Civil service wellbeing over time
Exploring data from the Civil Service People Survey 2014–23

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About this paper

We are least satisfied with our lives between the ages of 23 and 68, the age many people are in employment. Being employed is a particularly important short- and long-term driver of life satisfaction. Beyond having a job or not, the quality of our job and how satisfied we are with it is important for our overall wellbeing.

A workforce's wellbeing is an important concern for employers, as unhappy and unmotivated employees are likely to experience greater absence, turnover, and lower productivity than one that has higher wellbeing.

Collecting and analysing workplace wellbeing data provides an insight into how staff wellbeing is affected over time across organisations, type of work and in the context of the wider world. Measurement of job quality is still unclear but job satisfaction has been improving in the UK over the long term since 2015/16.

Through the annual Civil Service People Survey, the UK government has collected wellbeing data in the civil service, with results available from 2014. This survey is completed by more than 300,000 civil servants each year. This provides valuable insight into employee wellbeing in different government organisations before, during and through recovery from the pandemic.

In this short paper, we build on our previous analysis to further consider:

1. How civil service wellbeing has changed over time, and how it has changed over the longer term.

2. How the civil service has continued its recovery from the deleterious effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

3. How loneliness and stress within the civil service are changing over time.

Summary

A well motivated workforce is an essential part of the policymaking process, and the wellbeing of the civil service has important consequences for the government's ability to deliver public service reform and revitalisation, with lower wellbeing associated with lower productivity, higher sickness absence and higher staff turnover.[1]

This paper is the third in a series of annual reports that make use of department-level civil service data to analyse trends in staff wellbeing, and to see how it has changed since data started to be routinely collected in 2014.

In previous years, we found that, while it had generally been improving since 2014, civil service wellbeing declined considerably due to the pandemic and, as of last year, was yet to recover to pre-Covid levels.

From analysis of the latest data, from 2023, we find:

- Anxiety is higher now than before the Covid-19 pandemic in every government organisation for which data is available. 40% of officials in the Treasury, Department for Education (DfE), and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) report having high anxiety.

- No central government department has entirely recovered to pre-pandemic levels of wellbeing – and some departments that are crucial to the new government's agenda remain stubbornly, and substantially, worse off. This includes the DfE, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (recently renamed),

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1.   Quinzá, M. (2024). Evidence on reducing burnout among frontline workers: a literature review. What Works Wellbeing. https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/evidence-on-reducing-burnout-among-frontline-workers-a-literature-review/

the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), the Ministry of Justice and the constituent parts of what is now the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNEZ). The DHSC is among the worst performers, with life satisfaction seven percentage points lower than before the pandemic, and high anxiety seven percentage points higher. Similarly, life satisfaction within the DfE is six percentage points lower, and the department has seen a seven percentage point increase in anxiety.

• Yet in general, civil service wellbeing is better than in 2022, though the rate of improvement still lags pre-pandemic trends.

• Central government departments – which were experiencing particularly sluggish recovery from the pandemic in wellbeing terms last year – have seen much more positive growth this year. Several, including the Cabinet Office, DHSC and the Home Office, have experienced positive changes in all four wellbeing measures collected this year.

• Given the data collection period was autumn 2023, this faster growth may reflect greater stability in government from 2022–2023, compared to the previous year.

• The new government should make it a priority to support the wellbeing of officials to ensure the civil service is able to deliver the policies and reforms needed for its agenda.

Civil service wellbeing: how has it changed over recent years?

Our first analysis looks at how wellbeing has changed over the last few years. The pandemic is likely to have had a major impact on subjective wellbeing of the civil service, as it has across the nation as a whole. We update our previous analysis, conducted last year, by including an additional year of data to see whether the service's recovery has continued.

This dataset is hugely valuable not just for understanding wellbeing in the civil service, but also across the country – not necessarily because civil service wellbeing is representative per se, but because the response rate for the civil service people survey is high, compared to many other surveys. In total, 356,715 civil servants completed the survey in 2023, a response rate of 65%.

To investigate both the overall trends and to continue our analysis of civil service recovery from the pandemic, we conduct a basic linear regression analysis, in which departmental wellbeing is regressed on a pre-pandemic trend, and in which *2020, 2021* and *2022* appear separately as binary indicators for those years.

Through this analysis, we are able to compare the average proportion of people scoring highly on the four wellbeing questions asked in the Civil Service People Survey. For life satisfaction, worthwhileness and happiness indicators, a higher score is better, while for anxiety, a higher score is worse. The results of a straightforward OLS regression made on these data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Changes in wellbeing among civil servants over time (pre-, peri- and post-pandemic)

	Life satisfaction	Worthwhile	Happiness	Anxiety
2023	-0.020* (0.010)	-0.013* (0.008)	-0.016 (0.09)	0.019 (0.021)
2022	-0.039*** (0.009)	-0.020*** (0.008)	-0.022*** (0.008)	0.026 (0.015)
2021	-0.031*** (0.008)	-0.017* (0.007)	-0.018* (0.007)	0.017 (0.012)
2020	-0.082*** (0.007)	-0.045*** (0.006)	-0.057*** (0.007)	0.188*** (0.008)
Trend (pre-pandemic, 2014-2019)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	-0.001 (0.004)
Regression Constant	0.636	0.698	0.613	0.314
N	936	936	936	1041

Notes: * = p<0.05 **= p<0.01 ***= p<0.001
Data used are drawn from HMG departmental breakdowns of civil service people surveys from 2014–2023. Huber-White Robust standard errors in parentheses.

The pre-pandemic trend for three of the four outcomes was encouraging:

- The proportion of civil servants with high life satisfaction rose by half a percentage point per year.

- The proportion with high happiness and worthwhileness scores rose by 0.2 percentage points per year.

- Anxiety was essentially flat in 2018 and 2019 (the only pre-pandemic years for which we have consistent data).

What are p-values?

P-values denote whether the difference between two numbers is 'statistically significant'. They relate to the confidence with which we are able to reject the null hypothesis of no effect. In the regression results shown above, this denotes whether the value attached to a variable (for example, the trend) is significantly different from zero. If the difference is statistically significant, for example at the $p<0.05$ level, denoted by a single *, then we are 95% confident that the number is greater than 0.

In the case of the pre-pandemic trend in life satisfaction, we see that life satisfaction is rising over time. The point estimate is 0.005, which is statistically significant. This does not tell us how likely 0.005 is to be the correct value – instead, it only confirms that we are confident that the trend is in an upward direction.

These trends are slower than we observed in the general population for the same period (see for example our paper on wellbeing trends across local authorities), but are nonetheless encouraging. In previous years, we reported that the civil service's wellbeing was shocked dramatically by the pandemic, and recovery has thus far been slow.
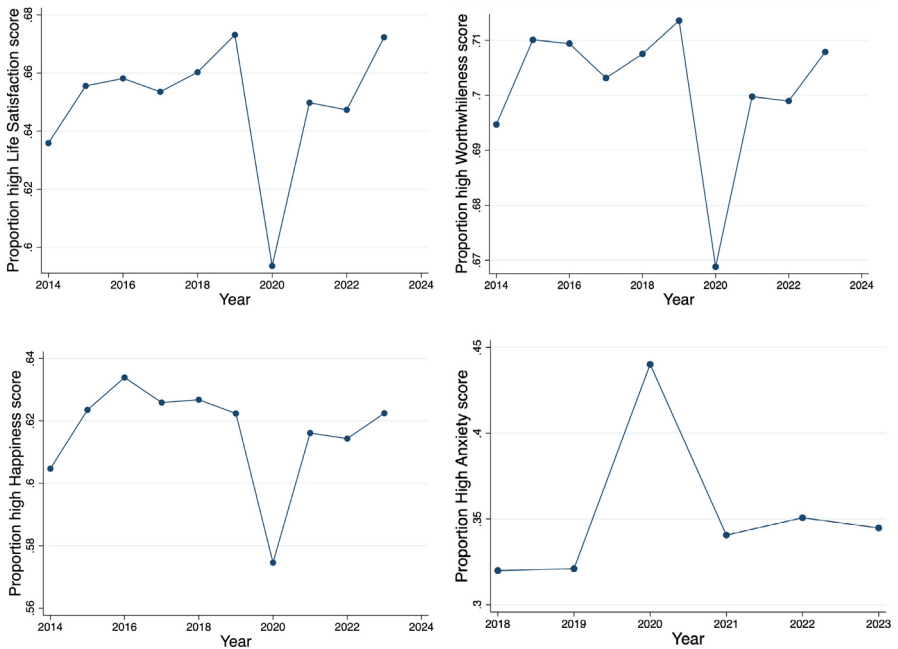
The overall positive trend in wellbeing *since* the pandemic has continued this year, with life satisfaction, people's sense that their life is worthwhile, and their happiness continuing to move towards pre-pandemic trends. Indeed, happiness is now not significantly different from where we would expect it to have been, had the pandemic not happened at all. Anxiety is edging closer to pre-pandemic levels, falling slightly in the last year.

We can now look at these data graphically to help us to evaluate the changes compared to prior trends (Figures 1-4). This panel data is not balanced – there are fewer departments' data earlier in the time series, and some departments move in and out of measurement (one prominent

example is the Test and Trace service, which for obvious reasons first appears in 2020). Figures 1 to 4 show averages across all departments reporting (without weighting for department size), from 2014–2022 for the main wellbeing measures, and from 2018 onwards for anxiety, reflecting that the way anxiety is measured in the data changes between 2017 and 2018.

In common with our regression analysis, we see that anxiety has fallen very slightly this year compared to last year, but remains above pre-pandemic levels.

Figures 1–4 Average scores for life satisfaction, worthwhileness, happiness and anxiety across all departments reporting (without weighting for department size), from 2014–2022

Were changes between 2022 and 2023 uniform?

The civil service has on average experienced an uptick in wellbeing over the last 12 months, although it remains behind pre-pandemic (2019) levels on most measures, and far behind where it would have been if pre-pandemic trends had continued.

As with our previous report, it is helpful to consider whether these changes are uniform across the civil service, and whether some departments have had a better year than others.

To do this, we establish an unbalanced panel within our data, and look at changes within the same cluster over time. We then take the first difference of each of our measures between 2022 and 2023, which is how much the scores change for these four measures in that organisation over that 12 months. These are then mapped in kernel density plots, which can be found below.

The central tendency is clearly close to zero change in the last 12 months. However, there is heterogeneity across departments. These distributions are generally tighter than in 2021, but as we can see, changes in worthwhileness and life satisfaction are more driven by a small number of extreme cases.

As these graphs show, different measures have different levels of spread and different distributions, as well as different levels that we have seen in previous sections. These graphs are not normally distributed, and in particular they generally display some degree of skewness (the majority of values lie to one side of the mean), and kurtosis (there are more organisations with both extremely high and extremely low changes year-on-year than the normal distribution.) Only the results of anxiety do not exhibit significant levels of skewness and kurtosis compared to the normal distribution.

Figure 5 Kernel density plots for life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness and anxiety
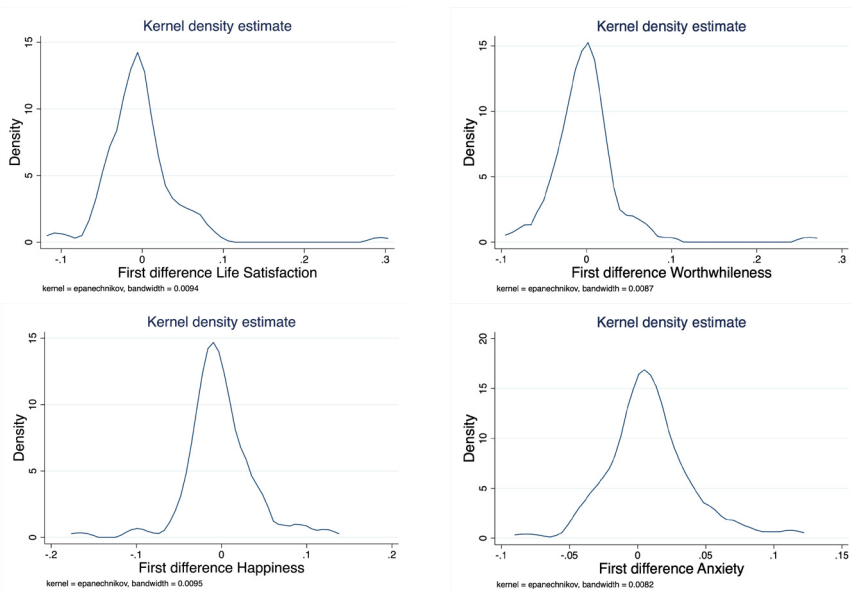
Another, more binary indicator of experiences across departments is to consider how many organisations have negative first differences on all of the measures, and how many have positive first differences on all of the measures. This would mean that wellbeing is either worsening, or improving, in these departments on all of these measures compared to the previous year.

During the pandemic year, 90 out of 105 organisations had negative first differences across all four questions – meaning that things got worse on all four measures – while none had positive first differences across all four measures.

This year, 38 organisations had positive changes in all four scores – improving wellbeing on all of the measures (listed below) – an increase from 17 in the previous year, while only six (down from 31) had negative changes across all four scores.

1. Cabinet Office
2. Companies House
3. Competition and markets authority
4. Defence equipment and support
5. Department for Education
6. Department for the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs
7. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
8. Department for Transport
9. Department of Health and Social Care
10. Disclosure Scotland
11. Driver and Vehicle Standards Authority
12. DSTL
13. Estyn
14. FCDO Services
15. Food Standards Scotland
16. Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
17. Forestry and Land Scotland
18. Government Actuary's Department
19. Government Internal Audit Agency
20. HM Prison and Probation Service HQ
21. Health and Safety Executive
22. Home Office
23. Legal Ad Agency
24. Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulator

25. Met Office
26. Ministry of Justice
27. National Records Scotland
28. Ofqual
29. Office of Rail and Road
30. Planning Inspectorate
31. Registers of Scotland
32. Scottish Forestry
33. Scottish Public Pensions Agency
34. The Insolvency Service
35. UK Space Agency
36. UK Statistics Authority
37. Veterinary Medicines Directorate
38. Welsh Government

This year's list of improving agencies is notable in the inclusion of a large number of central Whitehall departments: Cabinet Office, Department for Education, Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Transport, Home Office, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Justice.

This compares to just one central department in the previous year's data. No central government departments appear in the list of universally negative organisations this year. The Scottish government, which showed good growth last year, is no longer on this list.

Central departments

In previous years, central government departments have sat mostly in the middle of the distribution of wellbeing. Many of these departments have experienced systematic drops in wellbeing in 2021–2022.

To zoom in on these central departments, we show below three tables. The first of these (Table 2) shows levels of wellbeing in 2022. Table 3 shows changes from 2019–2022 (from before the pandemic to now).

Proxy stress is a combined measure of stress (good/bad) in the organisation based on the HSE management standards. The Proxy Index measures the conditions that contribute to a stressful environment including demands, control over work, support, relationships, role in the organisation, and change. PERMA is a combined measure of the protective aspects of wellbeing based on the PERMA model of flourishing.

Values within tables below are colour coded with green values representing the more positive end of the observed distribution and red the more negative end.

Table 2 Percentage of civil service staff with high wellbeing in 2023

	W01: Life satisfaction	W02: Worthwhile	W03: Happiness	W04: Anxiety	Proxy stress	PERMA
MOD	65.2	69.4	61.4	31.2	29.2	72.9
SG	70.1	72.4	64.1	34.8	25.1	75.0
MOJ	71.0	74.4	65.1	34.5	24.5	74.6
WG	70.1	74.1	66.5	32.3	24.5	74.6
DCMS	70.7	72.9	65.7	37.4	25.0	73.9
DSIT	66.5	69.8	60.4	41.2	26.9	73.1
DWP	65.2	70.1	60.6	36.0	28.6	73.7
HMRC	63.0	66.8	58.6	36.1	27.6	72.2
DHSC	67.9	73.5	63.3	38.0	27.4	73.1
DBT	66.6	70.1	62.4	35.6	26.5	73.2
HO	65.8	69.7	61.3	34.8	28.9	72.7
HMT	66.7	69.7	61.1	39.9	25.7	73.4
DFT	65.3	69.3	60.9	36.0	25.8	72.9
DLUHC	65.7	69.6	58.9	37.1	25.8	72.7
FCDO	67.0	72.7	64.3	36.5	30.0	73.6
DFE	65.3	69.9	59.6	39.2	26.6	72.8
CO	65.8	69.9	61.0	36.6	30.2	72.2
DESNZ	65.2	70.1	59.6	38.8	27.1	73.2
DEFRA	64.3	68.5	58.9	38.3	27.9	71.9

Table 3 shows the changes in wellbeing experienced by departments between the pre-pandemic period of 2019 (for which data were collected in September–November 2019), and the most recent data from 2023. There has been some improvement over the last year. In our report on 2022 data, only HMRC had shown a return to pre-pandemic levels on *any* of these four metrics. As it stands, HMRC have been essentially flat over the last 12 months, with life satisfaction, worthwhileness and happiness still slightly higher than in 2019 (although anxiety too is higher). This year, the Ministry of Justice has the same level of happiness as in 2019, and higher worthwhileness and life satisfaction. The Ministry of Defence and Treasury have the same level of happiness as before the pandemic, while the Department for Transport has higher worthwhileness than pre-pandemic and the Treasury has the same worthwhileness as in 2019.

These findings remain isolated, however, amid a sea of negative findings. Line departments crucial to the new government's missions – the DfE, DHSC, and the two departments that now form DESNEZ – still have wellbeing levels that are substantially lower, and anxiety levels that are significantly higher, than those experienced before the pandemic.

Table 3 Changes in civil service wellbeing pre and post pandemic 2019–2022

	W01: Life Satisfaction	W02: Worthwhile	W03: Happiness	W04: Anxiety
HMRC	1	1	2	2
MOJ	2	1	0	2
MOD	-1	-1	0	2
SG	-1	-2	-1	4
DCMS	-4	-3	-4	1
DWP	-2	-2	-2	4
BEIS	-6	-4	-4	4
DIT	-6	-5	-3	3
DHSC	-7	-4	-4	7
DEFRA	-2	-2	-2	2
DFT	-2	1	-1	5
HMT	-3	0	0	0
CO	-4	-3	-2	2
DFE	-6	-4	-4	7

Note that the Ministry of Justice is omitted from this table due to inconsistencies over time in how it is defined either including or excluding arms-length bodies, and that the Welsh government is omitted due to not having data in 2019.

Conclusions

In this paper we have looked at the wellbeing of civil servants across central government departments, as well as regulators, arms-length bodies, and the Scottish and Welsh governments. This builds on our previous report, published in July 2023, with the addition of another year of data.

Last year we reported that wellbeing had still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, and that there was considerable evidence of flatlining wellbeing and anxiety across the civil service. Although this pattern was not uniform, it was nonetheless a cause for concern as the government relies on civil servants, who have been experiencing low wellbeing for an extended period, to deliver reform.

This year, there is somewhat more cause for optimism, particularly among central government departments. Where only one experienced uniformly positive change between 2021 and 2022, this was the case for seven in 2022–2023. This suggests that the civil service in the centre is beginning to recover, and we should be encouraged by the fact that no central departments have experienced uniformly negative changes this year – compared to one in three last year. The overall picture is also encouraging, with 38 (up from 17) organisations experiencing uniformly positive changes this year, and the number of organisations experiencing uniform growth has dropped considerably.

Nonetheless, the new government will depend on the civil service to deliver policy and reform, both in central departments and elsewhere. No departments have experienced recovery across all four of our main wellbeing measures to pre-pandemic levels (those seen in 2019). HMRC remains the best performing relative to its pre-pandemic wellbeing levels, but retains higher anxiety than before the pandemic.

The new government seeks to reform and revitalise public services, in an environment of considerable fiscal constraint. Their best resource for making this happen – the civil service – still remains behind pre-pandemic wellbeing levels on a number of measures. Enhancing the wellbeing of the service should be a clear priority.
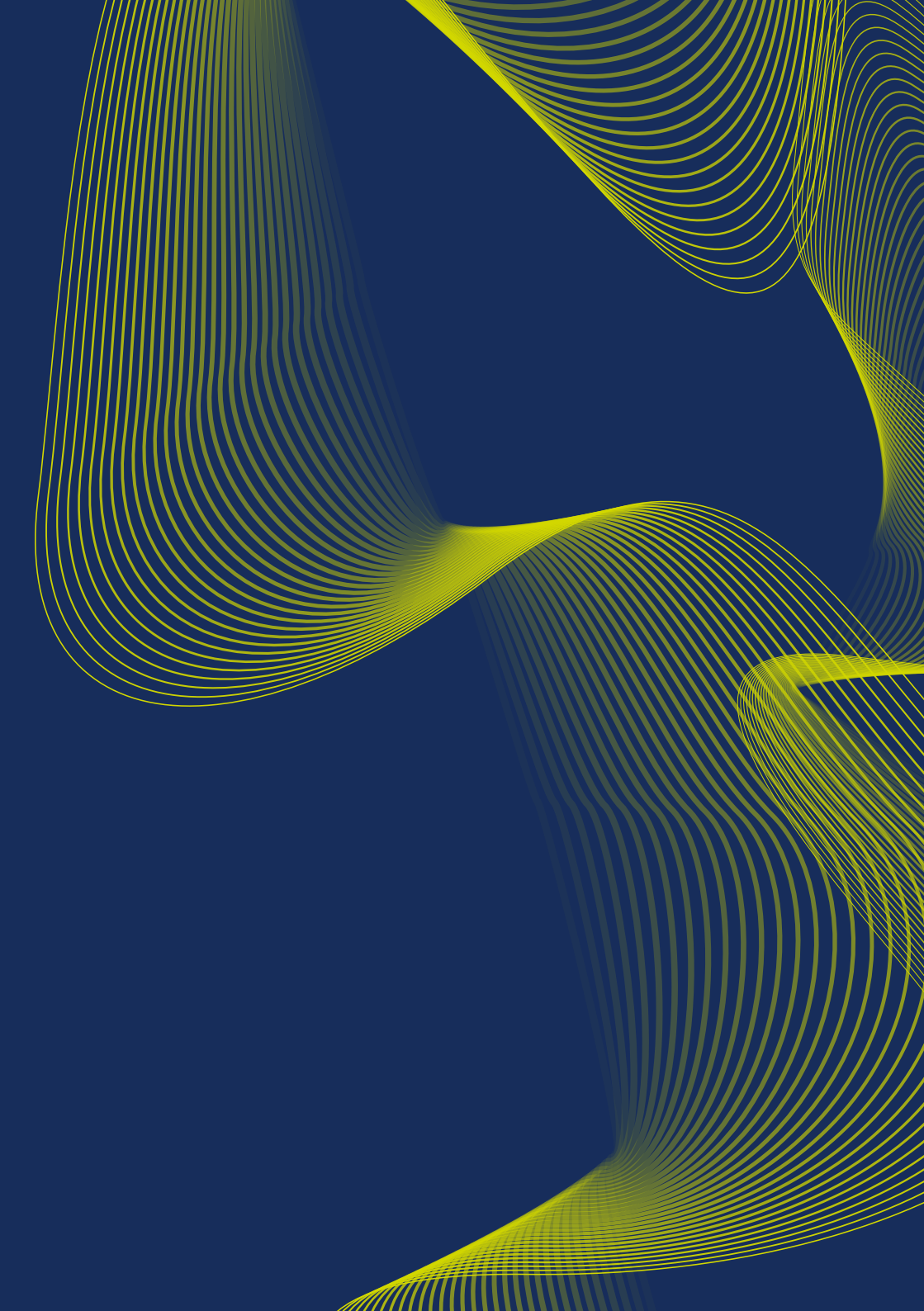
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