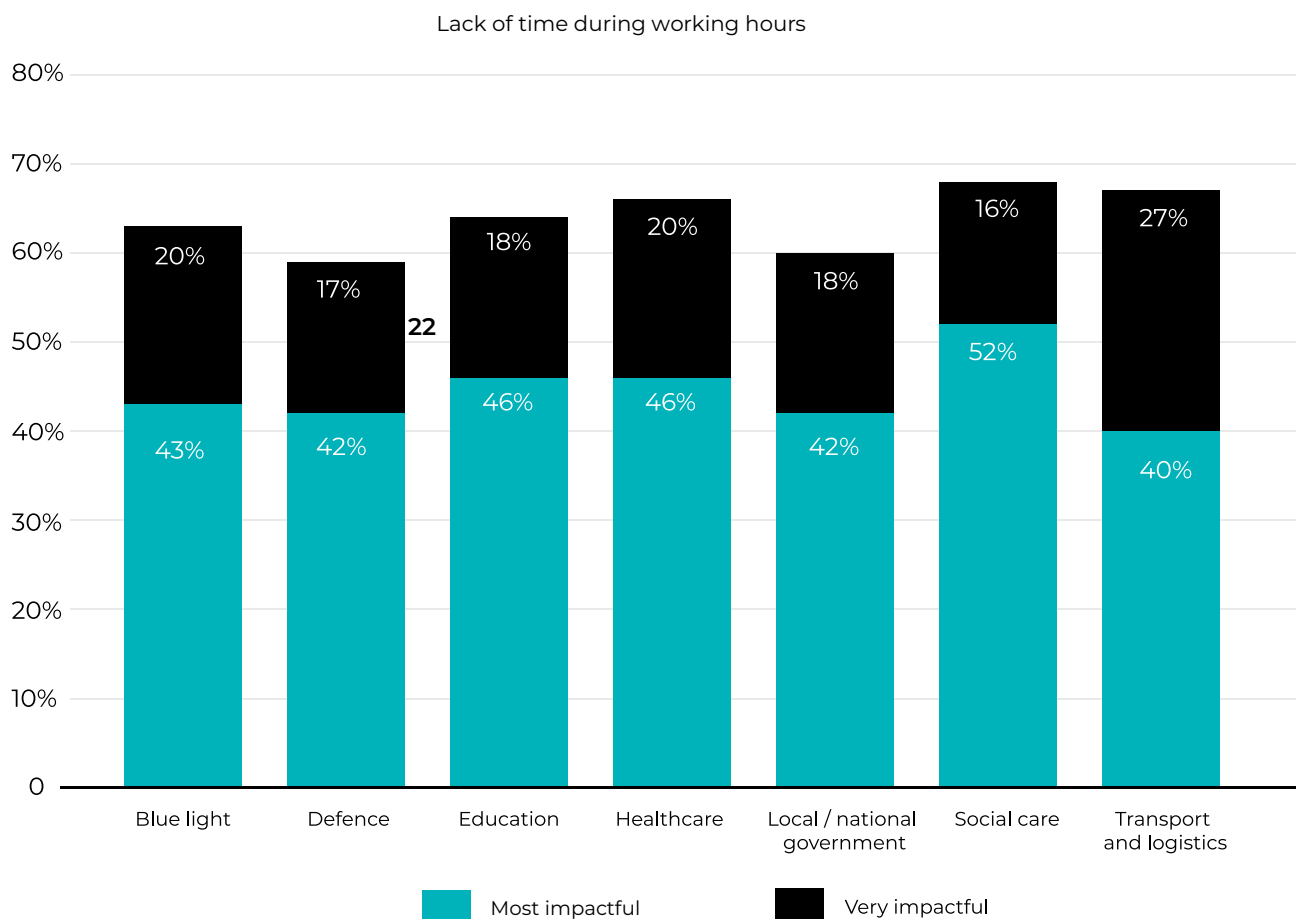
# Barriers to learning.

Despite their eagerness to learn, almost half (46%) of our respondents said they could not take part in training at work because they did not have the time to do so; this figure was comparable across all nations. This was particularly the case for those in social care (60%).

A lack of time was a main reason for not taking part in training at work, cited by 44% of respondents. Almost three in 10 (29%) said inflexible working hours prevented them from participating.

29%

Prevented from taking up training because of inflexible hours





Even attending something as straightforward and short as a lunch-and-learn session could prove problematic. While 19% of respondents planned to attend such sessions, a higher proportion – 26% – said they did not know whether doing this would be possible.

Almost two in five (38%) public sector employees in the education sector said a lack of flexible hours limited their opportunities to take up learning and development. This could be because much of the work is timetabled, allowing little opportunity for this.

A majority of the 2040 workforce is in employment now, and will gain skills through job-related training rather than the education system.

Despite this, the average time spent on job-related training in the UK fell 10% between 2011 and 2019 (Green and Henseke, 2019).

Finding time to learn is not a new problem.

Protected learning time is well established in healthcare but, when staff are trying to learn while in the workplace, they can easily be interrupted and called away to deal with work demands.

The rise of remote and flexible working may help provide solutions to the time problems. Online and distance learning, where students can plan studying to fit their time and access on-demand videos, have been around a long time, but the quality of provision can vary greatly.

Public sector organisations have long offered flexible working hours to meet the needs of both staff and services. Could this model be adapted for flexible learning, with staff taking time off in lieu for hours studied while they are away from the workplace with no one to distract them? Apprenticeships require learners to take a minimum of 20% off the job to learn, so can be a good option to carve out dedicated learning time.

Remote learning through virtual reality has been successful, and even provides some advantages over learning in a real-world situation



“

**Remote learning through virtual reality has been successful, and even provides some advantages over learning in a real-world situation**



# Type and format of training.

Much training was provided internally, with employees reporting more than three-quarters of organisations (77%) providing short courses or masterclasses themselves, and 69% providing coaching and mentoring. Just over four out of 10 (43%) organised lunch and learn sessions.

A majority of respondents (63%) plan to or would like to participate in short courses and masterclasses.





# Accredited and professional training.

Professional and industry-accredited training was reported to be offered by 43% of employers, with 39% offering undergraduate/postgraduate training, and 40% offering vocational training.

Both higher and degree level (32% of employers) and lower level (39%) apprenticeships were offered. A high proportion of defence organisations (69%) offered lower level apprenticeships.

Overall, only 32% employees knew their employer offered higher and degree apprenticeships; one in

three (33%) staff overall and nearly one in five senior managers (18%) did not know whether their organisation did or not.

If staff do not know higher-level apprenticeships are available, they will not be able to ask their manager about them or suggest them to team members.

This lack of awareness that apprenticeships are available to all adults, not just younger people, represents a major missed opportunity for employers and staff alike.

People aged 40-50 make up a significant proportion of the workforce and have over 20 years in work, and apprenticeships can upskill them to vacant roles young people are not applying for (Jenkins, 2015).

More mature employees are a good training investment as they will have a better idea of what they want out of a job and what they want to do in the longer term. In addition, they will have developed social, communication and management skills and see a bigger picture understanding



of how an organisation works (Jenkins, 2015).

A similar lack of awareness with concomitant missed opportunities was apparent regarding undergraduate and postgraduate education. Nearly four in 10 (39%) employees said this was offered where they worked, and more than one in four (27%) employers overall and a quarter (25%) of senior managers did not know whether their employer offered this.

Defence (55%) and healthcare (51%) were reported to offer undergraduate/postgraduate

programmes, a higher figure than any other sectors. In the largest group of respondents – government and local authorities sector – the figure was the lowest, at 27%.

A significant proportion of employees (43%) were interested in gaining microcredentials, which are professional development short courses taken over 10-12 weeks. They are designed to help staff build skills and knowledge in a specialist subject quickly.

Despite this demand, only 34% of public sector employers provided

them. Given they are a quick, efficient way of upskilling staff and do not demand long-term commitment on either side, they are a flexible way to update staff knowledge and skills in a relatively short time.

Most training was fully (52%) or partly (26%) funded by employers, with just over one in 20 (6%) employees paying for their own learning. A majority of employees were unaware of the various types of funding available for training.



# Learning preference: remote, in-person or a blend of both.

Blended learning, which involves both remote and in-person learning, was the most favoured approach, with 55% of respondents preferring this.

Given that much public sector work involves sensitive interviewing and interaction with the public in specific places (such as a hospital or a police cell), employees may feel that purely distance learning will not prepare them fully for some roles.

Many frontline workers, such as those in blue-light workers, are the least likely to have jobs that can be done from home (ONS, 2020) and nearly two-

thirds (64%) of blue-light employees in our survey preferred blended learning, more than any other part of the public sector.

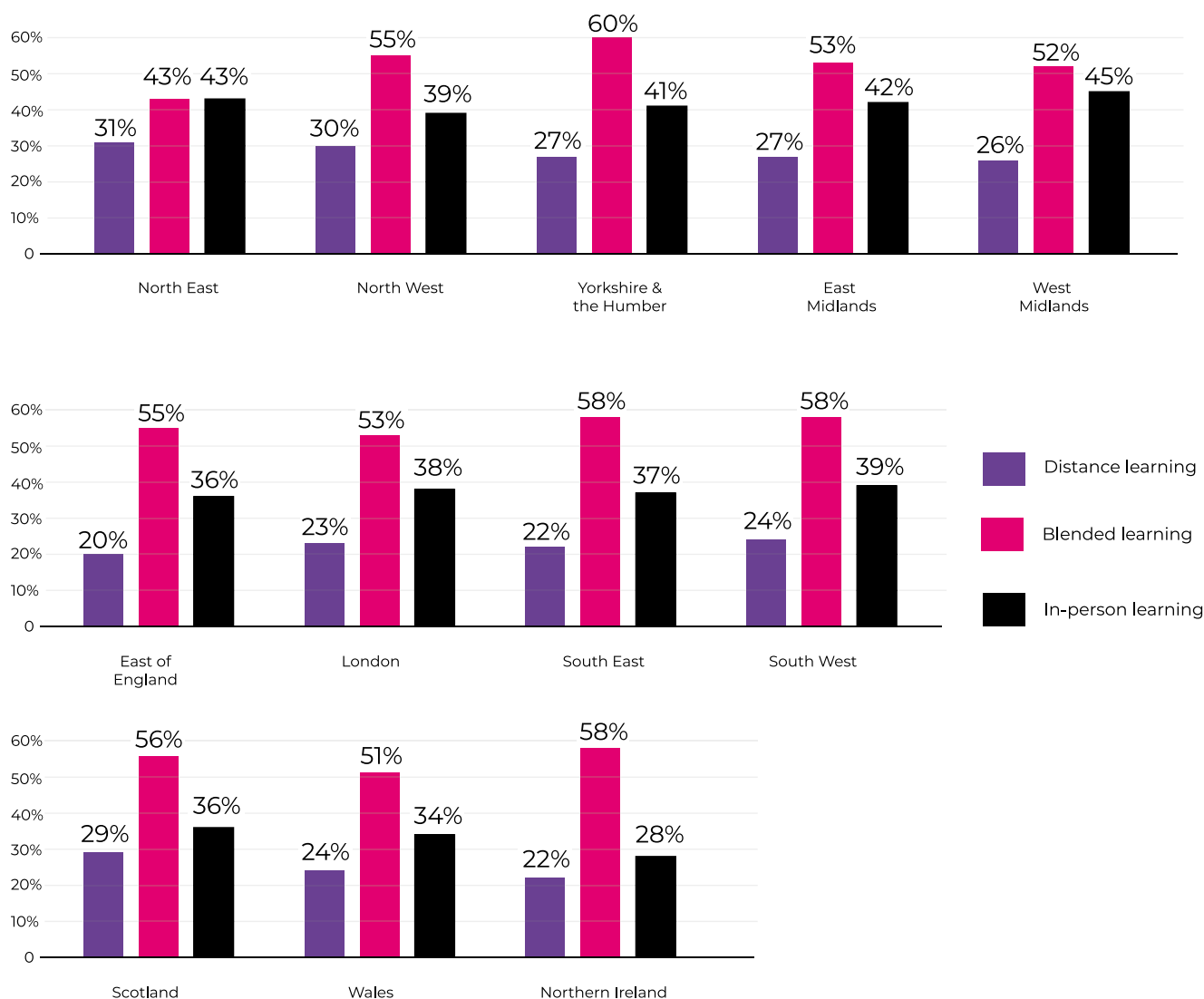
Overall, just over one third (34%) of employees preferred in-person learning and 25% wanted entirely distance learning.

In addition, public sector professional educational education may stipulate a placement with an employer. However, work placements and in-person teaching and opportunities to learn in practice were hit by the pandemic (Choi et al, 2022).

With restrictions on in-person and a rise in online learning, the use of virtual reality has become more widespread and accepted.

Organisations are using a range of technologies to offer more authentic learning experiences. Enriched realities allow learners to experience environments outside the classroom (OU, 2021).

Virtual workplace environments are being designed to simulate real-life situations where trainees can learn, practise skills, discuss and solve problems with others, and be assessed.



They can help close gaps between theory and practice (Corns and Thomas, 2022).

Learners are able to explore and immerse themselves in the virtual environment. Advantages include that an employer can provide specific work experiences that cannot be guaranteed to arise in a real-life placement. (An additional benefit in healthcare is that trainees can practise with no risk to patients.) Online resources can be linked to the teaching

material (Taylor et al, 2021).

Technology can also enable learners to learn collaboratively despite being at a physical distance (OU, 2021). On-demand video and virtual reality can be complemented by collaboration tools, such as forums and asynchronous discussions. Working with others while learning can promote critical thinking while reducing isolation.

Such digitally enabled collaborative learning can be

provided as part of blended learning – a format of training favoured most by staff. There are some great examples of police forces and NHS Trusts partnering with a distance learning provider to teach the academic side of apprenticeships, while delivering the hands-on practical side face-to-face. This could be explored further across the public sector.



# The future is flexible.

Our survey has highlighted how important learning and development are to employees, and will inform organisations about matters to consider when planning training.

A mass experiment in new ways of working was forced overnight with pandemic lockdowns (CIPD, 2021; GGF, 2021).

Overnight, services suddenly went online, meetings and events took place virtually or not at all, and many public sector staff worked from their homes and gardens. Organisations had to navigate numerous operational, technological and cultural issues (GGF, 2021). The public sector response to the pandemic was robust and impressive.

People were suddenly working from home full time, whether or not they or their employers wanted this. This was a culture shock for many, including the UK's civil servants, where progress to expand flexible working practices had been slow (GGF, 2021).

“

**To attract and retain the best staff, employers will have to provide flexible training that fits around hybrid working patterns**





Two years on, employers are less wary about remote working, and many employees report being more productive and having a better quality of life. For many of our respondents, being able to work from home for at least some of the time – hybrid working – has become a significant factor in decisions to take up or stay in a job.

Our survey also shows that learning and development opportunities have a major influence on job satisfaction – a key driver of both employee attraction and retention.

Given these results, employers wishing to attract and keep the best staff will have to provide flexible training that will fit around hybrid working patterns.

A lack of flexible hours prevents staff from participating in training;

one way of addressing this would be allowing people to study in their own time then claim time off in lieu for this. Numerous public sector bodies provide flexible working hours so this should be practically and culturally feasible.

Staff also said they did not have enough time to learn at work so, in the longer term, employers should carve out more time for learning in general.

Our survey highlighted potential areas for employers to consider. Many respondents wished to gain microcredentials, and share the opportunities offered by apprenticeships which are now available at all levels and ages.

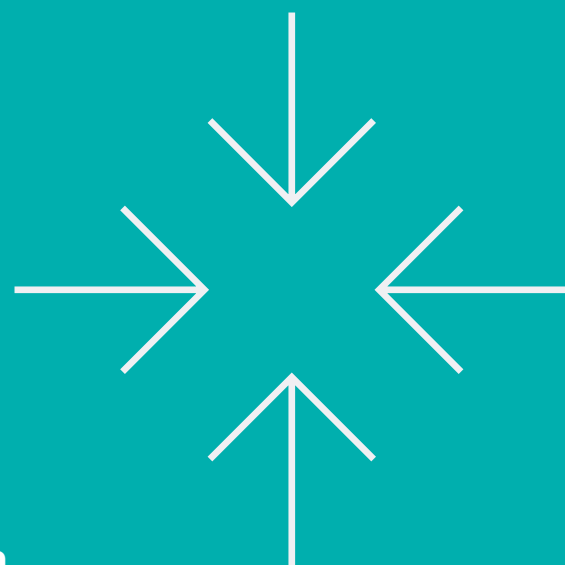
Educational interventions should be planned to ensure learning objectives and the needs of the students are met simultaneously (Corns and Thomas, 2022).

Employees working from home can have fewer opportunities to develop skills and may lose out on promotion (Felstead, 2022) so employees need to manage their career development (CIPD, 2021). Employers must also be prepared to offer different delivery models to fit around different learning needs – potentially expanding into distance and online learning as well as traditional face-to-face education in a classroom. The survey also showed strong support for blended learning which has already been utilised successfully in many public sector organisations.

Providing flexible learning and development opportunities that fit around hybrid working patterns will enable public sector organisations to attract and keep the best talent and enable them to provide sustainable services of the highest quality.

# The expert view...

**Experts from The Open University and beyond give their views on how L&D can adapt to the new working environment.**



As an industry, the public sector has always had an openness towards flexible learning. Over the past two years, the pandemic has accelerated this shift towards remote, online and blended learning, as our workplaces and attitudes changed.

The Open University (OU) has long been involved in supporting organisations to provide these types of flexible learning opportunities, which have proven particularly important for those living or working in areas that may not have had convenient access to traditional academic institutions or education.

Ensuring that public sector employers can offer this varied, modern type of remote, online and blended learning also helps create more engaged workplaces and opens up access to a broader talent pool, both internally and within the wider labour market.

Through its work with the UK public sector, the OU has been able to create a broad range of opportunities to develop its partners' workforces. This has included blended degree apprenticeships within police forces, through to digital skills training for Scottish councillors and leadership and mentoring support for black and minority ethnic colleagues.





# A shift to remote working.

All of this has been underpinned by the requirements of the pandemic to introduce remote working across the public sector at pace. Up and down the country, organisations were forced to adapt and strike the balance between delivering effective public services and protecting the health of staff and their communities.

Learning and development was just one aspect to undergo a significant change in this time, as organisations first focused on getting their staff settled in their new remote working environments and processes up and running. It was only then they could shift their focus onto how they could best upskill their staff to get the most out of the unorthodox working arrangements.

In Scotland, for example, the Improvement Service partnered with the OU to deliver a suite of courses aimed at the 10,000 community councillors across Scotland's local government landscape.

They were built around four key areas of digital skills, which these community councillors were likely to encounter – business skills, finance and fundraising, community, and society. The online portal proved hugely successful in empowering the public sector workforce to become more confident and effective in their new digital surroundings. It meant capitalising on some of the benefits which online meetings and interactions had brought with it.

That project proved so successful that the Improvement Service – which is made up of Scotland's 32 local authorities, Solace and COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) – has expanded out into an additional portal around Skills for Work. This allows for the development of further training for those working remotely all across the public sector in Scotland.

But the shift to remote working wasn't just a feature in Scotland, either. All across the country – in truth, across the globe – public sector organisations were looking at their new working arrangements and assessing ways to deliver learning in new ways.

Lynne Griffin, from Powys County Council, explains: "The pandemic forced us into moving overnight to the virtual delivery of courses.

"The authority had been looking at 'new ways of working' prior to the pandemic, so the virtual environment we were thrown into merely accelerated and supported that vision.

"It proved that home/hybrid working patterns were possible and would realise the savings that the authority needed to make."



# Adopting blended learning practices.

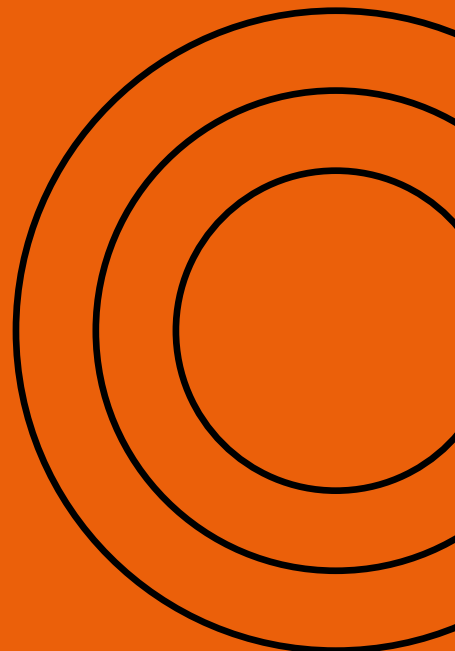


In reducing the amount of time staff were spending in traditional, fixed workplaces also required an assessment of the format in which training is delivered. For some essential public sector training courses, such as First Aid or Moving and Handling, there remains a need for some in-person elements.

However, for a lot of the learning that employees undertake in the public sector, there is an opportunity to shift this to online resources. That means both opening the door to those who geographically may have previously

been limited, or to those who would rather learn at times convenient to their own life schedules, which may have not always mirrored the availability of the training providers.

In Powys, the increase in remote elements in their training provided significant benefits, given the vast geography of the county council. Lynne explains: "Working in one of the largest geographical authorities has meant we have had to take logistical issues into consideration when organising learning events.



“The pandemic forced us into moving overnight to the virtual delivery of courses. Compliance training was developed to be blended delivery.

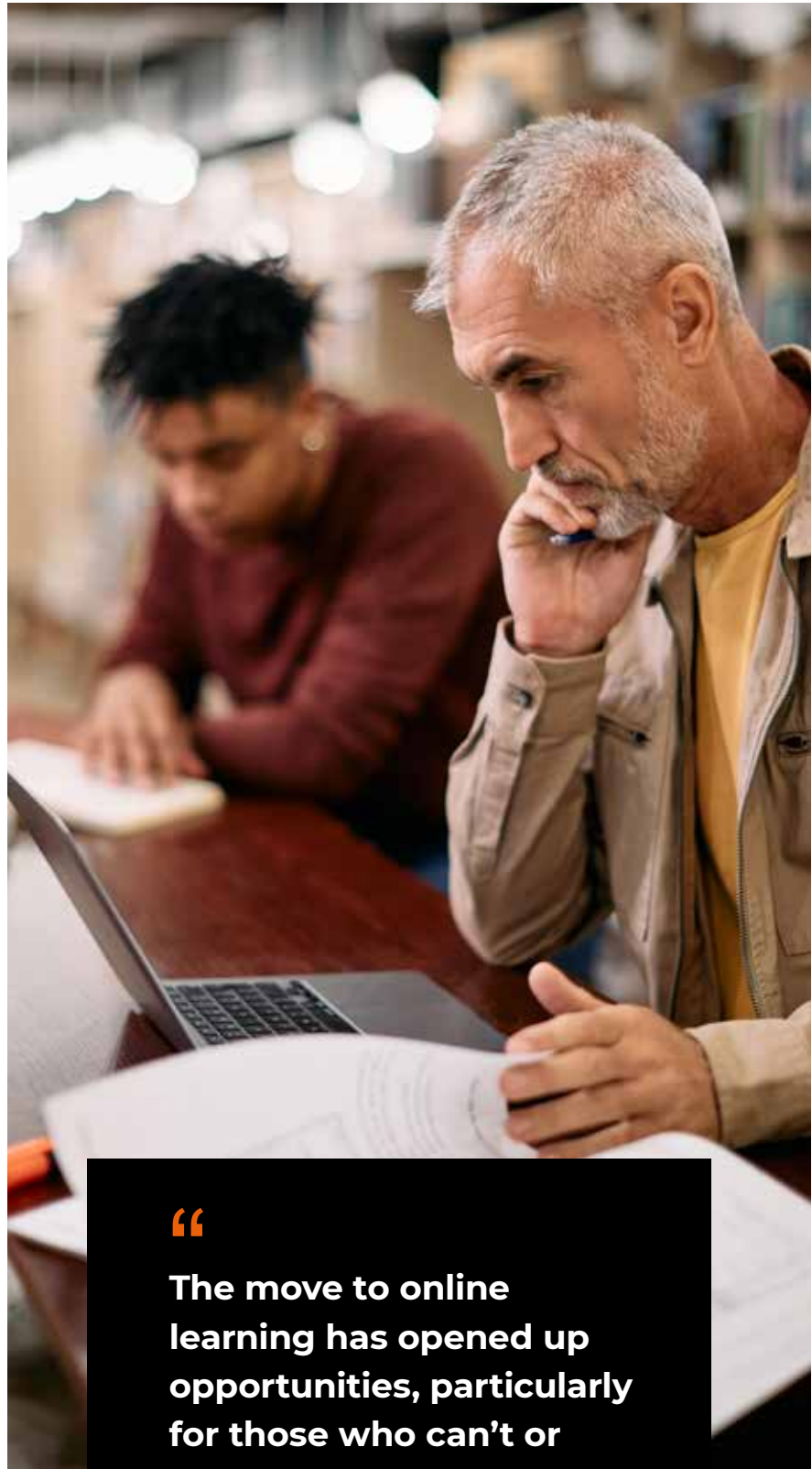
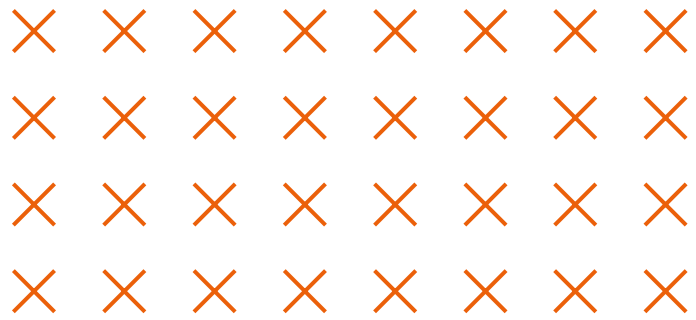
“Our training team had to quickly become familiar with different platforms and apps to make the virtual delivery as effective and engaging as face-to-face delivery.”

Where successful though, many employers are seeing the shift to blended learning to be one which provides much greater convenience for staff and leads to a wider uptake of training – encouraging a broader upskilling of the existing workforce.

At another local authority, this time in England, Angela Glithero MPA, Assistant Director - Strategy, Workforce & Comms of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, describes the benefits: “Many learning opportunities which have traditionally been offered in the classroom can be delivered through digital means, giving people the flexibility to learn at their leisure, when and where they want.

“This was happening anyway, but the pandemic expedited the trend. The move to online learning has opened up opportunities, particularly for those who can’t or don’t want to travel.”

That particular learner was a part of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, but the sentiments provided rang true with public sector employees across the devolved four nations, as employers recognised the logistical and wellbeing benefits of hybrid and remote working and sought to ensure that they could mirror these benefits within the training and development opportunities available too.



“

**The move to online learning has opened up opportunities, particularly for those who can’t or don’t want to travel.**





# Collaborating with employers.

Ultimately, the success of any of these educational opportunities though is crucially shaped by the quality of the collaboration. Just as the shift to remote working required the determination and commitment of public service staff to make it a success, the effective deployment of a blended learning requires effective collaboration between the learning providers and employers.

When high quality collaboration occurs and employers get it right, it can have a huge benefit to their workforce, as North Yorkshire Police discovered when it partnered with the OU on their policing apprenticeship programme.

Working closely with the policing team of academics including the OU's Centre for Policing Research

and Learning (CPRL), the police force created an innovative educational programme for its new policing recruits. Through the programme the recruits were able to access on-demand digital learning, but then equally get out into the community and start applying that learning straight away.

Professor Jean Hartley, Academic Director of CPRL and Jennifer Norman, Head of Policing Organisation and Practice are instrumental in developing the policing partnership and the apprenticeship programme. Jennifer explained how the partnership worked: “Supported blended learning is increasingly recognised as a valuable approach to learning and to develop important skills for professional practice.

“A number of national reports show that policing is changing substantially and will need to

change further to address a number of society’s challenges in crime and protecting vulnerable people.”

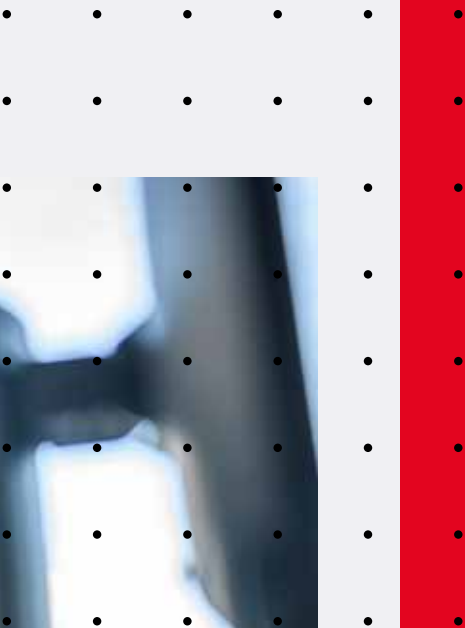
Jean explained: “Consequently, having leading-edge research [from the CPRL] linked to a degree and continuing professional development available at the OU is highly valuable for police forces around the UK and beyond.

Jennifer added “[With North Yorkshire] the online elements of the degree apprenticeship means that student officers can study when and where they wish, and this reduces the operational pressures on the force because students are not away from duty in a classroom but are learning online.

“North Yorkshire Police then provide tutor constables to help the recruits embed their degree apprenticeship learning in their daily duties.”

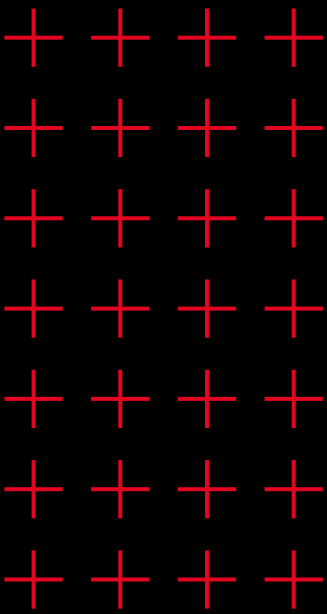
This represents just one practical example of taking the power of online and blended learning and applying it in a way that empowers both the employees (allowing them to develop new, valuable professional skills) and the employer (enriching their workforce, without detrimentally reducing staffing levels during the studying period).

The challenges around workforce retention and skills shortages are well documented across the public sector, so interventions that are able to upskill public sector workers without removing them from the workforce are increasingly attractive propositions for employers.





# Creating equal opportunities for black and minority ethnic colleagues.

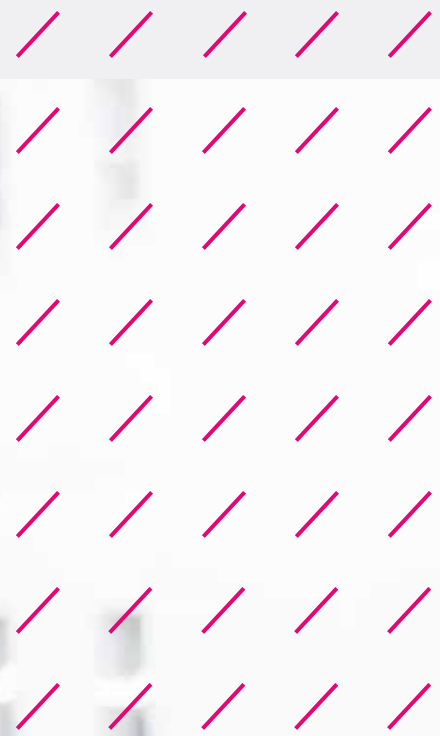


Coupled with that is the need to look deeper into the labour market and introduce support and intervention, which can broaden and enrich the talent pool available. In particular, this can be around creating more flexible and accessible training and professional development routes for traditionally disadvantaged communities.

For the black and minority ethnic (BME) workforce, traditional education

can sometimes be restrictive or unconsciously disadvantage their ability to access the labour market.

For the OU and other providers, this has been a key area of focus and through conscious, flexible interventions they have been able to open up a whole range of new career opportunities to a richer, more diverse talent pool.



That hasn't just been at entry level, either. One of the shining examples of OU's commitment to creating educational opportunities for all has been their BME Leadership Project, with Fidele Mutwarasibo explaining some of the benefits it has been able to bring him.

Fidele explains: "Traditional education affects the BME communities' access to the labour market in many ways. Those who live in socially disadvantaged communities are likely to have worse educational outcomes and this sees them have difficulties in accessing good-quality jobs.

"Traditional education is an advantage for those who have role models within their family or in the classroom, and for those who understand how the education system works or those whose

parents are aware of the vital role parental involvement has in a pupil's educational outcomes.

"Flexibility is key. Education which helps those who might have missed out on education in their youth is very critical.

"The ability to learn and earn is something that can be invaluable to those who come from families where getting into work to earn a living and support the family at the earliest convenience is the norm.

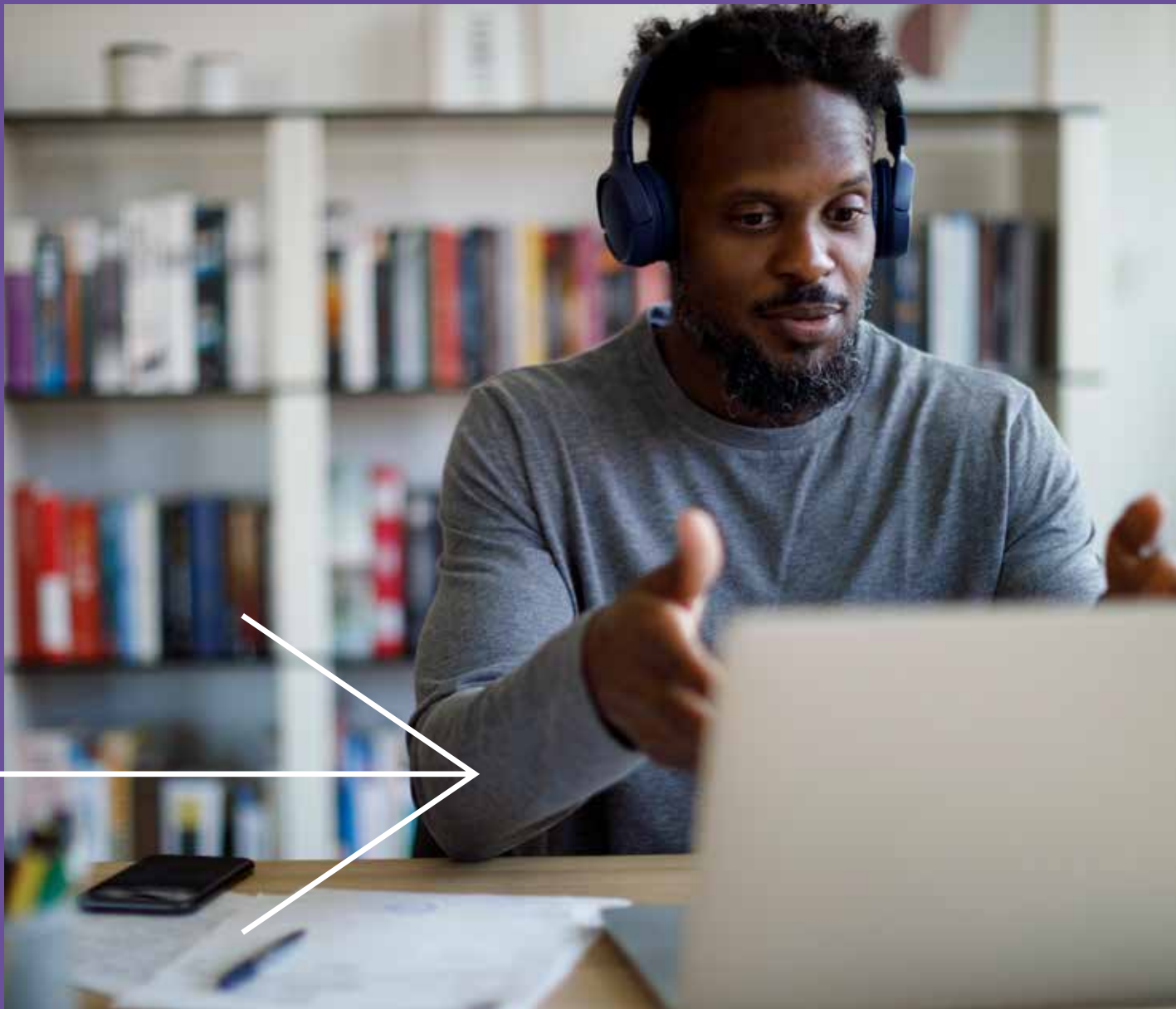
"Flexibility allows people to leverage their experiential learning if and when they choose to return to school after a stint – long or short – in the workplace."

In taking these steps, the public sector can open the door to a much broader cross-section of

the talent pool, and also create a working environment that is more welcoming and appealing to those from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to retain some of the top talent against other industries. Similar benefits can be seen in the area of disability – the OU has more than 36,000 students declaring a disability and the flexible nature of the learning helps mitigate issues associated with travel and accessibility.

As an industry directly responsible for representing the voice of society, being able to introduce to organisations at all levels a more diverse workforce ensures that the voices of the people can be recognised equally around the table in all forms of decision-making, helping to provide more representative and higher-quality public service.





# The future of public sector learning.

Looking to the future of public sector learning, remote working and blended learning seem to be here to stay, with public sector organisations up and down the country reporting benefits both at an organisational and staff level from the changes.

In Wales, Lynne describes the positive impact it has had on their employees: "Staff have reported that they enjoy the flexibility and work-life balance that home working offers.

"They feel they are more productive and focused, with less travelling required."



And across in Stoke-on-Trent it is very similar – Angela even questions whether there will be a hesitancy towards face-to-face learning in many settings in the future: “There will always be a place for people to meet face-to-face, but the last two years have proven that it can work without hours of travel.

“A blend of both seems to be the perfect solution.”

Being able to provide learning and continued professional development to public sector staff, in a way that blends well with their working preferences, is going to be a key step in realising the potential of the public sector workforce and continuing to maintain a high standard of talent in the industry.

As the team at the Improvement Service in Scotland make clear: “The most important resource councils have is their staff.

Amanda Spark, Organisational Development Programme Manager, said: “The demands made on the workforce and the expectations placed on staff are



constantly changing, and it is imperative that we support the workforce to adapt to this pace of change. Learning and development is crucial as we seek to improve, innovate and find new, better ways of working.

“Learning and development can enable this. It can help change mindsets and open up thinking.

“Staff who are under extreme pressure have requested a flexible learning environment and want to study when they are free to do so. OU courses are an excellent vehicle for this and a flexible way to learn and confirm competency in the subject matter that is well-established and recognised by all.”

# About The Open University.

**For over 50 years, The Open University (OU) has led the way in innovative distance-learning. The University has a proven track record and rich heritage of providing workplace education solutions for employers across a range of sectors, which help employees fulfil their potential.**

Specialising in developing high-quality learning materials, based on rigorous research and industry insight, the OU combines academic excellence with technological expertise to deliver flexible work-based learning. We have a range of options to suit individual requirements including apprenticeships, short courses, microcredentials and undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes.

The OU's flexible and adaptable approach enables consistent educational programmes to be delivered at scale, across geographically dispersed workforces. Through minimising the time needed in the classroom, the OU's supported online and blended delivery model is shaped around the needs of the employer and the role and responsibilities of the learner. This gives employees new skills and knowledge they can apply immediately to the workplace – increasing engagement and maximising return on investment.

This is why more than 2,800 employers, including local authorities, emergency services, transport providers and NHS Trusts, regularly choose the OU's learning solutions to develop their workforces.

Whether you're looking to develop new or current employees, contact the OU today to find out how flexible learning can work for your organisation.



# References.

Office for National Statistics (2021) Business and individual attitudes towards the future of homeworking, UK: April to May 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/businessandindividualattitudestowardsthefutureofhomeworkinguk/apriltomay2021>

Association of Accounting Technicians (2020) Covid-19 recession leads to spike in workers seeking a career change. <https://www.aat.org.uk/aat-news/covid-19-recession-leads-to-spike-in-workers-seeking-a-career-change>

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2020) Working from home: assessing the research evidence. [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/8051-working-from-home-report\\_tcm18-84208.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/8051-working-from-home-report_tcm18-84208.pdf)

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2021) Flexible working: lessons from the pandemic. [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/flexible-working-lessons-from-pandemic-report\\_tcm18-92644.pdf2021](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/flexible-working-lessons-from-pandemic-report_tcm18-92644.pdf2021)

Corns P, Thomas L (2022). Remote-facilitated mental simula-

tion to bridge the theory-practice divide. *Journal of Paramedic Practice*; 14(2): 73-81

Choi B, Jegatheeswaran L, Minocha A, Alhilani M, Nakhoul M, Mutengesa E (2022) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on final year medical students in the United Kingdom: a national survey. *BMC Medical Education*; 20(1): 206. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02117-1>

Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (2021) Millions to be empowered by government plans to strengthen day one employment rights and increase productivity of businesses. Press release. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/millions-to-be-empowered-by-government-plans-to-strengthen-day-one-employment-rights-and-increase-productivity-of-businesses>

Felstead A (2022) Remote working. A research overview. Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition

Global Government Forum. Civil service remote working survey. 2021. <https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/download/35678/> Green F, Henseke G (2019) Training trends in Brit-

ain. Unionlearn. <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/Training%20trends%20in%20Britain.pdf>

Health Education England (2022) Advanced practice. <https://advanced-practice.hee.nhs.uk/>

Imison C, Castle-Clarke S, Watson R (2016) Reshaping the workforce to deliver the care patients need. Research report. Nuffield Trust. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/files/2017-01/reshaping-the-workforce-web-final.pdf>

Jenkins D (2015) The benefits of employing older apprentices. *HR Magazine*. <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/features/the-benefits-of-employing-older-apprentices>

Krekel C, Ward G, Neve J-E. Happy employees and their impact on firm performance. *London School of Economics*. 15 July 2019. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/business-review/2019/07/15/happy-employees-and-their-impact-on-firm-performance/>

Local Government Association (2014) Working in local government. Career opportunities for young people. <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/>



documents/career-opportunities-youn-4dd.pdf

Moules J. Pandemic fuels demand for courses on remote leadership. FT. 13 March 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/8841d366-1c76-405a-9146-7af3dd4c9623>

Office for National Statistics (2020) Which jobs can be done from home? <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whichjobscanbedonefrom-home/2020-07-21>

Office for National Statistics (2021) Business and individual attitudes towards the future of homeworking, UK: April to May 2021. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/businessandindividualattitudestowardsthefutureofhomeworkinguk/apriltomay2021>

Philips A (2022) Working from home benefits everyone – including low-paid workers. CapX. 27 January 2022. [https://capx.co/working-from-home-benefits-everyone-including-low-paid-workers/?mc\\_cid=be3ba0dc32&mc\\_eid=b7dde5cbbc](https://capx.co/working-from-home-benefits-everyone-including-low-paid-workers/?mc_cid=be3ba0dc32&mc_eid=b7dde5cbbc)

Open University. Trends in learning. 2021. <https://www.open.ac.uk/business/knowledge-hub/whitepapers-reports/new-report-trends-learning-2021>

Taylor N, Wyres M, Green A, Hennessy-Priest K, Phillips C, Daymond E, Love R, Johnson R, Wright J (2021) Developing

and piloting a simulated placement experience for students. British Journal of Nursing; 30(13): S19-S24. doi: 10.12968/bjon.2021.30.13.S19.



The Open University  
Walton Hall  
Milton Keynes  
MK7 6AA  
United Kingdom

Email **[business@open.ac.uk](mailto:business@open.ac.uk)**  
Call 0300 303 0122, or +44 (0) 1908 655767 if calling from outside the UK.



**[open.ac.uk/business](https://open.ac.uk/business)**



**[twitter.com/OpenUniversity](https://twitter.com/OpenUniversity)**



**[linkedin.com/school/theopenuniversity](https://linkedin.com/school/theopenuniversity)**