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Lamont, Ruth A., Hollands, Laura, Silarova, Barbora, wooldridge, James and Poade, Donna (2020) Happy to Share Cards. University of Exeter and Recovery Devon and Economic and Social Research Council.

DOI

Link to record in KAR

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Happy to Share Cards

Early insights from establishments using them



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December 2020

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Caron Sprake and Recovery Devon for setting-up this novel initiative and trying to better connect individuals within our communities.

We are very grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for their funding towards this evaluation as part of the IAA Impact Cultivation Award, and to Laura Loveday for her support during the grant.

A special thanks to the businesses that took part in the survey, especially at a very difficult time for hospitality.

Happy to Share Cards: Early insights from establishments using them

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Overview

Happy to Share Cards (HtSC) are a simple, low-cost initiative aimed at reducing loneliness in the community. By placing a card on their table, a customer can indicate they are happy to share their table with someone else. The present study explores the use of HtSC among early adopters of this initiative and is the first evaluation of their use. An online survey was distributed to businesses known to use HtSC, to ask questions about why they chose to join the initiative, how staff and customers had been interacting with the cards (what was and was not working well), and how/whether they plan to engage with the cards following the Covid-19 pandemic.

This evaluation was completed in the months following August 2020 and so businesses had been experiencing financial and operational challenges for some time due to the pandemic. As a result response rates were low, just 9 respondents representing establishments or groups of establishments. Therefore the findings from this study should be viewed as expressing the views of a small sample of engaged establishments using HtSC. Open-ended responses were analysed for common themes in responding to provide early insights into the use of the cards.

Overall, it was found that the cards were positively received by businesses who noted that the cards aligned well with their business ethos, and believed they would encourage more efficient use of table space. Staff were shown to be core to the effective use of HtSC, by ensuring placement on tables and through active engagement of customers in the initiative. However, their 'introduction' to the cards was often minimal due to the basic nature of the initiative.

Respondents reported that a range of customers had used the cards, often older women, but also the middle-aged, regulars, staff, and people on their own and in small groups. Moreover, customer feedback was reported as unanimously positive, but often stated that this was positivity around the 'idea'. Less comment was made on any visible impact respondents had seen from customers using the cards.

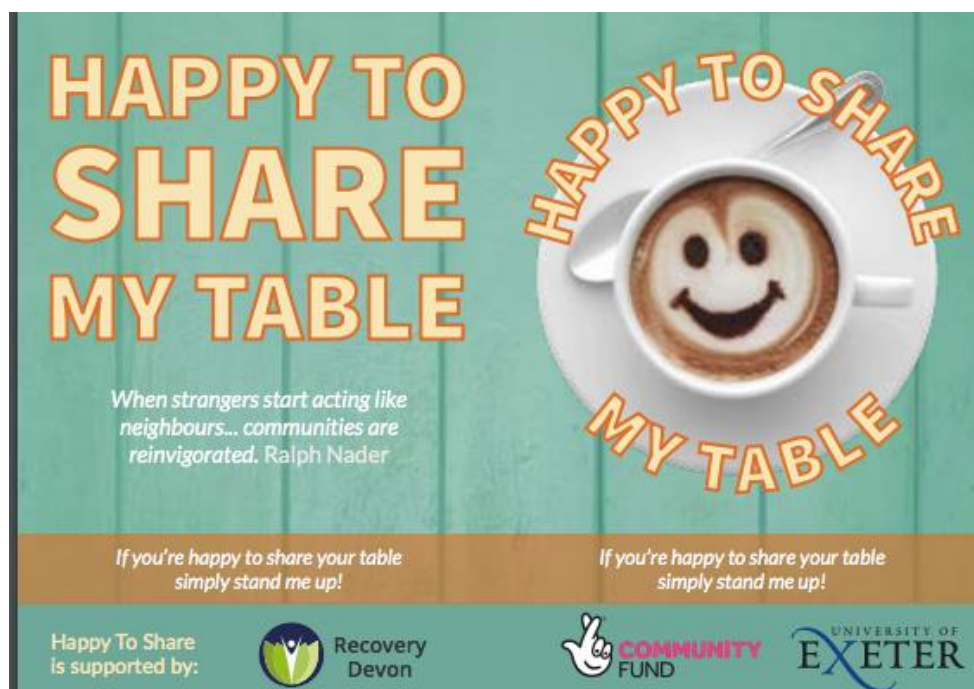
Interpersonal barriers, such as disability, shyness or lack of trust were named as factors that may stop people using the cards and engaging in conversation with others. Some businesses also noted that they thought people being regulars or growing familiarity with the cards would be important for their effective use. However, a number of respondents did not perceive barriers and this was linked to the perception of this as a 'light touch' intervention and so very little expectation.

It was clear, from respondents and from social distancing guidelines that HtSC will not be feasible to use again until it is safe to meet in close proximity. At this point, it was

suggested from the insights of this survey and reflections on these that the following may improve the use of this initiative going forward: 1) a “re-launch” of the initiative as a good way to build-back connection after a long period of social distancing; 2) social media and direct contact with establishments should be used to keep-up momentum among staff who are relied upon to promote the cards (e.g., user stories, tips, loneliness awareness and activities linking users); 3) simple conversation starters on cards to help customers overcome some of the initial awkwardness of talking to a stranger for the first time; and 4) improving messaging around the ability to take cards away and use elsewhere.

The Cards

Happy to Share Card front and back (folding mid-way)



Happy to Share Card inside (folding mid-way)



Introduction

This report outlines findings and insights taken from a survey of establishments using the ‘Happy to Share Cards’ initiative. This simple initiative provides businesses with ‘Happy to Share my Table’ cards for use by customers to promote the sharing of tables and conversation between customers. This first survey of users of the initiative provides some early insights into how it has been received and used, as well as suggestions for improving its use going forward.

Loneliness is more than a bad feeling, it places people at much higher risk of experiencing poor mental and physical health, as well as mortality^{1,2}. There is no ‘one’ approach to tackling loneliness, but many ways that if used in tandem can improve the connections between individuals within a community³.

Happy to Share Cards’ (HtSC) is a simple and low-cost community initiative targeting loneliness. Caron Sprake, an award-winning blogger and campaigner working with older people, noticed how many people in cafés were sat alone. By creating a simple card saying ‘Happy to Share My Table’, those people could be joined by others who may also be looking for someone to share a table with. The initiative aims to enable interactions with other people to take place with the potential to reduce feelings of loneliness.

Recovery Devon are a community interest company aiming to promote better mental health in Devon. They supported the inception of this initiative in 2018 and have since received funding to cover the expansion of the HtSC initiative. The University of Exeter offered their expertise to better understand how the cards are being used and how they can be used going forward through an early evaluation. Funding was then obtained for the current evaluation through the Economic and Social Research Council’s ‘Impact Acceleration Account’ in January 2020. This was unfortunately followed by the global Covid-19 pandemic and so reduced the size and scope of the evaluation substantially. The completion of this work is summarised here in this report.

This evaluation aimed to better understand:

- what businesses are adopting HtSC and why
- how HtSC are being used by customers
- what is and is not working well
- and how the initiative should be used in the future

About the evaluation

The University of Exeter conducted the evaluation in partnership with Recovery Devon.

Data collection

An online survey using the Qualtrics survey platform (Appendix 1) was distributed via email by Recovery Devon to their list of establishments known to use the cards. At the time of distribution (August 2020), establishments were unlikely to be using the cards due to the Covid-19 pandemic and so questions were asked in relation to previous use.

Any business who had adopted HtSC at some point was permitted to complete the survey, but completions were restricted to one survey per establishment, and where it was a chain, one survey could be completed per establishment within the chain. The survey could be completed with the input of other staff members from the same establishment.

The survey asked respondents a series of open-ended questions to describe their experiences of using HtSC within their establishment. The survey was self-completed through provision of the link online and took around 10-15 minutes. Respondents were free to withdraw at any point, and received a £10 shopping voucher as a thank you.

In total, the survey was distributed to ~80 email addresses and received just 9 responses between August and October 2020. By this point, establishments had experienced disruption due to the pandemic and would have been unable to use the cards for over 5 months (starting in March). Many of them would have been under substantial financial pressure and employees would have been on furlough and unable to respond to work-related emails due to this. These factors will have contributed to the low response rate.

Data analysis

Open-ended responses were imported into Nvivo software for analysis. Two coders (RL and LH) independently coded responses to identify meaningful units of text relevant to the research questions. Units of text with similar themes were grouped together and given a theme name. The same unit of text could be included in more than one theme. Once both coders had fully completed coding, coding was compared and refined/merged to draw out final agreed themes. These themes and the text within them were then used descriptively in the 'findings' below to draw insights from the completed surveys to answer the outlined research questions.

Findings

Motivations for adopting the initiative

To begin, we were interested to explore what kinds of businesses were adopting the cards and why. Understanding the value placed on the

initiative and how it can be beneficial to businesses as well as the customers is important for the continuation of this initiative.

To characterise our respondents:

- 5 were business owners and 4 were staff members
- 5 respondents in total included the feedback of other staff/owners within their responses
- It is notable that all respondents were from either local/independent business or had a charitable focus: 3 independent cafés, 1 independent café/shop, 1 independent pub and restaurant, 1 network of charity-based cafés, 1 charity café, 1 small/local coffee shop chain and 1 independent garden centre café.
- Although the initiative was started in Devon, respondents represent establishments in four further counties, alongside a network of charity-based cafés across the country.
- Establishments had been using the cards between 2 and 17 months (average = 8.44, standard deviation = 5.72).
- **Note:** this should not be viewed as a representative sample of establishments using the cards, both because the response rate was poor and those that took part were self-selecting. For example, all reported still using the cards prior to the pandemic and so represent only those establishments that are still engaged/supportive of the initiative.

Alignment with 'community focused' business values

When asked why they chose to use HtSC within their establishment, respondents showed a strong alignment with the goals of the HtSC initiative, expressing their desire to promote friendships and positive experiences, while reducing loneliness

among their clientele and the local community.

"We have a large percentage of elderly use our café and a lot of them come in just to chat to the staff as the staff may be the only person they see that day."

We thought it was a good way to try and beat loneliness.” #9

“The cards are a great way to get people talking, especially in our hubs and also community spaces to encourage people to engage with each other and feel welcome and wanted.” #5

“We wanted to bring people together in our community and to help out anyone who may be experiencing loneliness.” #7

“In addition to this it helps people make new friends and talk to others in the community.” #2

This promotion of community was noted for some as aligning with their values as a business. A couple of staff members noted this. It is notable that all the establishments that chose to respond to the survey were local/independent establishments

which may be characteristic of those using the initiative, perhaps magnifying this desire to support local community.

“The cards seem to be in parallel to our desired ethic” #8

“We are a small family run cafe that is eclectic and welcoming” #1

Alignment with business aims

As well as aligning with business values, the use of cards was often seen as a sensible business move as it was reported as encouraging better use of the space available.

“we encourage people sharing tables as it's great for socialising, uses the space we have and it's always nice to meet new people!” #1

“We have a limited number of tables and it is a good way to get people to share.” #2



The experiences of staff using the cards

A basic introduction to the initiative

The staff responding were asked to reflect on how their wider staff teams were introduced to and engaged with the cards. Without staff buy-in, the initiative is unlikely to be used effectively and the cards would be at risk of being cleared away or going unnoticed.

The cards are based on a simple concept and have very short guidance notes available [online](#). Due to this, they do not require extensive training to use. In line with this, most establishments reported that staff had been given some level of instruction or introduction to the cards prior to rolling them out.

“I gave them a card and got them to read it and asked them to ensure they was always one replaced when required on a table.” #2

“All staff members were briefed about the HtSC in a staff meeting prior to it being launched within our organisation” #7

“Shown the cards and how to use them” #3

Notably, only one establishment explicitly mentioned that their explanation to staff talked about HtSC as a way *“to form more ties of union and encourage proximity.”* (#6) This does not mean that others did not also explain this, but may suggest that emphasis was on the practicalities of

using the cards rather than encouraging staff to understand the issues of loneliness and social isolation and the role that HtSC aimed to have in tackling this.

Staff as key to the effective use of HtSC

The placement of cards by staff was most commonly on each table, but one establishment stated:

“Cards were displayed at the till where customers used to place their orders and could therefore help themselves to one for display; and one table was regularly designated as the usual sharing one.” #8

Staff were reported as actively engaging customers in discussions around the cards and promoting their use:

“Customers were encouraged to place the cards in plain sight if they wished to share their table, which they did.” #7

“Talking with customer when they came in and directing them to tables. If we knew the person on the table then we would also introduce them” #3

“When we are busy they encourage people to sit with each other” #4

“At the start of the scheme we did promote its use on social media. This was well received.” #9

The importance of staff engagement with the initiative was highlighted, they provided helpful feedback and reported issues with using the cards, but also spread the use of the scheme more widely.

“However the art work on the card was not popular. Most of our [staff] liked the message and sentiment but disliked the colouring of the card” #8

“Plus staff also carried the cards on them so could use them for themselves at any given time.” #7

“Staff felt sorry for people who then did not attract anyone else to sit with them and therefore felt obliged to go and have a natter.” #9

Overall, reports demonstrate that staff are central to the initiative, both to its delivery within establishments, to its spread further afield and to the shaping of the initiative to be more effective in the future.



Customer engagement with HtSC

Next respondents were questioned about who had been using the cards, the impact they thought the cards were having, whether they thought there were any barriers to people using them, and if they had had any

feedback from customers on the initiative. Understanding how people are using the cards and their impact is core to developing future plans for this initiative.

A range of customers engaging with the cards

Although older people were mentioned a number of times and women were identified more often than men as main user groups, there was little consensus on exactly who was most likely to use and engage with the cards. Two establishments mentioned a greater likelihood of use by those middle-aged and beyond—*“ladies in their mid 50’s”* (#4) and *“over 40s seem more willing to use the HtSC”* (#7)—while one establishment mentioned young people as a barrier to using the cards (#1) and another noted *“Young people who went out alone are more likely to use the cards”* (#6). A number of user types were mentioned, including ‘regulars’, ‘staff’, ‘people on their own’ and ‘people in small groups but sitting at a larger table’. This lack of consensus is encouraging, showing the potential for the initiative to appeal to a wide range of people.

The cards as a ‘good idea’

Overwhelmingly, respondents said the feedback from customers had been positive. Customers were described as thinking it was a nice ‘idea’, ‘Wonderful scheme’ etc.

“Customers really grasp the concept, and feedback has been positive” #1

“We have only had positive feedback from our customers.” #3

Some evidence of positive impact

However, fewer respondents reported that they actually saw a marked impact on customers and the establishment when asked about the impact of the initiative.

One highly positive establishment noted *“Many people were grateful to have left with new friends”* and *“The positive impacts were quite contrasting as we felt a much more lively energy within the establishment.”* #6

A few other establishments noted more minor benefits to their customers and business.

“Its had a positive impact, as we find locals always welcome holiday makers or visitors through this initiative” #1

“We have several large Sharing tables and it helps get more customers into a table” #3

“From a business perspective it actually could help as when used it meant you didn't have "table blockers". i.e. you were using a table to its full cover value” #9

Importantly, a number of establishments noted that engagement was not high and commented on the importance of building familiarity.

“If comments were received they were positive but most customers completely ignored them” and “Some customers used to use them occasionally however I do not think that they became sufficiently familiar before lockdown” #8

“After a few weeks, our regulars were becoming more familiar with them and that's when we found they were being used more.” #7

[in relation to the impact of the cards]
“None that can be directly contributable.” #9

Interpersonal barriers to using the cards

A number of barriers and challenges to the use of HtSC were identified by respondents. These were largely user-centred.

Interpersonal barriers, such as disability, shyness or lack of trust were named as factors that may stop someone using the card and engaging in conversation with others:

“If they have communication problems, a family with a disabled child, or are disabled themselves, maybe also those suffering from social anxiety” #1

“Making people's first contact natural and without looking awkward” #6

“The human race is a funny type of "thing" we are hard wired to only trust those already close to us and not those who may come close to us through a new friendship.” #2

[speaking of how customers used the cards] *“Naturally, at first even a little shy and ashamed.” #6*

“There are a lot of people who are very introverted and perhaps those who want to use it the most are those who find it hard to start a conversation.” #9

As would be expected, it was reported that not everyone is out to meet new people and so this limits the functionality of the cards. The people listed included, *“People who have arranged to meet [each] other”* (#3), *“Private discussions with friends/family members. Business meetings”* (#7), or simply *“Customers not wanting to share!”* (#3).

Other barriers mentioned as a one-off included:

“An unpleasant experience can make people avoid it.” #6

“The artwork was disappointingly dull and boring. Since the tables also display menu and messages/notices not everyone even noticed or read them” #8

“the feedback from the public would be for it to be clear that they can take the card away with them” #2

Limited barriers with a light touch intervention

When asked to think of barriers/challenges to using the cards, a number of establishments reported none. This could be seen in part as a positive sign of the effectiveness of the intervention. However, additional reflections on the nature of the initiative suggest also that HtSC is sometimes viewed as a light-touch initiative and so businesses may not perceive ‘barriers’ based on these low expectations.

[talking about difficulties with using the cards] *“Nothing. We make it very clear to all our customers that its completely optional.”* #7

“I would be happy to have it there again if it is safe as it is a 'nice to have'. Whether it gets used or not is another matter” #9

The challenge of a pandemic

In relation to the recent pandemic, one respondent noted:

“It's a terrible shame that we've had to put them back in the box - hopefully only for now.” (#5)

The survey was changed to include a small number of questions relating to businesses' continued use of the cards given the difficulties that the current pandemic poses. Three of the establishments indicated that they would re-introduce the cards again following the pandemic and the rest were 'not sure'. When asked what would enable them to do so, they provided varying response.

For two establishments, it was dependent on whether they re-opened at all.

“At present we are not even certain that we have sufficient numbers of [redacted] to re-open or sufficient levels of business to stay viable.” #8

“I have sold the business but the cards that are left will remain in the situ for the new owner to choose.” #2

For others it was dependent on the regulations making it viable within their establishment and for some it was dependent on a definitive end to the pandemic.

“When social distancing is removed” #3

“At the moment our tables are 2 feet apart and we still encourage single people to sit opposite each other on the same table , they always enjoy the conversation they have” #4

“When the whole coronavirus issue is over.” #6

“The safety of our staff and customers will always come first. We hope that one day, after all this madness has gone away, we can re-introduce them again.” #7

“Unless covid is no longer deemed as a risk we would not re-use the scheme.” #9

Reflections

This survey has allowed us to gain insights from nine establishments using this simple and low-cost 'Happy to Share Cards' initiative. Reflecting on these insights provides some idea of how the initiative is working and how it might be used more effectively going forward.

Foremost, the current pandemic has not only restricted the ability for people to come into close contact with others, but it has placed grave financial strains on much of the hospitality sector. **It will therefore not be until it is safe to do so and when businesses are thriving again, that initiatives like this can once again be promoted.**

The pandemic has left a greater number of people experiencing loneliness⁴ and so initiatives to support people both during the pandemic and once social distancing is no longer necessary are ever more important. When appropriate to do so, the HtSC may benefit from a '**re-launch**' in light of these societal needs. As demonstrated from our findings, supporting the local community is aligned with the values of many smaller businesses, and in return, the use of HtSC can be beneficial to them by promoting better use of space within their establishments.

The findings demonstrate that the initiative has been unanimously well received as a 'good idea'. Despite this, we still lack evidence of substantial gains. This is both due to the limits of this small evaluation, but is also a symptom of the discussed lack of engagement with the cards in some establishments. The wide range of people indicated as using the cards shows its potential scope and benefit, but more might be done to optimise their benefits when in use again.

The importance of growing familiarity with the cards and their use by 'regulars' were both noted by survey respondents. To grow familiarity and help them become a norm for regular customers will require long-term investment and enthusiasm in the initiative, and while staff were reported as actively encouraging the use of cards, this may dwindle if they are not supported. The 'guidance notes' provided as an introduction for staff are short and simple, and it was apparent that staff introductions to the initiative were brief in-line with this. Although no further explanation is needed of how to use the cards, further insights and inspiration around them may promote stronger and ongoing investment of staff in the initiative. This may be in the form of **effective use of social media and contact with staff/establishments to share**

user stories, novel ways of using the cards, resources raising awareness around the issues of loneliness and ‘activities’ that require their input.

Personal characteristics were another key barrier to use of the cards and while we cannot change people’s willingness or lack thereof to share their table and meet new people, there is potential to reduce some of the barriers relating to people’s anxieties in making first contact, whether due to shyness or fear of awkwardness. The cards in themselves remove the first barrier, as someone has indicated that they would like to share a table with you. However,

future card designs might include one or two **conversation starters and words of encouragement.**

Finally, an effective way to spread this initiative might be through people taking cards away and using them in other establishments, thereby making other businesses aware of them. It was noted within the survey responses that some staff and customers would do this, but that it was not always clear that this was an additional way to use the cards. Future designs may therefore also consider **improving the messaging around taking cards away with you.**

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Appendix: Survey in plain format

A few checks first...

Can you please confirm:

1.1 I am a staff member and/or owner of an establishment that is currently, or has in the past used 'Happy to Share Cards'

Yes- I am a staff member

Yes- I am the business owner

No

1.2 I am the first person to complete this survey for my establishment

Yes

No

1.3 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time. I agree to take part in the *Survey for businesses who have used 'Happy to Share Cards'*

Yes

No

1.4 To help inform your answers, you can talk to other staff members and get their input. Will you be doing this?

Yes- The responses will include feedback from other staff members

Yes- I am completing the survey with other staff members

No- I am completing the survey without the input of others

About your establishment...

We would first like to know more about who is using/has used HtSC...

Note: as businesses have been/are closed due to the coronavirus outbreak, please answer all questions reflecting on your experiences prior to this. Thank you.

2.1 What is the name of the establishment you are completing this survey on behalf of?

Note: your establishment name will not be reported in any write-up or linked to your responses.

We require it so we can check we have only one response per establishment.

[free text]

2.2 Which town/city is this establishment in?

[free text]

2.3 Roughly when did you start using HtSC in your establishment?

MM/YYYY

2.4 Have you removed HtSC from you establishment?

Note: if you have been forced to close due to the coronavirus outbreak but would otherwise still be using the HtSC, please choose 'No'

Yes

No

[Additional page- only appears for those who have selected an 'end date']

You have stated that you no longer use HtSC in your establishment. It would be helpful to find out why this is. Please be as honest as you can so we can assess the value of this initiative...

2.5 Roughly when did you stop using HtSC in your establishment?

Month

Year

2.6 Please tell us a bit about why you stopped using HtSC in your establishment?

Why and how you use/used HtSC...

We would also like to know why you chose to try out HtSC in the first place and how you have been using them in your establishment...

Note: please remember to answer all questions reflecting on your experiences prior to the coronavirus outbreak. Thank you.

3.1 Please tell us why you chose to use HtSC in your establishment?

[free text]

3.2a Were staff members told about HtSC?

Yes/No/Not sure

[if yes] 3.2b Can you please tell me how staff members were introduced to the initiative?

3.3a Do/did staff engage with HtSC?

Not at all/Sometimes/Frequently/All the time/Not sure

[if not 'Not at all'] 3.3b Can you please describe how staff engage/engaged with HtSC?

3.4 Please tell me about anything that makes/made it difficult for you to use HtSC in your establishment (if applicable)

[free text]

3.5 Please tell me about any impact/s HtSCs have had on your establishment (if applicable)

[free text]

3.6 Is there anything else you can tell me about how HtSC are/were used in your establishment?

[free text]

How your customers use/used HtSC...

We would like to know how your customers have reacted to and used HtSC in your establishment...

Note: please remember to answer all questions reflecting on your experiences prior to the coronavirus outbreak. Thank you.

4.1a How often do your customers use the HtSC?

Not at all/Sometimes/Frequently/All the time/Not sure

[if not 'Not at all'] 4.1b Please tell me about who tends to use the cards?

[free text]

[if not 'Not at all'] 4.1c How do/did these people use the cards?

[free text]

4.2 Do you think the cards are encouraging people to talk to each other?

Not at all/Sometimes/Frequently/All the time/Not sure

4.3 What do you think might stop some people from using HtSC?

[free text]

4.4 Have you had any feedback about HtSC from customers? If so, what have they said/written?

[free text]

[online survey page 7- only shown for those who stated at the start that they were still using HtSC before the pandemic]

Covid-19 and HtSC...

Finally, we have two questions for you about using HtSC given the current Covid-19 pandemic...

5.1 Will you re-introduce HtSC into your establishment following the Covid-19 pandemic?

No/ Yes/ Not sure

[if 'No'] 5.1a Please tell me why your establishment will not be using HtSC again?

[free text]

[if 'Yes' or 'Not sure'] 5.1b Please tell me what would enable your establishment to feel able to introduce HtSC again?

[free text]

For further information on the survey, please contact:

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