

# *Let's Listen*

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Insights and opportunities

# Introduction

## Let's Listen

Throughout most of 2020 we were in lockdown; dealing with restrictions to our freedoms and the things we took for granted at a level that most of us had never before experienced. This included fundamental changes to our ways of working.

Through 'Let's Listen' we have taken the opportunity to share and explore people's experiences (good and bad) of working during lockdown, what can we learn from this, and how we can use this learning to improve how we work in the future.

We found that everyone's story is completely unique but equally important, and the wealth of insight gained has been analysed and refined into findings and opportunities. This information is shared within this document, with the intention that it will be used to shape future strategies and working practices enabling us to become a more resilient, agile and adaptive as an organisation.

***We thank everyone who gave their time to participate in Let's Listen.***

### Let's Listen Focus Groups

- Facilitated by a diverse team of facilitators from a range of services
- Balanced the opportunity for reflection with a forward look
- Delivered virtually via MS Teams
- Relaxed and participative with no hierarchy – all views equally valid
- Included a pre-session poll to get the conversation started

### Sessions delivered



Focus groups covering staff across all services



In all we captured the experiences and views of 108 staff.

### What our aim was

- Explore what we have learnt from the experience of lockdown
- Capture what the experience tells us about our working culture and how we want to work in future
- Consider what would we like to retain and what needs to change or be different in the future, and how we can make this happen

***Let's Listen demonstrated inclusivity and a growth mindset. We sought to give staff a voice in shaping the future and helping make the Council more agile, adaptable and resilient***

**Thank you for the opportunity to share our experiences and ideas for change that will benefit the organisation and our residents**

# The key messages

*Let's Listen*

- The pandemic brought a powerful and unifying sense of purpose, especially early on
- People welcomed the pace of change and high energy in the first phase of lockdown, but this has now waned and has been replaced by high levels of fatigue
- The flexibility made possible by home working has been one of the most positive experiences of lockdown
- Despite this, many people are experiencing loneliness and finding it hard to get the right work-life balance away from the office. Work schedules are relentless, it's hard to switch off, and a back-to-back meeting culture prevails
- People have embraced and feel more confident with technology like MS Teams
- People feel valued and cared for by Haringey as an employer and welcome the increased attention on health, wellbeing and diversity
- The balance of strong and human leadership from the top is recognised, and regular update messages are appreciated
- Many managers are recognising that they don't have to see people to trust them. We need to ensure that the positive messages from the top about trust and empowerment consistently filter down locally
- Engagement levels in Council-wide initiatives is relatively low, suggesting more work in this area
- **The overarching message is that people don't want to go back to old ways of working and that there are many positive opportunities for change**

*A detailed summary of key themes, with positive and negative aspects, are provided in the following slides*

**"We have proven to be adaptable and resilient and there is certainly capacity for ways of working to change drastically to better meet the needs of staff and residents"**

## Reflections from the pre-session polls

## Let's Listen

*Reflecting on your personal experience of working since Covid-19 lockdown began...*



### *What's worked well?*

\*These word clouds reflect the frequency of words used in the pre-session polls rather than the discussion at the focus groups themselves

## ***What hasn't worked well?***



# 1. Sense of purpose

*People have experienced a common and unifying sense of purpose during Covid-19 and lockdown*

**“It can be really powerful when individuals come together, united in a common cause”**

**“I’m now better at drawing connections between the bigger strategic picture and the work I do at an operational level”**

**“A lot of people are willing to come together and step up in time of crisis and uncertainty despite their own fears and worries”**

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## POSITIVES

- Common purpose and sense of focus (particularly during lockdown 1)
- High levels of energy and commitment, especially early on
- Quick to adapt to new priorities
- High paced working and decision making not slowed down by structure or bureaucracy
- Society’s perception of the value of local government has improved
- Greater resident focus and clarity of outcomes

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## NEGATIVES

- Pace and energy has waned as time has gone on and people are now feeling ‘lockdown fatigue’
- The unifying purpose is still there but less powerful than it was at the start
- Sense in some areas that our work has become more automated and less values driven – perhaps a consequence of more remote working

## 2. Working Practices

*People welcome greater flexibility, especially being able to work from home, but there are problems of meeting overload, isolation and getting the right balance*

“I like working flexibly in a quiet calm environment around my home commitments”

“We don't have to have really long meetings, often quick catch ups are good enough”

“Why did it take a pandemic to give us the ‘kick up the backside’ we needed to change our ways of working”

“It's too easy to work late when you are at home”

“This is not agile working – our rigid office working practices have simply been replicated in our homes”

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### POSITIVES

- The concept of work as a ‘place you go’ has been challenged
- Greater flexibility and choice over work schedules – not 9-5
- Better work-life balance and more time with family
- Shorter, more focused meetings
- Non-reliance on paper and manual processes
- Time, money and energy saved by not commuting

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### NEGATIVES

- Too many meetings, often back-to-back
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness
- Balancing work with home/family
- Difficulties establishing a workable routine
- Tendencies to work when you shouldn't - e.g. evenings, weekends or when you would previously have taken sick leave



### 3. Leadership

*People have noticed and welcomed a more trusting, open and human style of leadership, especially from the top, but there is inconsistency in how this ethos is applied in practice*

**“When managers show vulnerability and transparency, this is a strength”**

**“Some managers have found new ways to micromanage remotely”**

**“Standards of professionalism and conduct have fallen, making it challenging to manage staff virtually”**

**“All staff need support but some more than others – you have to adopt a flexible leadership style”**

**“Teams check-ins and more responsibility for own workload negates the needs for so many management layers”**

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#### POSITIVES

- Visible, honest and human leadership from the top throughout lockdown has been welcomed
- Excellent direct communication from senior management and a care for wellbeing
- A more trusting and empowering approach from many managers
- Less scrutiny and micromanagement in some teams, and an increase in personal responsibility and self-management
- An understanding that leadership styles need to flex to the needs of different individuals and situations

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#### NEGATIVES

- Inconsistency in management practices
- Management behaviour at a local level doesn't always match the corporate message
- New forms of 'presenteeism' – back-to-back meetings
- Some managers find it hard to manage performance remotely

## 4. Teamwork and collaboration

*The impact on teamworking has been one of the most positive aspects of working during Covid, but people miss face-to-face interaction and it can be harder to make connections outside your team*

**“When people work together and are left to lead from the ground up, amazing progress can be made”**

**“Human beings, for the most part, are compassionate, strong, and care about each other”**

**“People's masks have been removed. Their true selves are revealed in these uncertain times”**

**“Our strength lies in being part of a community, we struggle to work and live in isolation”**

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### POSITIVES

- Amazing levels of peer support, compassion and understanding
- Teams have unified to deal with new challenges
- Honest and regular team communications
- Better partnership working, especially in the early stages of lockdown
- Building relationships with new people and networks
- Lockdown has acted as a leveller, with more of our true selves revealed to colleagues

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### NEGATIVES

- People miss face-to-face interactions and informal networking
- A sense that the virtual world can reinforce rather than break silo working and discourage cross-organisational collaboration
- Some staff still don't engage in Council-wide events, activities and networks such as 'Let's Talk', 'Let's Listen', webinars or Yammer communities
- It has been harder to onboard new starters remotely



# 5. Organisational Culture

*There has been a positive impact on many aspects of culture including adaptability, resilience, respect, kindness and personal growth, but people have found the 'always on' culture relentless and overwhelming*

"We were more adaptable than perhaps we believed"

"I have developed my confidence greatly and have learnt new skills as I have had to step outside my role"

"Be kind to yourself (and others) more than ever! Forgive yourself when you are not being productive"

"Being at the front-line and under relentless pressure, it can be annoying when others complain about the stress of working from home"

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## POSITIVES

- Amazing levels of adaptability and resilience
- A kind and caring culture has developed, with a greater focus on wellbeing
- Greater understanding and respect for equality, diversity and inclusion and more open and honest discussion
- More innovation and experimentation – people are more willing to 'give it a go' and less afraid of failure
- There have been high levels of learning and personal growth
- People have talked about being able to bring more of their skills, talents and 'whole selves' to work

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## NEGATIVES

- People have often found the pace of work and work schedules relentless and overwhelming
- An 'always on' culture has emerged and an expectation when working remotely that you are always available
- People are 'busy being busy' but are they being productive? Where is the space for innovation and creativity?
- It can be hard to appreciate the different pressures that other people in different roles are under
- There can be low levels of engagement, suggesting a passive culture and a low sense of influence

## 6. Wellbeing

*The negative impact on wellbeing has gradually increased during lockdown and is the most common concern for staff, but they recognise that the Council sees this as a high priority*

**“I thrived at the start of the lockdown but have found it more challenging lately working in isolation and maintaining good wellbeing everyday”**

**“I feel I have more choice and control over my life than I did at the start and developed coping mechanisms”**

**“I feel really supported – the Council has been very positive on wellbeing”**

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### POSITIVES

- Due to homeworking, many people report increased physical health (such as doing more exercise) and mental wellbeing (such as a better work-life balance)
- Staff wellbeing has gone right to the top of the employee experience agenda
- Excellent resources and activities are available to support wellbeing
- A caring and kind culture has developed in most teams
- People are prepared to talk openly about wellbeing with managers and colleagues

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### NEGATIVES

- Covid-19 and lockdown has triggered unprecedented levels of pressure and stress, leading to danger of burnout
- There are relatively low levels of take up, and access to, the excellent wellbeing resources and sources of support
- Management behaviours can exacerbate poor wellbeing
- Inadequate homeworking environment can have a negative impact on physical wellbeing
- People feel pressure to work when feeling unwell
- Council initiatives and resources tackle the symptoms of poor wellbeing but don't always address the causes

## 7. Service Delivery

*The Council has been quick to use technology to adapt its services and offerings, but faster, higher volume customer transactions and interactions can be at the expense of quality of care and resilience building*

“Fast pace and target driven doesn’t allow for professional trauma-informed work which needs to be slow and purposeful”

“I feel like we’ve been fighting fires and not building resilience”

“I miss the value of the face-to-face interaction I used to have with residents”

“Being closer to the front line and directly helping residents has been motivating and I’ve brought new skills to work”

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### POSITIVES

- Amazing response to supporting the most vulnerable residents during lockdown
- Services quick to adapt their offer, such as Adult Education
- Quicker and higher volumes of transactions
- Technology makes it easier to communicate with parents and families
- Online access and communication enables higher volumes of transactions and interactions
- People have been trained up and redeployed to support front-line work helping residents

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### NEGATIVES

- Doing things quicker and at higher volume is not always good for the service user and the quality of care
- Some things are missed by not getting as close to residents.
- Vital support work during Covid has been necessary but has created too much dependency rather than empowering residents and building resilience
- Not all clients have access to technology

## 8. Systems and technology

*The Council was well prepared for the overnight transition to homeworking and people have embraced technology and grown in confidence*

**“Using virtual meeting technology has saved time and been really helpful”**

**“Not everyone in the Council has a consistent basic level of understanding in the main Microsoft tools”**

**“As a Council we were particularly well prepared from an IT and digital point of view”**

**“I feel that we could go further with our use of technology and provide more support to staff to develop their skills”**

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### POSITIVES

- The Council was technologically well prepared for remote working during lockdown
- People have quickly and successfully adopted new systems like MS Teams and have felt well supported by Digital Services
- Levels of IT confidence have grown
- There has been less reliance on paper-based systems and processes
- People have really benefitted from the growth in virtual learning, such as online webinars

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### NEGATIVES

- Reluctance to go further with some IT such as fully utilising Teams functionalities and using cloud-based storage for document sharing and collaboration
- Inconsistent access to high speed broadband has hampered some people's ability to use technology remotely

## 9. Work environment

*People have welcomed the opportunity to work more from home but have missed the social aspects of office working. What most people want is choice and a balance, and we have the opportunity to rethink the purpose and design of our offices.*

**“We can work more creatively and flexibly, through a combination of working in the office and from home”**

**“Being able to come into work has helped keep me sane”**

**“It’s really hard for some people to WFH - often those on lower grades without an appropriate home environment”**

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### POSITIVES

- The success of homeworking has strengthened the business case for property rationalisation and workspace redesign
- People understand the importance of balance and choice between home and office – not ‘all or nothing’
- Environmental impact of reduced office working – travel, energy consumption and printing

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### NEGATIVES

- People have missed the social aspects of office working
- Not having the right home working environment – issues of disparity between different staff groups (e.g. young people in shared rental)
- Higher energy consumption in homes
- Lockdown has highlighted the need to modernise our physical workspaces to adapt to new working practices