

SCS Stakeholder Feedback Exercise Report

Senior Civil Servants in Welsh Government were asked to provide feedback on if and how hybrid working has affected the way in which they engage with their key external stakeholders and Ministers. This exercise was conducted between December 2023 to January 2024. Responses were received from 109 members of the SCS.

Key summary

- Respondents were generally positive about the impact of hybrid working on their ability to effectively engage with stakeholders and interact with Ministers.
- Although respondents did not frequently report difficulties in engaging with stakeholders and Ministers whilst working in a hybrid way, and the majority of stakeholders and Ministers had not communicated a preference for in-person engagement, it was clear that there were certain tasks and activities that were felt to be more effective to do in person.
- Engagement activities and tasks thought to be more effective to do in person were reported as being similar for both stakeholders and Ministers. These included activities and tasks that helped to build and maintain relationships such as networking and informal discussions, where sensitive or complex discussions were required, group activities or events where collaboration was necessary and more formal meetings and activities.
- Overall, hybrid working was felt to facilitate effective engagement with both stakeholders and Ministers in a wide range of ways, including:
 - Meetings were easier to arrange, which facilitated more frequent and focused engagement and allowed respondents to be more flexible, agile and responsive in their engagement.
 - It increased the reach and therefore quality of engagement activity by improving access to stakeholders both within and outside of Wales, as well as to a wider group of staff and Ministers. It was noted that an additional advantage of hybrid working for Ministers was that more staff could attend meetings or briefing sessions so that wider expertise and knowledge could be drawn upon instantly if required.
 - It reduced the need for travel, as well as the 'dead time' often experienced waiting for meetings because engagement no longer had to be in-person, so respondents could use their time more effectively.
 - The technology available to support hybrid working was thought to support effective engagement through chat functions and the ability to share resources more readily. It also gave respondents access to information instantly if Ministers asked for any points of clarification in meetings.
- However, as hybrid working has resulted in fewer in-person activities or tasks, it was suggested that it could hinder some aspects of effective engagement. Respondents suggested that it was more challenging to build and maintain strong working relationships because of fewer opportunities for informal conversations and networking. It was noted that this was a particular disadvantage for those who were new to their role. There were also challenges around ensuring hybrid engagement activities were effective and inclusive with participants being fully engaged, as well as ensuring that those leading engagement activities are equipped to do so. In addition, hybrid meetings require support to ensure technology is functioning appropriately and utilised effectively by both meeting Chairs and participants to facilitate full engagement by all.

Main Findings

Types of key external stakeholders the SCS engage with

SCS respondents were asked who they considered to be their key external stakeholders.

The most frequently reported types of key external stakeholders were:

- Central UK government departments (60%)
- Local Authority (Council) (57%)
- Other public sector bodies (47%)

The table below shows the percentage of respondents who are engaging with the following stakeholder categories.

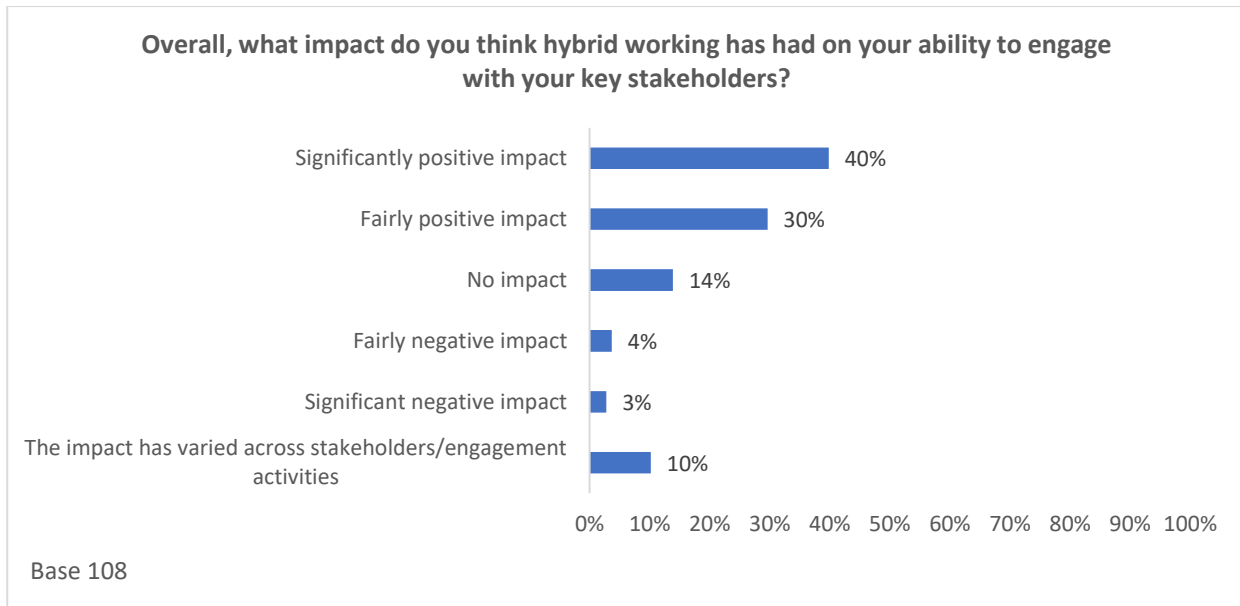
| Stakeholders | Percentage of SCS respondents engaging with stakeholders |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Central government department | 60% |
| Local Authority (Council) | 57% |
| Other public sector body | 47% |
| Private sector company/business | 44% |
| Third Sector | 40% |
| Government Agency | 39% |
| Academic organisations/ providers | 36% |
| Regulators | 34% |
| National Health Service body (NHS) | 33% |
| Employee representative/ Trade Unions | 25% |
| Other | 24% |

Just under a quarter of SCS respondents (24%) also reported that they engaged with stakeholders not listed above. Some of the additional stakeholders mentioned could be included under the wider categories provided above e.g., charities, however others included:

- People and communities
- Judiciary and external legal advisers
- The Senedd
- Other devolved governments
- Medical and Nursing Royal Colleges
- LGBTQ+ expert panel
- Disability Rights Taskforce
- Statutory undertakers (bodies authorised by any enactment to carry on certain specified undertakings) e.g., Utilities

Impact of hybrid working on stakeholder engagement

SCS respondents were asked their views on the impact of hybrid working on stakeholder engagement.



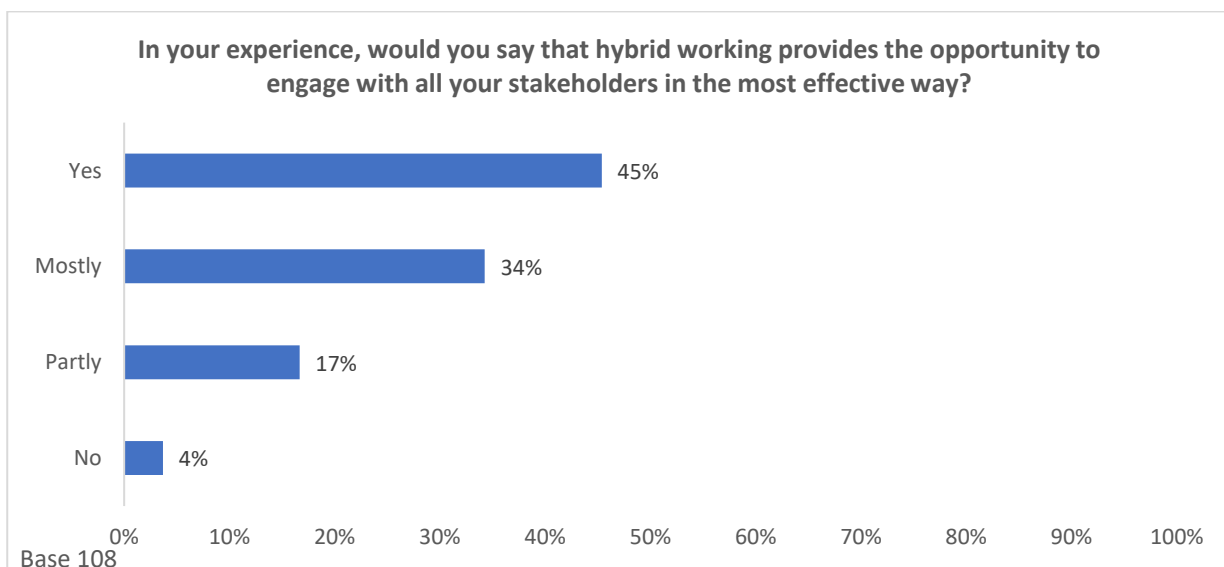
*Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Overall respondents were positive about hybrid working, with 69 percent reporting that it has had a 'significantly' or 'fairly' positive impact on their ability to engage with stakeholders.

Only 6 percent thought that hybrid working has had a negative impact on stakeholder engagement and around a quarter reported either no impact (14%) or that the impact varied across stakeholders (10%).

SCS views on the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement whilst working in a hybrid way

SCS respondents were asked if hybrid working provides the opportunity to engage with stakeholders in the most effective way.



Respondents were again positive overall, with 80 percent reporting that hybrid working fully provides or mostly provides the opportunity to engage with stakeholders in the most effective way. Only 4 percent responded that it did not.

However, most respondents (87%) agreed that some stakeholder engagement activities or tasks were more effective to do in person, particularly those that helped to build and maintain relationships. Respondents noted that working in person provided opportunities for networking and informal discussion and highlighted the importance of this for establishing trusting relationships that facilitated collaboration:

'Having the option of face to face as well as online meetings with groups of external... providers proved popular and enabled greater networking and discussion...'

Several respondents indicated that conducting more complex or sensitive discussions was better to do in person. This included having difficult or personal conversations, or more formal discussions such as negotiations with stakeholders:

'Discussing complex and difficult issues is easier to do in person in the room where non verbal cues are more easily picked up and conversation/tone etc can be adjusted/responded to accordingly.'

Many respondents felt that certain types of group activity such as workshops, conferences, presentations, and large-scale events leaned themselves more favourably to attending in person. It was felt that in-person gatherings offered greater opportunity for debate or exchange of views, or better facilitated co-design or problem-solving because people were more able to fully engage:

'Roundtable events can be more effective in person as those attending tend to [b]e more engaged and not distracted or multi-tasking which can be a negative consequence of larger virtual meetings.'

Similarly, some respondents believed tasks involving collaboration, planning, and creative or strategic thinking were better to do in person:

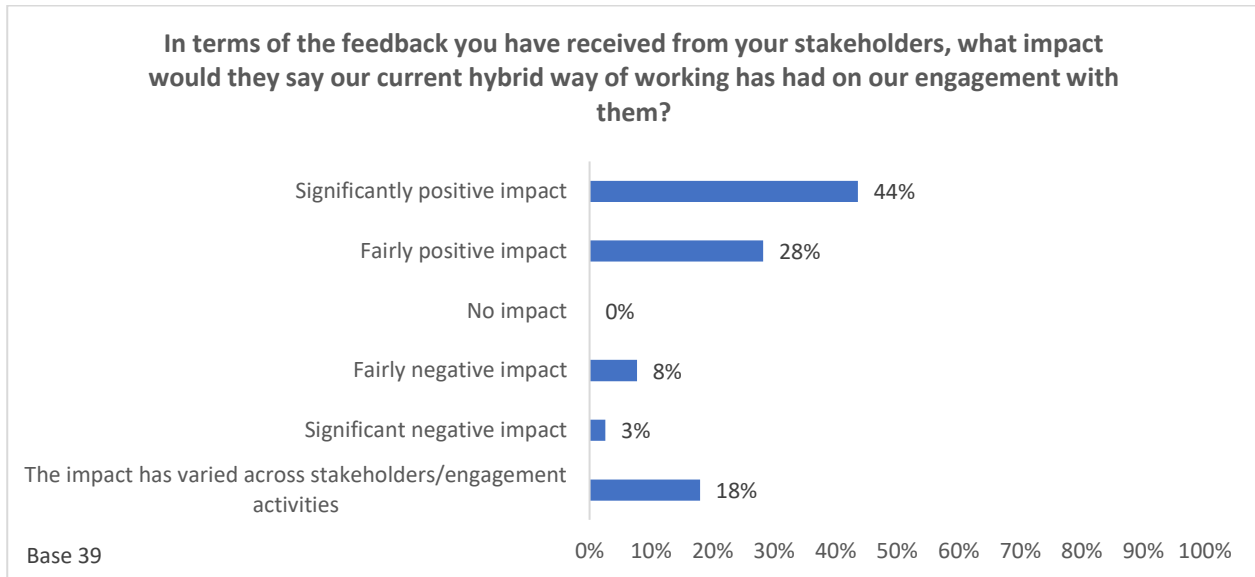
'Collaboration and consultation with stakeholders is best done face to face, particularly on technical and sometimes completely new subject matters.'

Additionally, more formal meetings and engagements such as governance, board meetings and hearings were felt by some to be better in person. Other responses received from a smaller number of respondents included sector or role specific benefits e.g. the farming sector or underserved groups responding better to in-person engagement or the benefits of in-person team days and learning and development opportunities. One respondent noted that tasks requiring translation were better either all in person or all online.

Most respondents did not note any challenges to in-person activities but for those who did, common issues raised included lead-in time for organisations, travel time, and costs. Logistical challenges such as finding suitable venues, room availability and appropriate technology, as well as co-ordinating diaries and reduced flexibility, were also concerns for some.

Stakeholder preferences for methods of engagement

SCS respondents were asked if they had received feedback from their key stakeholders on the organisation’s current hybrid way of working, and if so the nature of the feedback. The majority of respondents (64%) reported they had not received any feedback from their stakeholders on the organisation’s current ways of working.



*Figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Of those who had, just under three-quarters (72%) reported that they had received positive feedback about the impact of hybrid working on their engagement with their stakeholders.

Only 10 percent reported receiving negative feedback on the impact of the current hybrid ways of working. For around a fifth of respondents (18%) the feedback they received suggested that the impact varied across stakeholders.

Stakeholder preferences for in-person engagement were quite evenly split. Around half of respondents (49%) reported that their stakeholders preferred to engage in person for some or all activities rather than remotely.

A wide range of stakeholders were identified as preferring in-person engagement. Local Authorities were noted by several respondents, although this could be due to the extent of engagement between WG and LAs rather than greater preference from LAs for in-person activity.

The types of activities and/or reasons for stakeholders preferring in-person activity were similar to those expressed by SCS respondents above, particularly networking and relationship building, formal governance, and dealing with challenging or sensitive issues such as negotiations.

The challenges of in-person engagement raised were also similar, notably the inefficient use of time and reduced convenience of in-person meetings, with some logistical issues such as finding appropriate venues for meetings and translation.

Overall experience of stakeholder engagement whilst working in a hybrid way

Respondents were asked in what ways hybrid working has facilitated and/or hindered effective stakeholder engagement.

Facilitating stakeholder engagement

The most prominent theme emerging from comments provided by respondents was that hybrid working has made it much easier to arrange meetings with stakeholders. Several respondents pointed to benefits related to removing barriers to organising meetings, such as meeting room capacity, or costs of travel which stakeholders may not be keen to outlay:

'Much easier to set up meetings, 1:1 or wider, with no issues around location.'

Others highlighted the greater flexibility and agility that hybrid working offered, such as the ability to add or invite others to meetings easily. Respondents also noted the benefits of being able to organise meetings at short notice with fewer difficulties in co-ordinating diaries or meeting spaces, as well as being able to respond more rapidly to urgent business needs and to maintain pace of work with stakeholders:

'It is far easier to get meetings arranged for large groups when doing virtually. Historically with face to face meetings these have taken long periods of time to set up resulting in loss of momentum with projects.'

Respondents highlighted advantages related to greater efficiency of hybrid working due to reduced staff travel, both for Welsh Government employees and stakeholders. Some respondents felt the reduction in travel time and more effective use of time for all parties meant that stakeholders were more likely to engage, with the added benefit of being better for the environment.

'Hybrid working has been far more productive in terms of less travel, expense and easier to engage in a timely manner enabling more activities to occur in same day. e.g. I can attend board meetings virtually, visit a ... site, meet team members and attend other meetings, which I would not be able to do these key activities in a day if it was in person only.'

Many respondents felt that hybrid working increased the reach of their engagement by facilitating access to a larger and broader group of stakeholders across Wales, the wider UK as well as internationally. It was felt that pre-hybrid working, time and/or budget restrictions limited these opportunities. Additionally, some respondents highlighted the greater inclusivity and opportunities for participation offered by hybrid working for those in protected characteristic groups or those with impairments:

'More efficient use of time - reducing travelling and increasing flexibility in terms of timing events and meetings. Greater ability to work across Wales and across UK - fairer in terms on the travel burden isn't on any one stakeholder or group. Accessibility and inclusiveness for stakeholder with disabilities or remote working arrangements.'

Finally, several respondents noted that hybrid working increased the frequency and quality of their stakeholder engagements, which helped to improve and maintain stakeholder relationships. Others suggested that hybrid meetings provided a forum in which staff may be more likely to contribute than if they were in person. Some respondents also noted the

benefits of hybrid technology in supporting engagement, including the use of chat functions in enabling collaboration, and being able to share resources more readily within meetings:

'...Sharing technical references, web links and documents into the chat during a Teams-based meeting has added to the richness of learning and development for attendees at these meetings and adds to their value for the participant. They have become a recognised opportunity to "show and tell" and share good practice. In this way, hybrid has encouraged more active participation and sharing of knowledge, skills, tools and technics.'

Hindering stakeholder engagement

Although several respondents noted that they did not feel that hybrid working has hindered stakeholder engagement, where potential issues were raised, a key focus was on challenges in relation to establishing and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. Developing an understanding of stakeholder culture and the context for their responses, as well as building trust and relationships with stakeholders, were felt to be more challenging to do whilst working in a hybrid way, with some respondents noting that this was particularly difficult for newer colleagues:

'It has proven very difficult for the less experienced or new colleagues coming into the organisation. They have less chance of meeting key people, understanding how teams actually work and getting to really know the people they work with. Basic standards are being lowered - some deliberately, with apprentices being particularly vulnerable.'

Highlighted alongside the difficulties in establishing working relationships was the loss or reduction in opportunities for informal conversations and networking. Some respondents pointed to decisions and discussions in-between meetings that were missed by staff participating in meetings virtually, or were lost altogether when a meeting was entirely virtual:

'...Perhaps the biggest loss has been the reduction in serendipitous micro-networking opportunities that take place in and around the office environment - the 5 minute chat with a colleague, an impromptu coffee etc. I've not yet seen a good way to replicate this online...'

Challenges around being able to effectively manage hybrid meetings were raised by some respondents, which included those participating in meetings virtually finding it more difficult to 'read the room' and judge participants' responses. Some respondents highlighted the difficulty in managing an effective and inclusive hybrid meeting for those both in person and online:

'Unless the IT works really well then a mix of in-person and virtual attendance can result in limited/restricted contributions from some attendees. Depending on the split (and how well the meeting is Chaired) those joining virtually may not feel as connected or as involved.'

Additionally, respondents highlighted the lack of full engagement from people when attending a meeting virtually. Some noted that sometimes colleagues and stakeholders were completing other tasks, had their cameras off, or experienced other disruptions, with one respondent suggesting that further development was required on chairing 'effective

and inclusive virtual meetings'. Some felt this issue limited or hampered effective contributions from colleagues who were online:

'Quantity is no substitute for quality and hybrid engagement may attract many more people [but] it lacks a level of engagement, understanding and commitment by some of those attending. Remote engagement does not elicit all views - too many observers too few contributors.'

The limitations of hybrid working in promoting collaboration and thinking around complex issues, as well as supporting innovation and creativity were also raised:

'It has stifled innovation between teams and stakeholders, virtual contact means you need a reason to contact someone and it[']s very specific to that meeting which means limited or no opportunity to explore wider areas.'

However, other respondents believed that hybrid working hasn't necessarily hindered these activities, but that some tasks are simply more suited to being in person, for example conducting more difficult conversations.

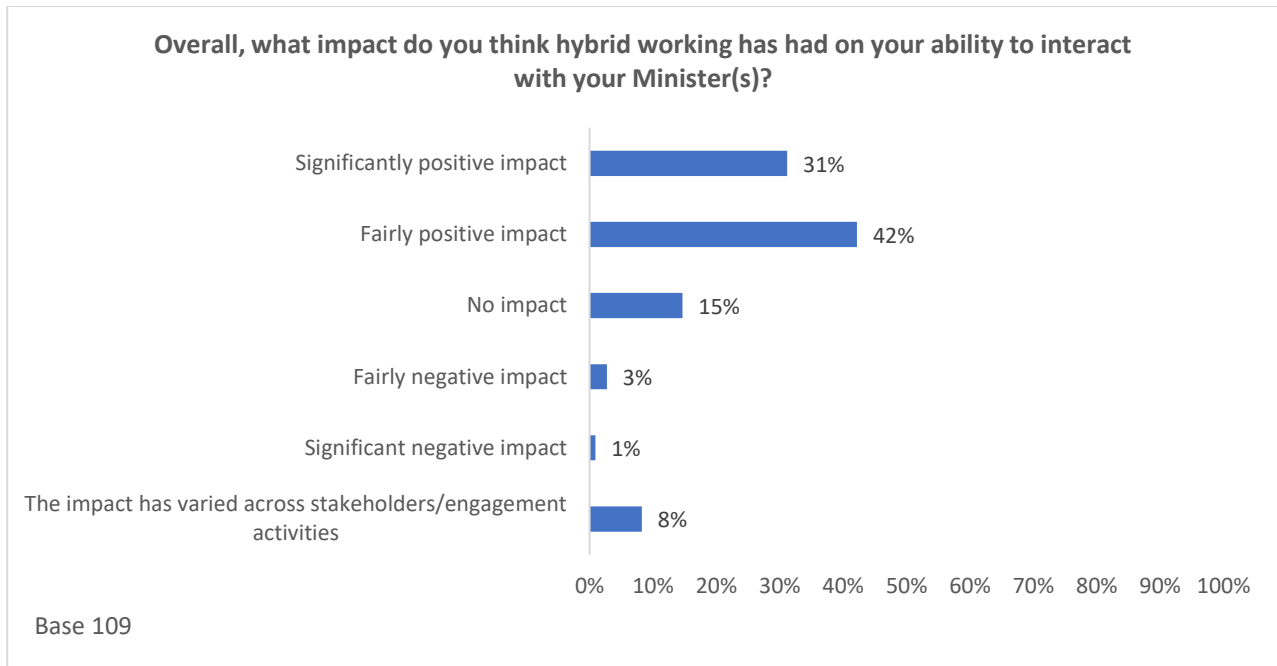
Lastly, a concern was noted by some around the availability of appropriate spaces and/or technology for effective hybrid working. Problems with technology, or a lack of appropriate facilities to effectively host hybrid meetings in particular venues were highlighted:

'While meetings where everyone is on Teams can work as well as in person meetings, and sometimes better because of functions like sharing screens, chat bars, the "hands up" function and so on, true hybrid meetings often don't work well, mostly in my opinion because WG does not have the right tech in anywhere near enough rooms.'

Additional issues with offering effective translation in a hybrid setting were mentioned, as well as information security and the potential for digital material to be disseminated in a less controlled manner, were also raised.

Impact of hybrid working on interactions with Ministers

SCS respondents were asked about the impact of hybrid working on their interactions with Ministers.



Just under three-quarters of respondents (73%) reported that hybrid working has had a positive impact on their interactions with their Ministers, with only 4 percent reporting a negative impact. Just under a quarter of respondents (23%) suggested that hybrid working has had either no impact (15%) or that the impact varied across activities (8%).

Minister preferences for in-person interactions

The majority of respondents (62%) reported that there were no particular interactions that Ministers requested to do in person rather than remotely. For those who reported that Ministers did request interactions in person, these most frequently related to Senedd activity, in particular Committee Meetings and preparation, followed by ‘set piece’ type events such as key meetings, workshops, conferences, and away days. Some respondents also reported requests to support Ministers in-person on projects, site visits and engagement activities with stakeholders.

Additionally, respondents noted that some Ministers preferred to conduct difficult or sensitive activities such as Trade Union negotiations, as well as more strategic or creative ‘blue sky’ type discussions, in-person. Other interactions that some Ministers preferred to do in-person included small group catch ups, Executive Team meetings and Bi-laterals. As one respondent noted, in-person interaction preferences generally depended on the Minister.

Overall experience of interactions with Ministers whilst working in a hybrid way

Respondents were asked in what ways hybrid working has facilitated and/or hindered their ability to effectively support Ministers.

Facilitating effective support for Ministers

The most prominent theme emerging from comments provided by respondents on how hybrid working has facilitated effective support for Ministers was the ease with which they could arrange meetings. Many respondents felt Ministers and support staff were much more readily contactable, allowing for a more agile way of working and faster response to more urgent issues. Hybrid working allowed for meetings to be arranged where logistical issues might have precluded an in-person meeting:

'easier to arrange, imagine better use of Ministers time as more meetings, officials can observe without worrying about numbers and space etc'

Additionally, several respondents pointed to the increase in the frequency and quality of Minister interactions, with the ability to conduct shorter, more focussed meetings in and around Ministers' other commitments, which they would not otherwise have been able to do. A few respondents noted improved relationships through more frequent and better-quality interactions:

'There has been an increased frequency of shorter catch up meetings with Ministers, which means it is easier to build relationships and trust, as well as ensuring they are sighted on the right matters in a timely way.'

Associated with this greater ease in arranging meetings was increased efficiency, in part driven by reduction in travel time, particularly to and from Ty Hywel. Being able to work virtually allowed respondents to use what would otherwise have been 'dead time' while travelling or waiting for Ministers more effectively. Additionally, virtual meetings enabled SCS members to more readily interact with staff and Ministers across Wales:

'I now have regular and frequent meetings. Timing can be flexible if urgent Ministerial business arises. Can arrange other meetings around the Ministerial meeting, which is not possible with the travelling required for in-person events.'

Respondents highlighted the benefits of hybrid working in expanding the reach of Minister interactions, allowing for a greater number of Ministers and staff to be involved in meetings. Some respondents noted this was a particular benefit to junior staff, as they could observe and develop their knowledge of ways of working with Ministers. This also provided Ministers with the opportunity to interact with staff that they would not otherwise meet and to ask real-time direct questions within briefing sessions, as well as incorporate colleagues with expertise into discussions:

'We are able to arrange for the Minister to meet directly (on Teams) with each of the policy officials who lead on the subject matter areas of her Oral Questions. This is much, much better than the previous arrangement, where we sent one or two officials, who then had to relay the Minister's concerns/requests back to policy officials. Now, the Minister is able to question the relevant officials herself, in real-time, which leads to much greater clarity.'

Lastly, some respondents pointed to the benefits that the use of Teams technology brought to Minister interactions. Teams meetings were felt to allow for more effective

communication through the use of messaging and chat functions and screen sharing. Additionally, it was noted that working in a hybrid way allowed SCS members to access information they required more readily than in person, paper-based briefings, improving the quality of interaction:

'Firstly it means that we are using the laptops to engage in the meeting which means that we have all of our toolkit available to us in the moment. Prior to covid physical meetings with Ministers rarely saw one taking in a laptop and using it as part of the meeting mostly these meetings were done with papers. This ability to have the modern toolkit at our disposal is key whereas physical meetings with ministers or others detract from the use of the laptop for fear that someone might consider you to be distracted or rude.'

Hindering effective support for Ministers

In general respondents did not feel that hybrid working had hindered the ability to effectively support Ministers. Where issues were highlighted, the most common challenge raised was around the ability to build strong working relationships with Ministers, particularly when Welsh Government staff or Ministers were new. Some respondents noted that meetings felt more transactional, or it was more difficult for a natural conversation to flow, and it was also harder to interpret body language or 'read the room' online:

'Harder to form a relationship with online meetings, more formal and business orientated, people feel a bit more reserved in the online environment so less free flowing with ideas etc. Less opportunity for recognition of officials involved by being introduced to the Minister. Often online no introductions.'

Respondents also missed the peripheral time before and after in person meetings for informal discussion, particularly with the restrictions of Ministers' diaries. This reduced opportunities for quick chat or to discuss non-work matters:

'It has removed the time around and in meetings when relationships with Ministers deepen by physically being together - so walking to and from meetings gave the chance for more informal discussion and for Ministers to appreciate better that 'officials' are human beings with lives outside of work'.

Additional points raised small numbers of respondents included technical or logistical issues with hybrid working such as connectivity, as well as hybrid working providing more of a challenge for people to engage fully in complex or difficult discussions.