The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland

Full Report

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1. Introduction

Background

1. Prior to 2020 less than 4% of workers in Northern Ireland (NI) worked mainly from home. Homeworking, teleworking or remote working (as it has increasingly become known) has increased only very slowly in recent decades, despite the development of IT and telecommunications technology. However, the COVID-19 pandemic produced a significant change in behaviour, following the introduction of the 'work from home' mandates in April 2020. Soo afterwards 41% of workers in NI were working from home and, by April 2021, more than 30% of UK businesses were reporting that some or all of their employees were still working remotely.

2. To develop a deeper understanding of the impact of this change in behaviour, this research paper analyses the following:

   - Pre-COVID commuting and travel to work patterns;

   - Current and potential levels of remote working;

   - Future intentions of employees and employers;

   - Policy responses elsewhere and considerations for Northern Ireland.

Approach

3. The following research techniques were applied in completing this research:

   - Data analysis – from publicly available sources;

   - On-line survey – conducted by UUEPC based on over 1,600 responses; and

   - Consultations – interviews and focus groups with senior staff from public and private sector employers and policy makers/analysts in the Republic of Ireland, the European Commission, Scotland and the OECD.

Definitions

4. The following definitions are applied in this report:

   - Remote working – is where employees or owner/managers work away from but are connected digitally with their normal workplace or office. Remote working is often done from home though sometimes from another location such as a hub or co-working space.

   - Hybrid working – refers to arrangements that involve a blend of in-person/in-office and remote working (Neeley, 2021). Hybrid working is different from either the traditional 'working from home' or statutory flexible working (De Smet et al, 2021).

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2. Pre-COVID commuting and travel to work patterns

1. Commuting has long been a key part of our working days. In the most recent NI Travel Survey (for 2017-2019), 20% of all journeys and 31% of total distance travelled were for commuting purposes. The average commute was 10.5 miles (an increase of 2 miles over the previous decade) and remains the longest average journey people take.

Commuting behaviours vary by occupation

2. In general people are less likely to travel long distances for lower paid jobs (Figure 2.1). This reflects the cost of commuting both in financial terms and time but also recognises that there is a need to travel longer distances for roles in Managerial, Professional and Technical occupations as there are fewer jobs of this type in the economy.

Figure 2.1: Commuting distances by occupation, NI, 2011
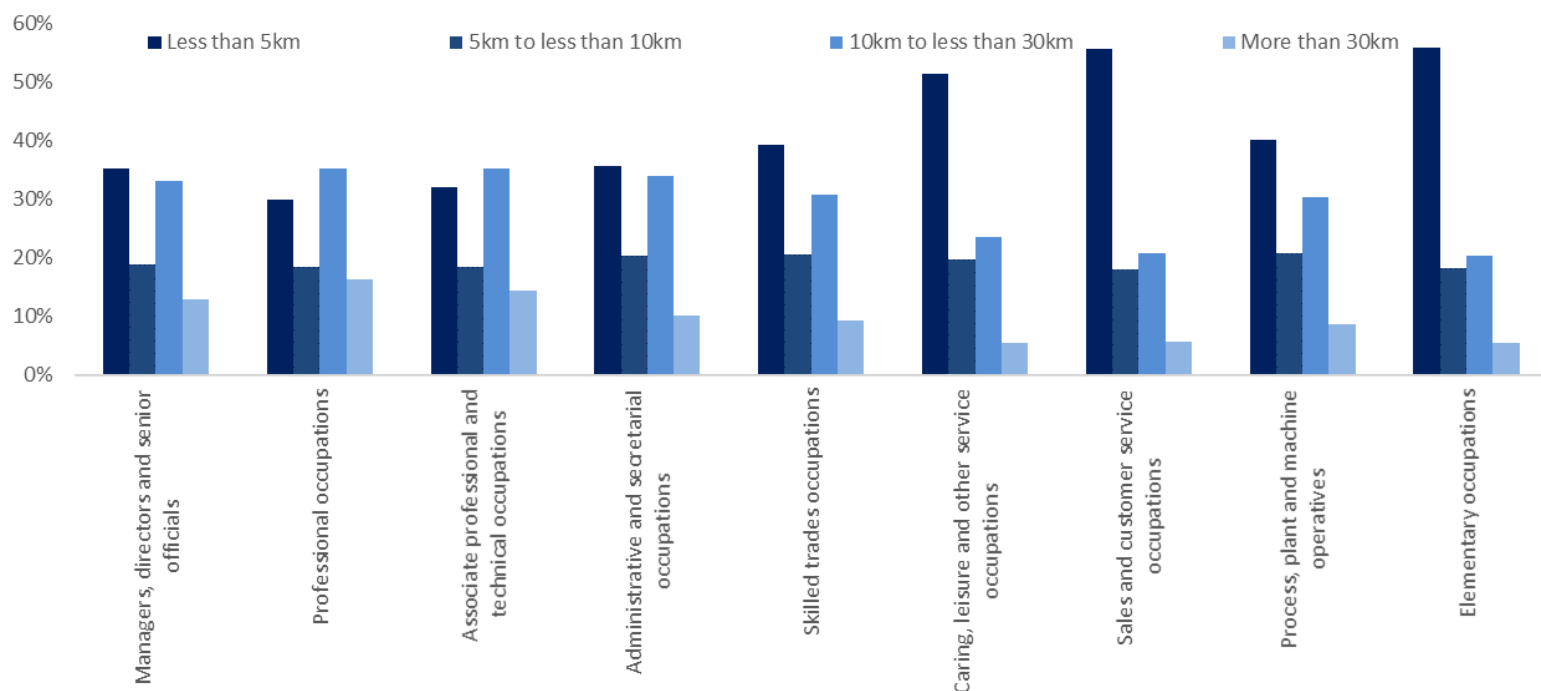
Source: Census 2011, NISRA and UUEPC Analysis

Commuting flows between council areas

3. The most detailed data on commuting patterns in NI can be found in the Census, which identifies both place of residence and place of work on a Council area basis. In general, most people live and work in the same council area, but this varies significantly across NI. Living and working in the same council area is more prevalent west of the Bann (Belfast aside) but this is much reduced in council areas contiguous to Belfast (see Figure 2.2).

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Figure 2.2: % of Residents living and working in the same Council Area, NI LGDs, 2011
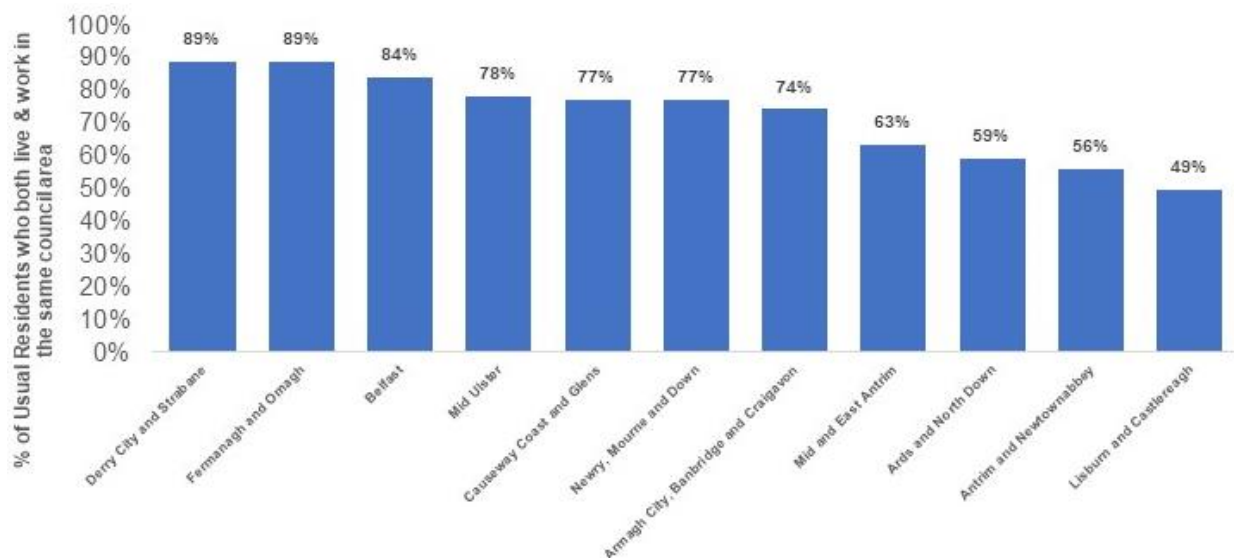
Source: Census 2011 & UUEPC Analysis

4. Belfast, as the economic hub, draws in commuters from across NI (approx. 100k people) and, as a result, almost all other councils have a net outflow of commuters – except for Fermanagh & Omagh and Derry City & Strabane which are more broadly in balance (see Figure 2.3).

**Figure 2.3: Estimated net commuting outflow, NI LGDs (exc Belfast), 2020**
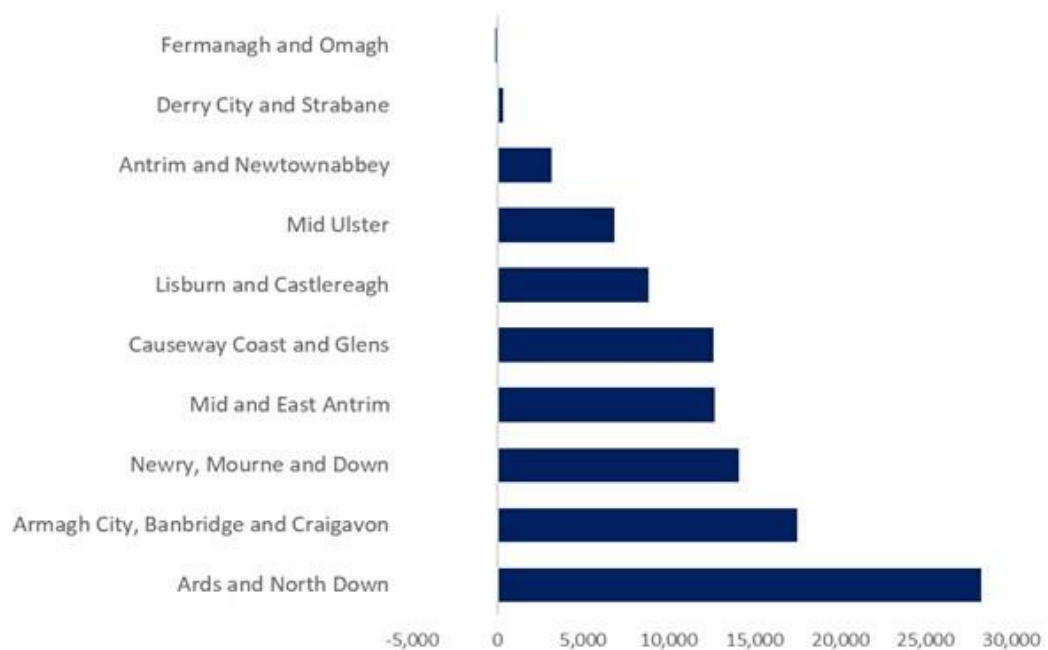
Source: Census 2011 & UUEPC Analysis

5. The significant draw of Belfast to its neighbours is shown in Figure 2.4. Approximately 65% of commuters into Belfast come from just three council areas: Lisburn & Castlereagh, Ards & North Down and Antrim &

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Newtownabbey, equivalent to 90k people travelling daily. This represents 70-74% of the total number of outward commuters in those three council areas.

Figure 2.4: Est number of commuters into Belfast and % of total outward commuters, NI LGDs, 2020
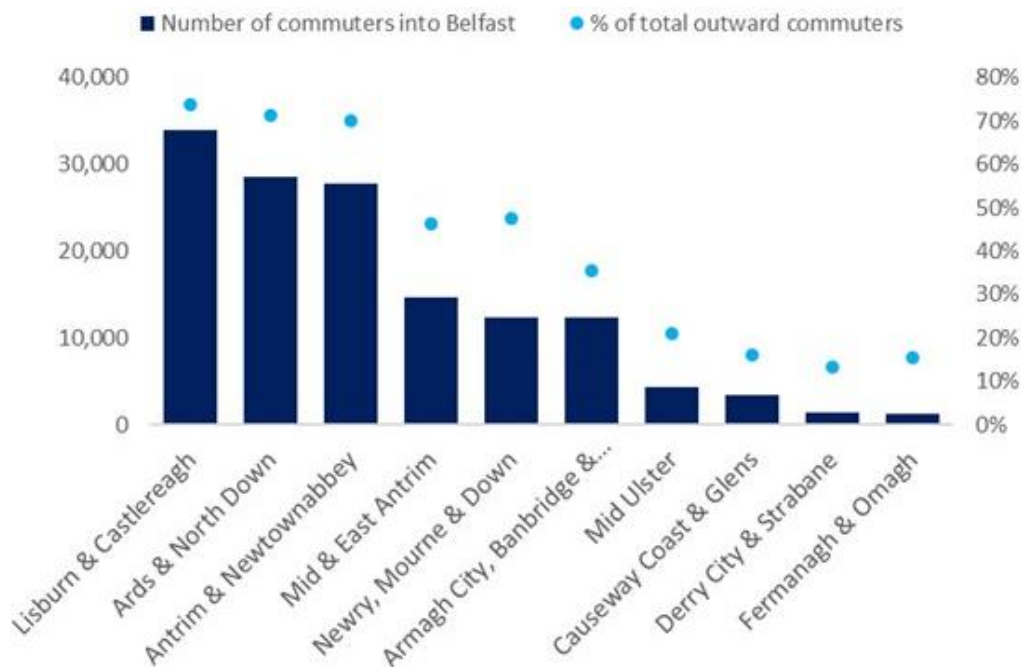
Source: Census 2011 & UUEPC Analysis

6. However, the traffic flow isn't all one-way (Figure 2.5). Unsurprisingly the same three councils also see the largest inflow of commuters from Belfast (approx. 29k people travel out of Belfast to Lisburn & Castlereagh, Ards & North Down and Antrim & Newtownabbey).

**Figure 2.5: Estimated number of commuters out from Belfast, NI LGDs, 2020**
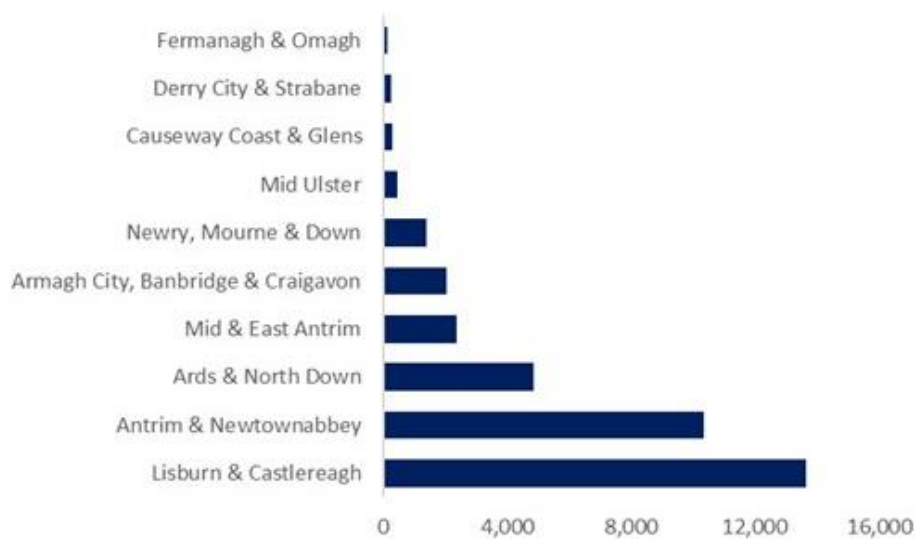
Source: Census 2011 & UUEPC Analysis

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7. In addition, there is approximately 10k people who commute from NI to the Republic of Ireland each day (Figure 2.6), primarily from Newry, Mourne & Down, Derry City & Strabane and Fermanagh & Omagh.

Figure 2.6: Cross-border commuting estimates, NI LGDs, 2020
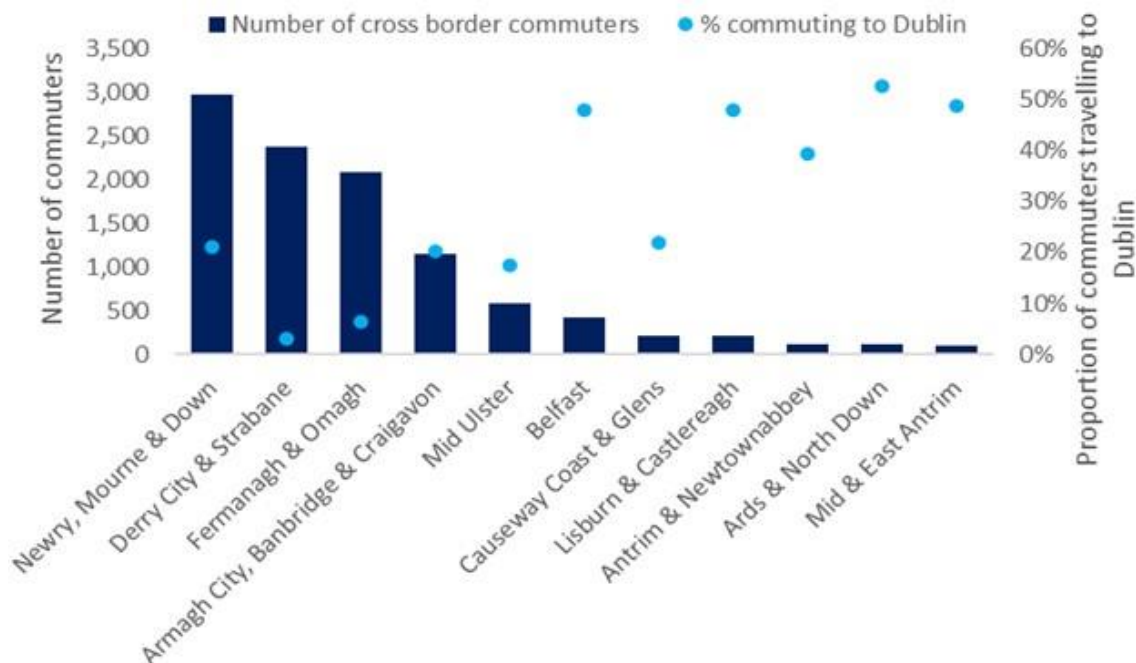
Source: Census 2011, NISRA and UUEPC Analysis

8. Most cross-border commuting tends to be localised – 43% of commuters leaving Newry, Mourne & Down to travel to County Louth; 70% from Derry City & Strabane travel to County Donegal. However, Dublin also has a draw, probably due to higher salaries. In council areas, such as Belfast, Ards & North Down and Lisburn & Castlereagh, smaller numbers of cross-border commuters are recorded but a much higher proportion are attracted to a longer commute to the wider Dublin area.

The reduction in commuting caused by COVID

9. Google mobility data gives a stark indication of the reduction in commuting to workplaces (or workplace mobility) since the outset of the pandemic (Figure 2.7). This chart shows the reduction mobility in mid-January 2022 (i.e. after some restrictions have been lifted but working from home is still recommended) compared to a baseline median figure constructed over a 5-week period at the beginning of 2020. By this stage workplace mobility levels were still 29% lower than the January-February 2020 baseline, perhaps suggesting close to a third of commuters were working from home.

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Figure 2.7: Workplace mobility, NI LGDs, January 2022
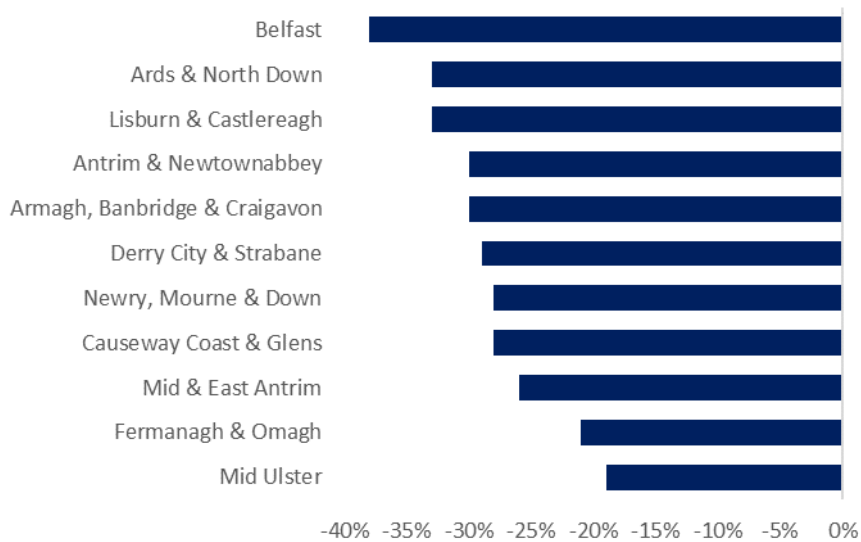
Source: Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Report & UUEPC Analysis

10. Figure 2.7 also shows clear differences across council areas, with Belfast and its surrounding council areas experiencing the most significant decline from the baseline. This most likely reflects the higher proportion of office-based jobs in these areas which are more suitable for home-working.

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3.   What is the potential change in work in patterns?

Introduction

1.   This section outlines the data relating to those who 'mainly' or 'regularly' worked from home before the pandemic, it includes the change in patterns over the last 22 months and also considers the jobs which could potentially be undertaken remotely.

Home working before Covid-19

2.   On average 29% of employees worked from home or had no fixed workplace according to the 2011 Census. This varies significantly across sectors (Figure 3.1) with high proportions in Agriculture working in (home) farms and those in Construction or Healthcare who have no fixed workplace. Reasonably high numbers of public sector and retail workers worked from home or had no fixed workplace, but it was a low proportion of the total workforce in those sectors.

Figure 3.1: Number and proportion of sector working at home or with no fixed workplace, NI, 2011
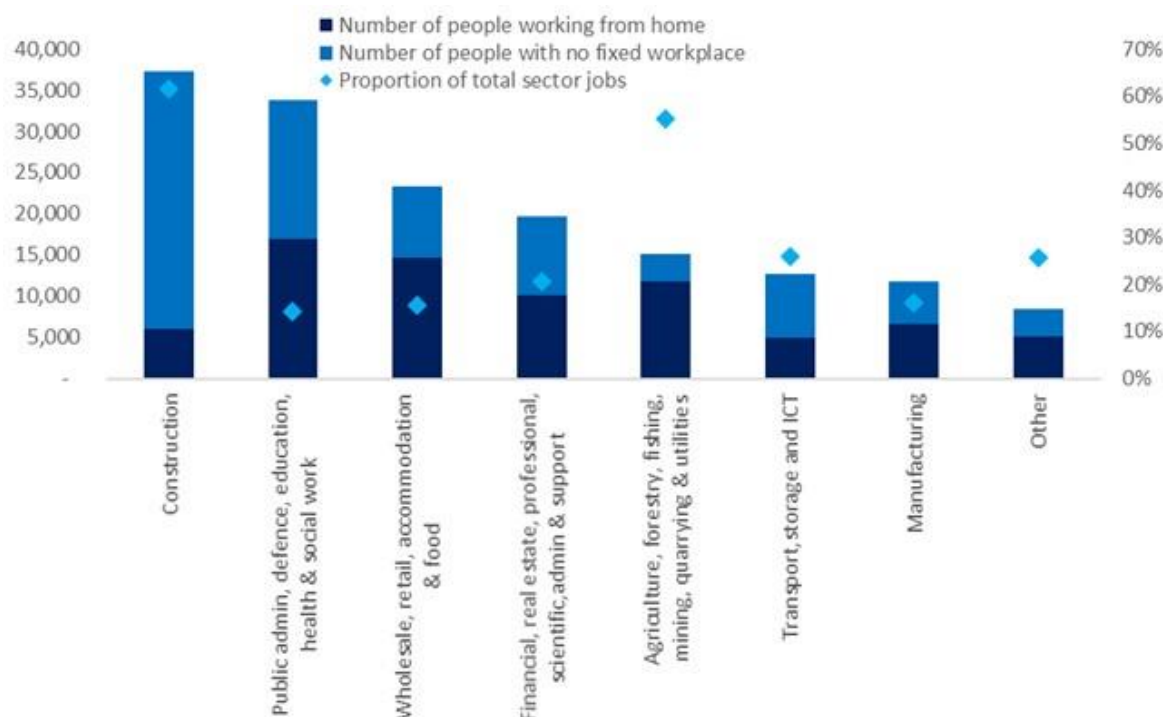
Source: Census 2011, NISRA and UUEPC Analysis

3.   The Annual Population Survey (APS) data provides an estimate of the number and proportion of employees 'regularly' working from home in NI (Figure 3.2). This 2019 data supports the picture of a slow increase in the number of employees working from home in recent years prior to the pandemic. The

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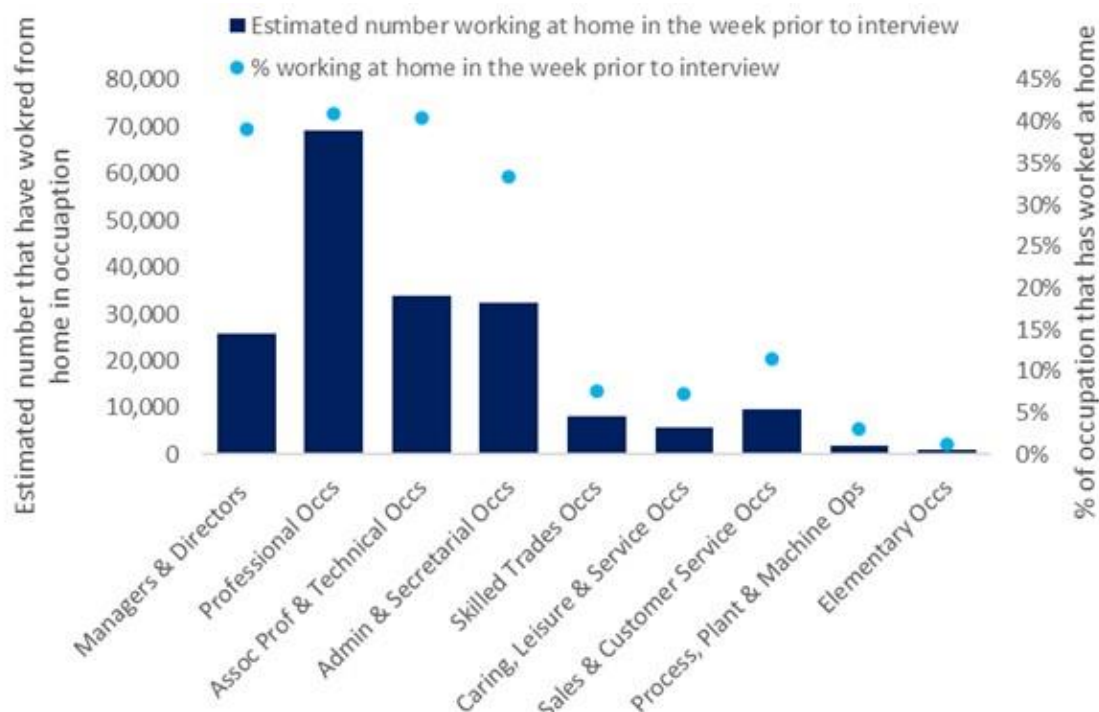
data also shows a concentration of remote working in the professional occupations.

Figure 3.2: Employment by occupation in NI using the % of the occupation group working from home, UK, 2019

Source: NISRA, ONS APS, UUEPC analysis

4. In summary, 3-4% of NI employees reported (in the Labour Force Survey and APS) that they **'mainly'** worked from home before the pandemic. A further 7.7% of employees report in the APS that they **'regularly'** worked from home or had done so in the week before. The figures for NI are among the lowest percentages of any UK region, but are similar to survey data from Ireland.

Remote and home working during Covid-19

5. At the height of the first 'work from home' lockdown in April 2020, 41% of NI employees were doing some of their work from home, with 82% of that group attributing this practice to the effects of the pandemic.[1] However, UK data from the BICS indicates that this has fallen gradually to 17% in September 2021.

6. This is supported by data in the Opinion and Lifestyles Survey from ONS (Figure 3.3). Approximately 21% were working from home in December 21/ January 22 (although there is a clear downward trend from the start of the

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[1] This data is from ONS, Labour Market Survey, April 2020 and suggests that, in the absence of COVID, 7.3% of employees would have worked at home in the previous week, similar to the 2019 APS figure.

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year) and a further 11% working from home and travelling to work. The proportion of those working in a 'hybrid pattern' had started to increase in recent months up to December 2021.

Figure 3.3: % of working adults working from home, GB, May 2020 - Jan 2022
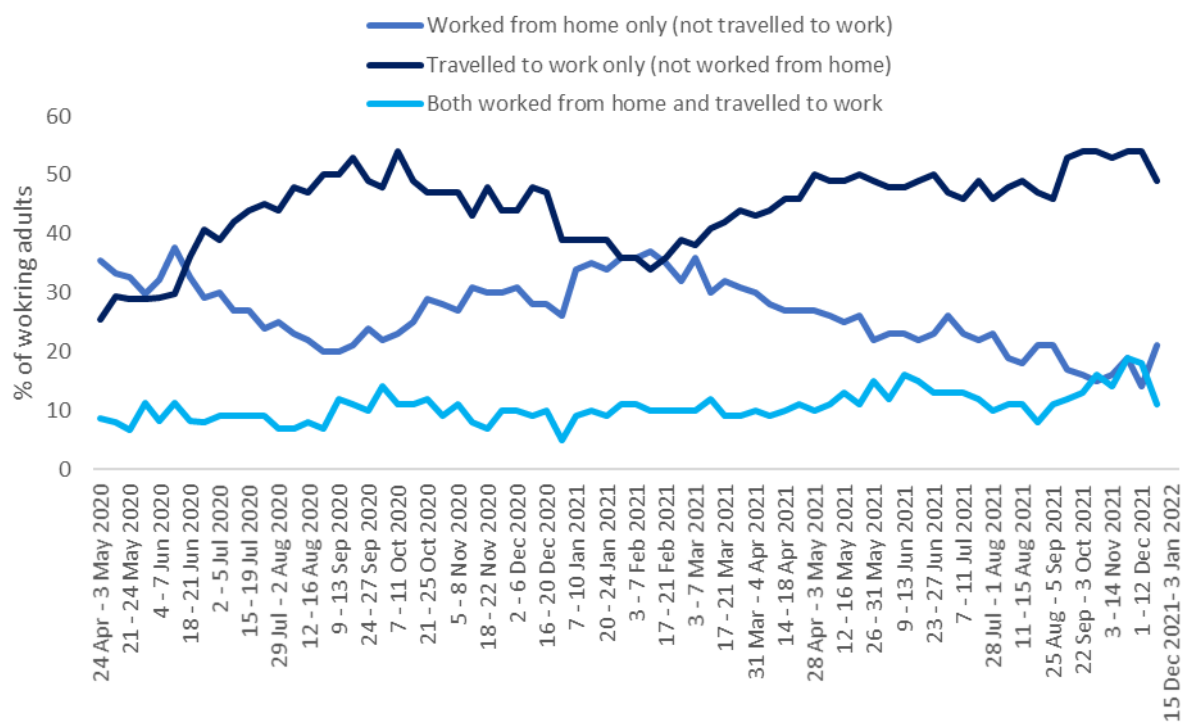
Source: ONS, Opinions and Lifestyle Survey
Note: The proportions do not add to 100%, reflecting numbers furloughed or seeking employment.

7. Section 4 of this report considers employee expectations and many businesses accept that hybrid working is likely to form a major part of their working arrangements in future.

The future of remote and home working

8. Recent research[2] based on a US survey of the working contexts and characteristics of occupations (e.g. the need to be in a specific location, high levels of face-to-face interaction, higher exposure to work hazards etc.) has been used by UUEPC to estimate the number of people who could potentially work remotely in the future[3] in NI.

9. This research provides a range of estimates, with a lower '**in practice**' estimate and a higher '**in theory**' estimate. This broadly mirrors the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI, 2021) view that **this is not an immediate transition and it does not mean full-time remote working**.

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[2] For examples see Dingel & Newman (2020); Crowley & Doran (2020) and Daly (2020).
[3] For more detail see ONS (2020b) and Dingel & Newman (2020).

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10. The 'in practice' estimate suggests 40% of total employee jobs in NI could be completed remotely. Figure 3.4 shows the differences across sectors with higher proportions of ICT and Professional Services jobs compared to, for example, Health & Social Work.

Figure 3.4: Total number of people employed by sector and the estimate that could 'in practice' work remotely, NI, 2020
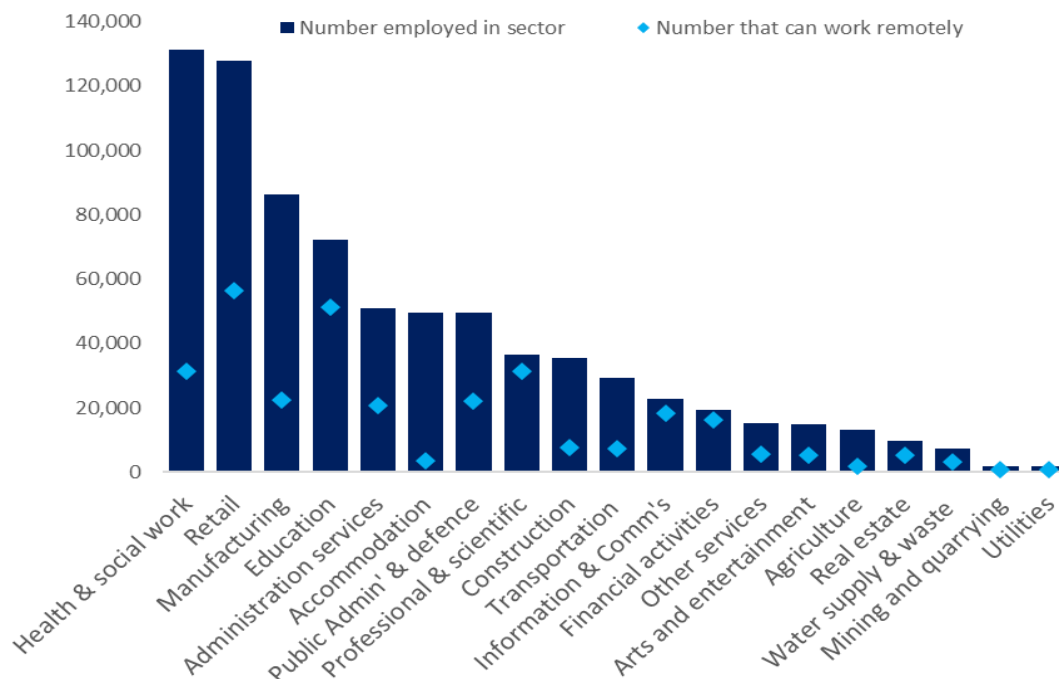
Source: Dingel & Newman (2020) and UUEPC Analysis

11. The impact across councils also varies (Figure 3.5). Belfast, with its high proportion of professional services and ICT jobs, has a much higher proportion (at 46%) than other council areas which are broadly similar – higher concentrations in Agriculture, Construction and/or Manufacturing will lead to a lower remote working potential.

Figure 3.5: 'Effective' estimate of employees that could work remotely, NI LGDs, 2020
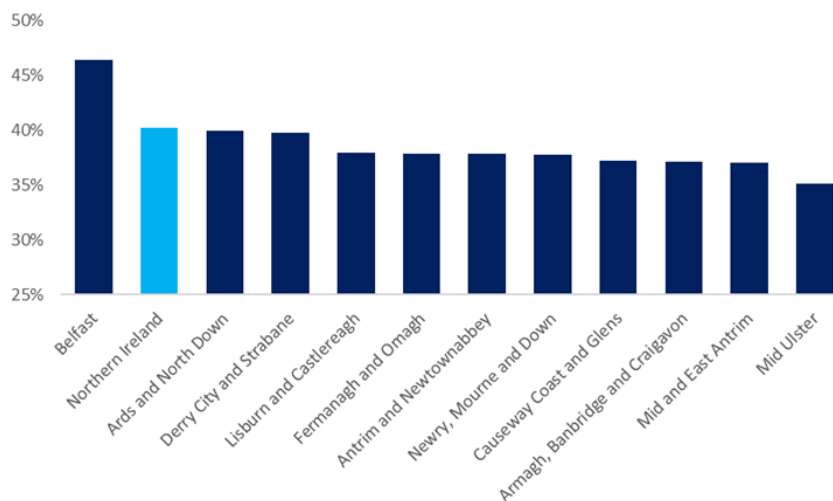
Source: Dingel & Newman (2020) and UUEPC analysis

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12. An alternative approach to determine a higher 'in theory' estimate is based on research by Crowley & Doran (2020) – see Figure 3.5. This estimates approx. 61% of jobs could be undertaken, at least in part, remotely.

Figure 3.5: Number of people employed by sector and the 'theoretical' estimate of employees that could work remotely, NI, 2020
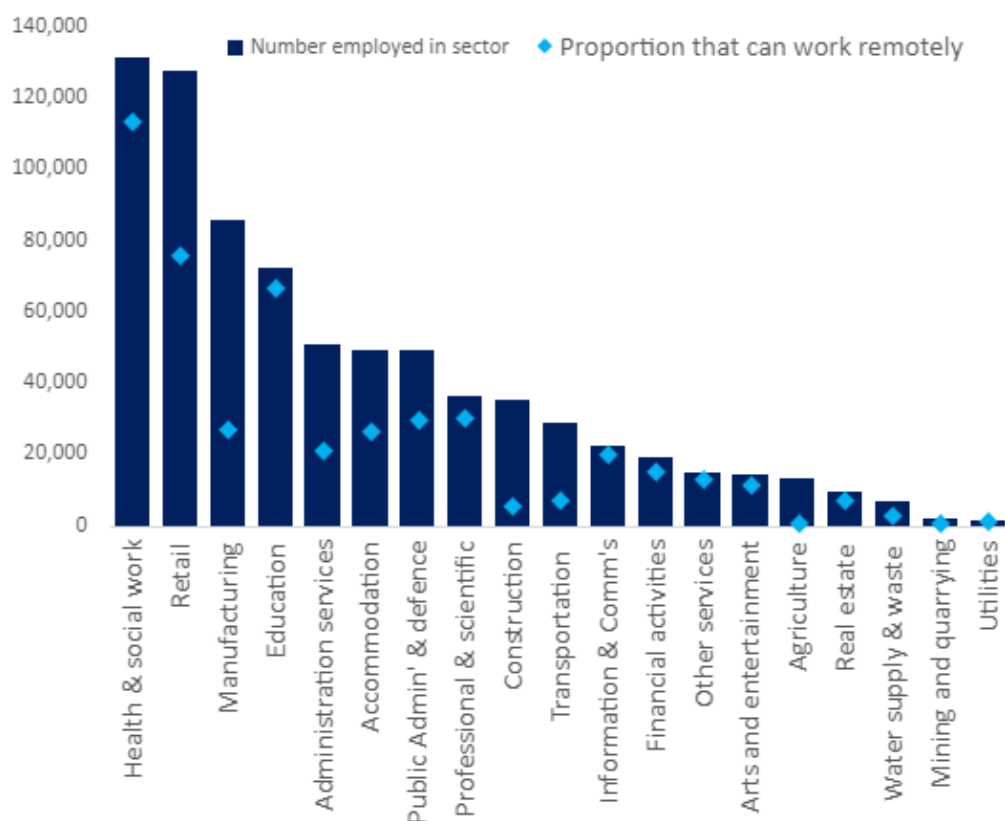
Source: Crowley & Doran (2020) and UUEPC analysis

13. In summary, this suggests that between 40% and 61% of employee jobs in NI could be undertaken remotely, however, **this change would take time and does not mean remote working on a full-time basis**.

14. Given the economic profile of Belfast City Council, it has the highest proportion of employee jobs that could be completed remotely. This would have significant knock-on impacts in terms of long-term future commuting patterns into the city and spending in the city centre.

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4. What are employees thinking?

Introduction

1. The UUEPC conducted an on-line survey of approximately 1,600 people in 2021 to ascertain views on their commuting and remote working experiences during the pandemic.

Most respondents had worked from home

2. Of the group sampled, the vast majority worked from home (this was intentional as it was the views of this group that was of particular interest to this research topic). Women were marginally more likely to have worked from home (Figure 4.1) and young people were less likely to have worked from home (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.1: Whether the respondent has worked from home during the Covid-19 pandemic by gender, NI, 2021

		Have you worked from home/remotely in the last 16 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic?	
		Yes	**No**
What is your gender?	**Male**	85.6%	14.4%
	Female	91.2%	8.8%
	Pefer not to say	80.0%	20.0%

Source: UUEPC analysis
Note: Figures sum to 100% by gender

Figure 4.2: Whether the respondent has worked from home during the Covid-19 pandemic by age, NI, 2021

Source: UUEPC analysis
Note: Figures sum to 100% by age category

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Almost all managerial, professional and administrative staff experienced home working
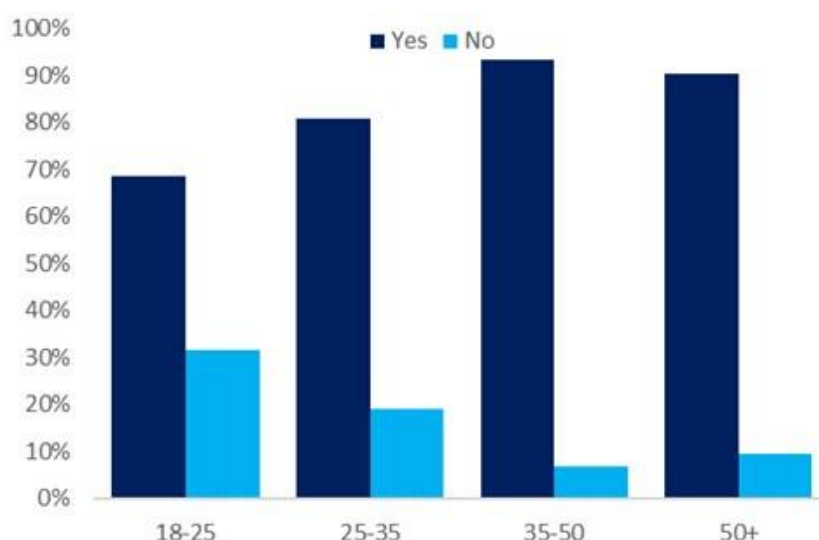
Figure 4.3: Whether the respondent had worked from home during the Covid-19 pandemic by occupation, NI, 2021

		Have you worked from home/remotely in the last 16 months due to the Covid-19 pandemic?	
		Yes	No
Which category would your occupation fall into?	Managerial or higher official	95.8%	4.3%
	Professional or Technical	92.2%	7.8%
	Administrative or secretarial	90.6%	9.4%
	Skilled trades or machine operative	27.9%	72.1%
	Caring, sales or leisure occupations	32.7%	67.4%

Source: UUEPC analysis

3. Almost all staff in managerial, professional or technical and administrative roles worked from home at least some of the time. For those in skilled trades and caring roles, only a minority were able to work from home, consistent with the 'hands on' and 'in person' nature of the role.

Public sector workers more likely to work from home

4. Although the significant majority of respondents in both the public and private sectors worked from home, it was more common in the public sector – approx. 94% compared to 81% of private sector respondents.

Employees want to return to the office, but most want a flexible/ hybrid arrangement

5. Overall, respondents overwhelmingly backed a return to the office BUT only if it was combined with home working. Women, in particular, indicated a stronger preference for hybrid working (Figure 4.4), a trend found in a recent CSO survey for Ireland.

Figure 4.4: Whether the respondent wants to return to the office by gender, NI, 2021
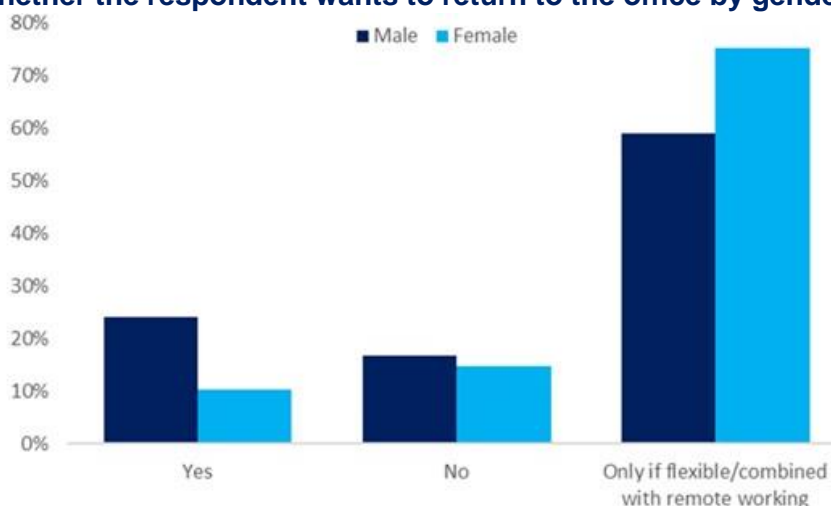
Source: UUEPC analysis

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6. This is consistent with the qualitative responses received with regard to working around childcare and caring responsibilities. However, this also raised other challenges that come with flexible working (e.g. with caring responsibilities) that result in staggered working hours, leaving other staff feeling that they must be available over a longer working day.

    "I am able to have a much better balance between work, childcare & looking after my disabled partner."

    "Many colleagues are working more flexible hours to manage childcare, leaving my working hours extended beyond the regular 9 to 5, but I am expected to meet their needs as I have no children."

7. Therefore, flexible working is not just seen as flexibility in terms of **where to work,** but also flexibility around **when to work**, which raises different challenges for other colleagues.

    ## Remote working can re-engage the economically inactive

8. The number of economically inactive due to looking after the family/home has been in long term decline, but this trend has accelerated during the pandemic, between Q1 2019 and Q3 2021 this proportion fell from 6.1% to 4.0%.[4] **Remote working can therefore be viewed as a labour market activation tool** enabling more people (in particular women) to return to work.

    ## Younger people more keen to return to the office

9. Younger employees expressed a greater interest in returning to the office. As part of the qualitative responses other respondents highlighted the benefits to younger staff being in the office to learn from those with more experience and the sharing of knowledge and ideas.

    ### Figure 4.5: Whether the respondent wants to return to the office by age, NI, 2021

		Do you want to return to working in an office?		
		Yes	No	Only if flexible
What is your age?	18-25	31.3%	10.4%	58.3%
	25-35	22.8%	12.8%	64.5%
	35-50	10.9%	17.2%	71.9%
	50+	15.6%	14.0%	70.5%

Source: UUEPC analysis

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[4] UUEPC Labour Market Intelligence Portal - https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/labour-market-intelligence

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"You lose creativity/ innovations/ knowledge sharing that comes from networking in the office environment."

"Younger staff members missed out on a lot of the knowledge you pick up from older and more experienced colleagues."

Preference shown for 2 to 4 days per week in the office

10. Similar trends across the public and private sector with strong support for a return to the office 1-3 days per week and reasonable support for a return 4 to 5 days per week. It seems staff want to retain the physical connection with their colleagues in the office but also want to retain the benefits of home working.

Figure 4.6: How often the respondent wants to return to the office by public/private sector, NI, 2021
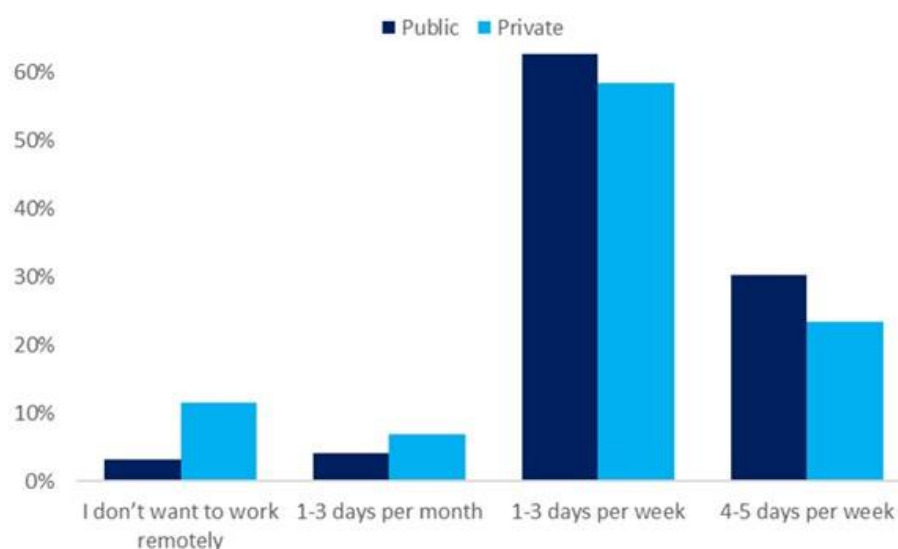
Source: UUEPC analysis

11. PwC surveyed employees in 2020 and then again in 2021 asking them how often they would like to work remotely post Covid. Interestingly, the proportion of employees wanting to work 2-4 days remotely remained largely unchanged, but those wanting to work remotely 5 days per week fell from 32% in 2020 to 19% in 2021.[5]

12. The ONS Opinion and Lifestyle Survey (September 2021) found that 82% of the UK working population expected, post-COVID to work in some hybrid fashion, 14% saying they would be solely office-based and 4% solely working from home. In Ireland a CSO survey (November 2021) found that of those able to work remotely 60% would like to do so 'some of the time', 28% 'all of the time' and 12% not at all.

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[5] PwC US Pulse Survey 2021 and PwC's US Remote Work Survey 2020

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13. Attitudes are also broadly similar across occupations (Figure 4.7), with only those in trades and caring/ sales/ leisure indicating less of a preference for remote working (consistent with traits of the role).

Figure 4.7: How often respondent wants to return to the office by occupation, NI, 2021
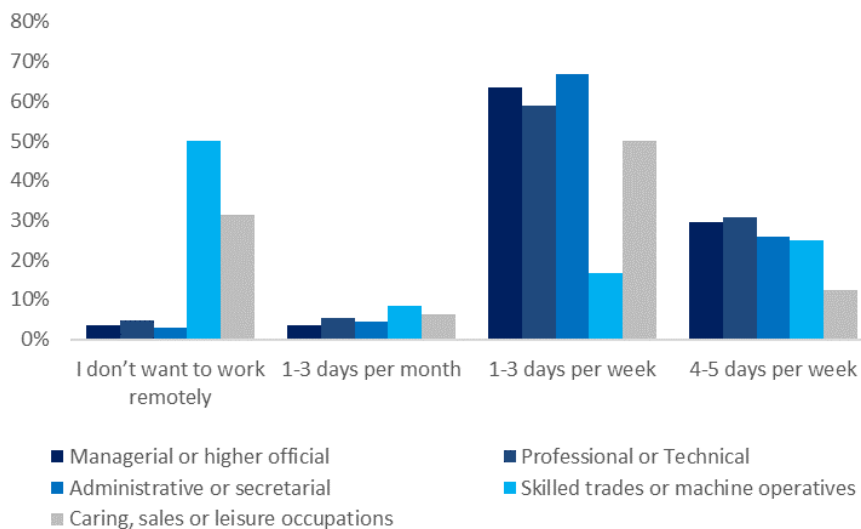
Source: UUEPC analysis

Mixed attitudes towards remote working hubs

14. Overall, **most respondents were not interested in working in remote hubs**, and of those who expressed an interest, their preference was to work in a hub dedicated to their organisation (or their part of the organisation), which was marginally more popular than a hub in their closest town.

15. Of those who expressed an interest in remote working hubs, interest was greater in managerial; professional & technical; and administrative occupations.

Figure 4.8: Respondents interest in remote working hubs by occupation, NI, 2021

		When working remotely in future would you be interested in using remote 'hubs' or dedicated office space?		
		Yes, in a remote working hub located in nearest town centre	Yes, in a remote working hub dedicated to my part of the organisation	No, I am only interested in working from home
Which category would your occupation fall into?	Managerial or higher official	14.0%	22.2%	63.8%
	Professional or Technical	13.2%	21.3%	65.5%
	Administrative or secretarial	7.0%	21.2%	71.8%
	Skilled trades or machine operatives	0.0%	16.7%	83.3%
	Caring, sales or leisure occupations	12.5%	18.8%	68.8%

Source: UUEPC analysis

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> *"I am very much in favour of a hybrid approach and very interested in the idea of local hubs."*

> *"In regard to a working hub as I live in a rural area any working hubs would be located in the main town where I work."*

Working from home worked well for some but poorly for others

16. Of the qualitative responses provided, these tended to be relatively equally balanced between those who have benefited from the new arrangements and those who have had a negative experience. Some found it provided an improved work-life balance, others found it had a negative impact, some found it greatly benefited their mental health whilst others felt isolated and lonely. Successfully working from home typically depends on an individual's personal circumstances, their personality traits, their job role and their career position.

> *"Better work-life balance most of the time, I turn off the IT equipment and I am home, no commute. Although, as a manager there is a temptation to log back on in the evenings. Also, there is no social interaction and there are fewer breaks taken when working alone."*

> *"Working from home is like living at work. You cannot switch off, so I have to remind myself that I need to maintain family time. If that balance is not reached, one would feel drained of energy which can put stress on your health and wellbeing. Not ideal!"*

> *"I am happy in my job, less tired due to a reduction in commute, much more productive, less stressed and anxious and most importantly I currently have a much better work life balance which benefits me, my family and my employer."*

> *"Mental health benefits cannot be over emphasised, has been of great assistance to me."*

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5.   What are businesses thinking?

Introduction

1.   The previous section provided a quantitative overview of employee views on remote working, but this section provides a more qualitative assessment based on consultations with a range of public and private sector employers and includes a review of other research.

Business attitudes changing to accept increased homeworking

2.   Business attitudes have changed since the start of the year. The BICS[6] data (Figure 5.1) shows approximately 70% of UK businesses did not intend to use an increased level of homeworking as part of their future business model. However, by April this had fallen to 50% with the corollary increase in businesses indicating an intention to adopt a homeworking approach.

3.   This is particularly prevalent in sectors such as ICT, Professional Services and Financial Services where approx. one third of firms were intending to use homeworking at the start of the year, increasing to over 50% by June.

Figure 5.1: Intention of UK businesses to use increased homeworking as a permanent business model going forward, October 2020 to June 2021
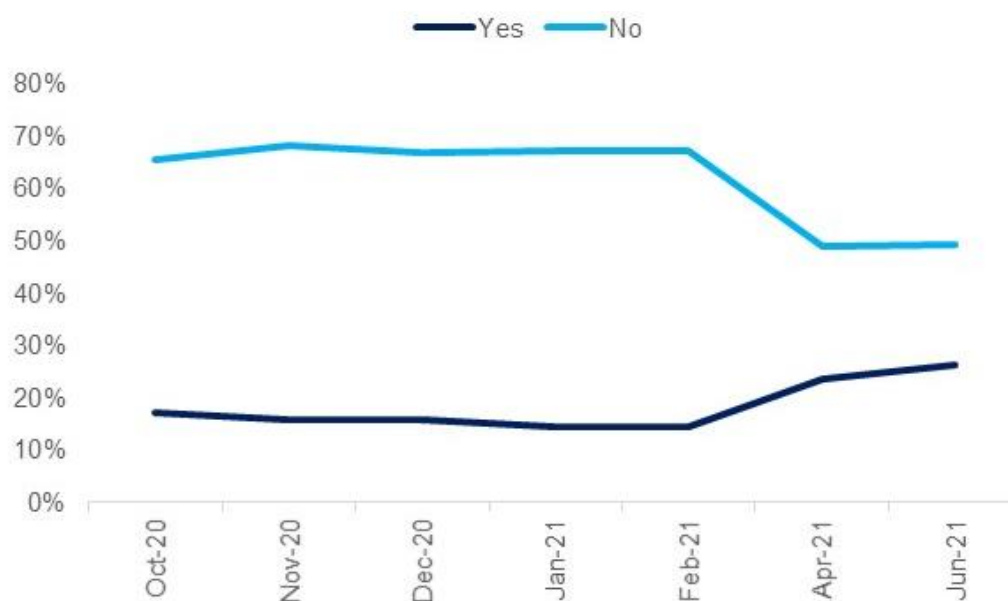
Source: ONS BICS and UUEPC analysis

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[6] Business Insights and Conditions Survey, formerly Business Impact of Coronavirus Survey

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Views of consultees

4. Senior HR managers and COOs from 16 large (>150 employees) private sector businesses and public sector organisations were consulted alongside three sectoral focus groups for smaller firms. These consultations considered the following:

   - Initial impact of moving to remote working and the outcomes thus far;

   - Managing the shift to hybrid working in a post pandemic world; and

   - Potential implications for staff well-being.

Initial impact of moving to remote working was more positive than anticipated but some views still mixed

5. The move to remote working required a significant change for most organisations, decisions had to be made very quickly and with the view that this would be over in 4 to 6 weeks. The impacts and outcomes are summarised below:

   - **remote working was NOT part of the business model pre-COVID** – allowing staff to work from home was generally a tightly controlled measure, governed by management approval and a scepticism about the benefits. Being tethered to one location was central to the way an organisation ran smoothly and efficiently. ICT firms were something of an outlier but even within that sector few, if any, jobs were advertised with remote or homeworking being a feature before March 2020.[7]

   - **there were very few guidelines available to businesses on how to manage this shift** – staff were either sent to work from home (if that was viable) or furloughed.

   - **IT infrastructure performed better than expected** – in the immediate period after March 2020 a lot of organisations were finding that there was much about their IT infrastructure that they did not know existed and that this allowed a smoother-than-expected transition. *"As far as the IT infrastructure went, we didn't know what we didn't know is a good way to describe the extent of our knowledge in March 2020".*

   - **the enforced change worked much better than they expected** – the barriers many believed would exist (such as poor broadband,

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[7] An interesting article points to vacancy advertisements for programmers having slowly adopted remote working since 2016 (from 20% to 35%) with the real change coming with the pandemic; see 'For programmers , remote working is becoming the norm', *The Economist*, 11 August 2021, see https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/08/11/for-programmers-remote-working-is-becoming-the-norm .

distractions at home and the perceived need for close monitoring) did not materialise or was not as significant as expected. *"It has worked better than we ever could have imagined and now gives us an opportunity to work in a different way based on trusting in our staff's autonomy. COVID has shown that we have changed our mind on something we thought could never work. The question now is: how much do we want to continue to adapt to the opportunities presented by technology to move away from the old 9-to-5, office-based model."* (Professional services firm, >300 staff)

- **Even sectors such as manufacturing are now looking at some elements of remote working** – a complete move to remote working is not feasible but opportunities for more flexible working is being considered. *"I know people say that not all sectors can do remote working and that it doesn't apply to us [in manufacturing]. But the last year has surprised us and although we have largely returned onsite, we are trying to find ways to integrate some hybrid practices to offer flexibility. Prior to COVID, I would not have been convinced we could do that without losing production."*

- **Autonomy and trust in staff is mixed** – whilst some remain convinced of the need to manage processes very closely and minimise staff autonomy, others are now looking at outputs and quality. Along the way some are finding a higher level of trust in their employees.

- **Productivity impacts mixed** – the evidence for a relationship between remote working and improved productivity is mixed (Barrero, Bloom & Davis, 2021; NCPC, 2021). One survey for Microsoft found that 82% of employers believed productivity had held steady or increased as remote working increased, but other surveys cast doubt on this[8]. A recent paper, based on data from monitoring software, is sceptical and points to more hours worked but little increase in output. This suggests more time is spent to trying to coordinate tasks remotely and quality of coordination is lower (Gibbs, Mengel & Siemroth, 2021).

- **Productivity difficult to monitor and collaboration negatively impacted** – organisations typically have different views on the definition of productivity. Some considered it simply in terms of hours worked (and there was general agreement that staff were working

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[8] For this see Flexible ways of working are here to stay, finds new European research – with leaders focused on maintaining culture and innovation – Microsoft News Centre Europe, 15 Oct. 2020. A later survey (March 2021) of 600 UK directors for the IoD found that 40% believed remote working had been slightly/significantly more productive while 37% believed the opposite to be the case; see https://www.iod.com/news/news/articles/IoD-Directors-look-to-hybrid-working-for-the-future

longer hours) and others were linking it to outputs. However, some organisations (business services firms and public sector organisations) linked productivity to innovation levels of staff and ability to collaborate, which had come under strain.

"Our work demands not only collaboration within and between teams to avoid silos but also close management of employee performance. We are not convinced this is possible via Zoom and therefore will move back towards 3 or 4 days a week in the workplace for all staff. We need to do it for everyone so that we are treating people equally." (Public sector organisation, >500 staff).

Managing the shift to hybrid working in a post pandemic world

6.   This research identified three distinct groups of people in attitudes towards hybrid working –the process-led; the optimists; and the sceptics.

Process-led – focus on terms and conditions rather than costs and benefits

7.   This group consisted mainly of HR professionals who were firm on what does **not** constitute hybrid working (i.e. it is not an extension of mandated working from home during the pandemic and it is not traditional flexi-working), and there was less of a focus on what hybrid working could be. There was also clarity that this needed to be employer-led with employee consultation and that the process needed to be carefully managed to avoid legal issues arising such as fairness or discrimination.

8.   A separate but linked point was that decisions on remote working should be "led by the work" rather than being "led by the want". This will require business leaders to be as flexible as possible and to avoid addressing the issue solely through the lens of legal terms and conditions.

9.   The Irish Government recently published its National Remote Working Strategy which includes proposals for legislation giving people the right to request remote working[9]. There was interest in a similar proposal being developed for Northern Ireland which would also provide guidance to employers.

"I'd be keen to see some guidelines on how we might make decisions that are best for our business. I see a return to work where three quarters of my staff can do their work from anywhere and one quarter need to be in the office all the time. However, I'd also like to see most people in the workplace most of the week, not least to meet clients." (Professional services firm, c.50 staff).

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[9] For more on these development see https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/f1b2d-tanaiste-publishes-views-on-right-to-request-remote-work/, accessed 20 Aug. 2021.

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

10. This group took the view that hybrid working (or some blend of office and home working) will be a fixed feature in future. **The priority for this group was staff retention** and protection of productivity gains made during the pandemic. Some Belfast-based organisations (public and private sector) were concerned they may lose staff to other employers prepared to offer hybrid working.

    "Almost half of our staff commute more than an hour every day, so we need to tackle that time wastage or lose staff to competitors. Within 12 months we will be a 'hybrid firm' taking a team-based approach as to who needs to be in the office at any time." (ICT business, >100 staff)

11. A further advantage identified was the ability to **tap into a larger talent pool** with less commuting requirements, but this needed high quality IT communications infrastructure across all Northern Ireland. It was suggested that the potential associated with hubs for remote workers could provide a secure environment for handling secure/ confidential data.

    "We are based in rural Northern Ireland and it is a challenge to recruit good people, but we placed two adverts in the past six months which allowed 'hybrid working' and it attracted a much larger pool of possible candidates. It is not clear how this hybrid approach will evolve, particularly in terms of managing client expectations, but it seems that this way of working is here to stay." (Construction services firm, >50 employees)

12. An alternative model referred to as the **'clubhouse' model** is developing in the US and spreading to Europe. The 'clubhouse' is a co-working hub with a regular (monthly) fee which gives access to a work-space, a network of other people and creates a conducive working environment.

13. The final advantage identified by the optimists was the **significantly lower levels of sickness absence**. This is consistent with 2020 ONS data which found that only 2.0 days were lost on average by those who did any work from home, compared to 4.7 days for those who never worked from home.

    "We typically have staff in the office two days a week and this is where I think we will continue to operate. We will have to formalise this position at some point and maybe think about employment contracts, health and safety and other issues but for now the management team are happy and staff morale is good. What we do with the lease and space in three years time is the next biggest question for us." (Professional services consultee, <50 staff)

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

Sceptics – lack of equity or fairness

14. This group tends to be sceptical about the benefits of hybrid working and are keen to see a return to the workplace for as many employees as possible, as soon as possible.

15. This outlook is probably more typical of the majority of UK firms who have consistently said in the BICS survey that they do not intend to make increased homeworking a permanent part of their future business model. When this view is teased out in some detail there is acceptance that remote working might apply to some parts of the business but given the nature of their business, could not be a permanent feature of the entire business.

16. However, a key concern of any future hybrid model was lack of equity or fairness. In particular, remote working could lead to a two-tier system within workplaces where those able to work remotely become different from those who need to be workplace-based.

    "We are now in a complicated place with most staff onsite, but with a small number still working from home where they don't have to be in the office. It might be too complicated to run very different systems and management styles for different staff. It will probably be easier for us all to come back on-site." (Manufacturing sector consultee)

Potential implications for staff well-being

17. It is estimated that approximately 30% to 40% of the labour market worked from home during lockdown, many for the first time. The research evidence identified a series of advantages and disadvantages with these new arrangements.

    Advantages

    - A reduction in commuting times – savings estimated at 240 hours a year[10], alongside cost savings and reduced stress associated with the daily commute;

    - Increased flexibility and more family time (where applicable) – being able to move quickly from work to time spent with family and being able to combine work with other responsibilities;

    - Help attract and retain staff – an employer who can facilitate home working is better placed to retain and attract talent;

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[10] Calculation taken from a Nationwide UK survey of 2,208 adults in GB; see Nationwide UK, *The Future of Work*, March 2021.

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

- An 'escape' from the downsides of work – this included colleagues or managers they clash with, office politics, mundane work routines, etc.

- An increased ability to undertake 'deep work' at home in an uninterrupted fashion.

Disadvantages

- Lack of collaboration – loss of opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and an inability to network particularly for new staff members and for progression purposes;

- Lack of staff development – loss of opportunities for young staff in particular to develop, learn and progress;

- Technology issues – longer or more imbalanced working days and a sense of being 'always on' as enabled by technology. Also, issues around the quality of broadband connectivity;

- 'Zoom fatigue' has become a new phrase and recent research has highlighted how it is indeed something real and impacting on eyesight and concentration, more so for females than males[11];

- Distractions – this is dependent on the homeworking environment e.g. childcare issues and the difficulty of attempting to juggle domestic and work duties outside the office (normally worse for female staff).

18. These issues collectively can have a significant impact on the mental health of staff and highlights the importance of health & safety and well-being guidance being circulated to staff. One key element emerging was the "right to disconnect" for staff, employees needed to be able to distinguish between work time and home time. However, legislation was not favoured by most consulted and as one Manufacturing COO said, *"we know where the line is, our staff also know where it is and someone writing legislation will never have that same understanding."*

19. A major concern of most consultees was that remote working works best for those established within their organisation. Induction of new staff over the past eighteen months has been difficult for most and some indicated that an

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[11] A good summary of the research can be found at Paul Levy, 'Zoom burnout: Ditch the video-conferencing calls', The Conversation blog, 17 March 2021, see https://theconversation.com/zoom-burnout-be-more-productive-ditch-those-video-calls-expert-156772

employee's productivity can depend on what they learn by working alongside other colleagues and/ or the culture of the organisation.[12]

"I've personally found remote working to be a huge bonus in terms of flexibility but I have staff who share accommodation or have moved back home with their parents and they don't feel that same flexibility. Bringing people back 3 or 4 days per week onsite seems the best solution to meeting their needs. However, I expect a battle will come from those who don't want to come back and give up their gains as they see them." (Public sector consultee, >80 staff)

"I'm enthusiastic about what remote working can do for our business, but [I worry] about how the skills of staff have not developed because they are never around other staff." (ICT consultee, <50 staff)

Where next for remote working?

20. It seems inevitable that many more people will be working remotely at least some of the time, in a post-COVID world. Some research from both the UK and US suggests that up to one-third of employees may want hybrid working models to form part of their future working patterns. This presents major challenges for employers.

NI Civil Service and Connect2 Regional Hubs

21. The NI Civil Service employs 23k people, 62% of whom commute outside their Council area and the majority of whom work in Belfast. This makes it a prime employer for remote working and it is introducing the Connect2 Regional Hubs programme over the next two years. The programme will create a mix of reforming the use of existing facilities and encouraging the decentralisation of staff. Hubs will open initially in Ballykelly and Downpatrick, followed by a further eight over the next two years.

22. The aim of this programme is to create a greater regional economic balance in urban areas across Northern Ireland and is consistent with a "blended approach" for some areas of the NICS[13]. Guidance on the types of jobs and occupational duties likely to be included in the Connect2 hubs is yet to be

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[12] This follows the findings of Corsello & Minor (2017) which argue that a person's productivity can be linked to who they sit next to and learn from. Gibbs, Mengel & Siemroth (2021) find that workers with longer tenure in businesses and better networks of colleagues to draw upon for advice and assistance tended to be more productive when working from home.

[13] See Written Ministerial Statement on Connect2 Regional Hubs, 18 Feb. 2021, https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/Written%20Ministerial%20Statement%20-%20Connect2%20Regional%20Hubs.pdf

issued. Other public sector organisations may join in the Connect2 hubs or develop their own hubs, but this is yet to be determined.

23.   In the Republic of Ireland, a minimum of 20% of public sector workers who would normally work from home or remotely will access a network of over 100 local hubs (in public buildings and well as in local community spaces).

24.   The primary concerns with implementing the Connected2 programme were process natured and covered: equity and equality issues (who will be allowed to work remotely and how often); the potential impacts on productivity; and management of staff.

25.   Finally, the level of demand for these hubs is highly uncertain (see Figure 4.8 of this report) and will probably depend on the facilities available and quality of broadband connectivity.

Private sector enthusiastic about the potential

26.   Given the greater diversity across the private sector, views were also more diverse, but tended towards optimism if it was feasible for their individual sector. That said, most businesses (61%) expected more than three-quarters of their staff back in the office within their return to work timeframes. However, ICT was a significant outlier, with only 36% of businesses expecting more than three-quarters of their staff back in the office. In addition, Professional Services was similar with only 49% of firms expecting a similar proportion of staff back in the office.

Fig. 5.2: % of employees expected to return to work in specific timeframe, UK, June 21
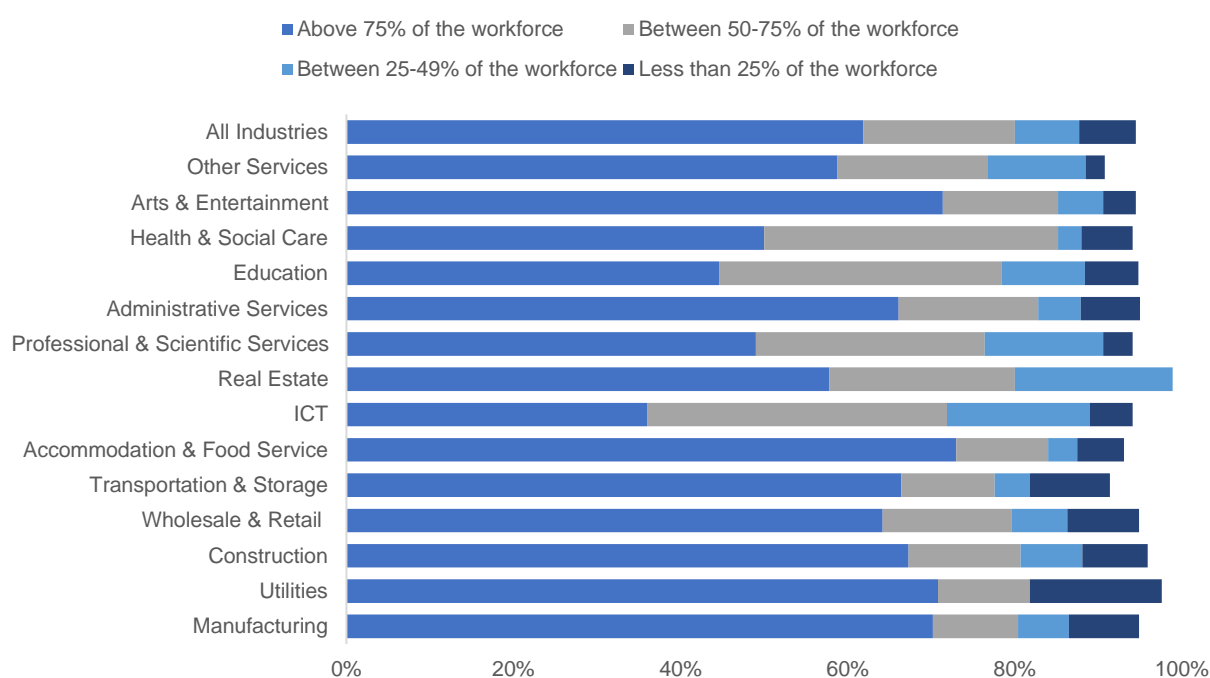
Source: ONS BICS and UUEPC analysis

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

Summary

27. The following key points are taken from the research:

- The findings suggest **a phased return that will not affect all staff** – this shows that the hybrid model will exist for a significant proportion of staff. This is supported by IoD surveys in the UK and Ireland where more than 60% of directors see hybrid working as a key element of future work.

- Where feasible, **most businesses will pursue a hybrid/ blended model** for staff – this could range from 30% (where most responses fell) to all staff (in some ICT firms).

- For those who could adopt hybrid working, **the preferred number of days was 4/1** (i.e. 4 days in the workplace and 1 day at home) for most firms. Some businesses in ICT and Professional Services tended towards a 3/2 split.

- The main reasons for adopting hybrid working was recruitment from a wider pool, reduced sickness levels, improved staff well-being and some saw reduced overheads. Although others were sceptical about the potential for savings.

    "We believed hot desks would reduce our footprint ten years ago and the savings were very limited, so I don't expect hybrid working to be any different. This is more about getting the best out of our employees and retaining them. If we were looking for new office space, then that might be different."

## 6. Remote working policy responses elsewhere

Introduction

1. The available evidence suggests that remote working will be increasingly adopted and has the potential to have an unpredictable, non-neutral impact on people, firms and places.

2. This raises questions around the policies that need to be in place to ensure that any increase in remote working has both a sustainable and positive impact on the NI economy and society. The DfE 10X strategy, *A 10X Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation* (May 2021), presents the increased flexibility allowed by remote working as part of the 'place' offering, a sign of how NI is an 'innovative and agile environment' (p.33).

3. This section identifies policies either already adopted in other countries or are in the process of being implemented to derive the greatest benefits from increased remote working.

Policies adopted within the OECD

4. Figure 6.1 provides a list of the remote working policy responses and the number of OECD countries (and regions) in which they have adopted or developed. Supports for firms and employees have been most widely adopted, while new infrastructure and the adoption of new employment regulations are policies with future potential. Finally, there are long-standing initiatives to attract home-based start-ups and freelancers.

Figure 6.1: Types of remote working policy responses, OECD, 2020-2021
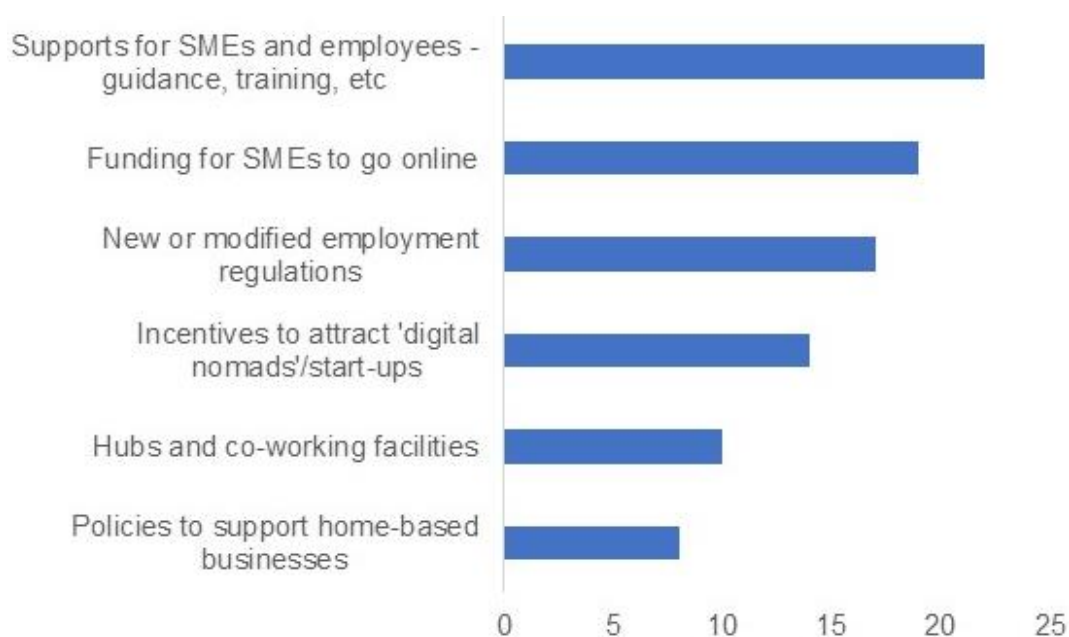
Source: OECD/LEED, 2020

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

Supports for SMEs and employees – training and guidance

5. The following training supports were made available (usually online) to SME management and employees:

    - dedicated support desks to provide guidance on health & safety and cybersecurity risks associated with the move online (Business Wales);

    - technology advisors available to micro-enterprises and the self-employed to advise on issues surrounding technology selection, remote management, security and e-commerce (The Inplantalariak programme in the Basque Country);

    - assistance to staff on furlough or temporarily laid-off to acquire new digital skills that would assist them and their firms to manage a better recovery from the pandemic (Scotland, France, Italy). In addition, DfE rolled out a number of short-term interventions for businesses to improve their digital and leadership skills and more than 2,000 free places were offered to staff impacted by the pandemic to allow them to re-skill and enter new pathways to qualifications.

Adopting digital technologies to enhance e-commerce

6. Reflecting the need to significantly increase the level of e-commerce and use of digital technologies by businesses, Invest NI rolled out their Digital Selling & Capability Grant programme in September 2020, followed by a Digital Transformation programme (in 2021). Both of which have targeted firms who are keen to find new online ways of selling their goods and services or adapting their internal processes.

7. Significant benefits to SMEs from the adoption of digital technology has been shown in research from the Enterprise Research Centre[14]. However, there are different constraints to adopting digital technologies across different business sizes. The constraints on small firms focus on availability of broadband and incompatibility with existing systems. Constraints for medium-sized firms tend to focus on security risks, specifically arising from the widespread adoption of technology by staff.

8. Some national governments (Austria, Italy, Portugal and Finland) have created online platforms through which both SMEs and employees can access tools to enable them to achieve the maximum from remote working. **'Digital Team Austria'** is a group of ICT firms, supported by a central government department, who have created a website which offers free digital services to SMEs, from cybersecurity to virtual workspaces and video-conferencing

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[14] ERC (2021), *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Northern Ireland's SMEs: Evidence and comparison with the rest of the UK* (March 2021); ERC (2021), *The effects of digital adoption due to COVID-19 on Northern Ireland SMEs' performance* (July 2021).

solutions. This aims to make the adoption of digital technology easier for smaller firms.

Modifying employment regulations to facilitate remote working

9. Employment regulations to facilitate remote working have been modified during the pandemic:

    - some border regions in Europe have amended regulations to allow frontier workers (those who commute cross border and had their tax arrangement centre on being taxed where they work) to work from home under the same arrangements as before;

    - some countries have moved to consult on or pass new legislation to give workers the 'right to request' remote or more flexible working arrangements.

    - Many countries are now considering regulations around the:

        - **right to privacy** (or freedom from monitoring data used by employees) – this has typically been dealt with by Data Protection authorities and the use of guidelines on data protection for remote workers as well as their appropriate use of the internet and behaviour while in online work settings.

        - **right to disconnect** (to prevent the blurring of work and private lives through constant use of e-mail) – this has been drafted into legislation in some countries (France, Italy, Spain and Canada), though in all cases the operation of this is left to dialogue between employers and employees. In the Republic of Ireland, the Workplace Relations Commission has issued a code of practice which will govern how firms deal with electronic communication with staff outside the normal working hours. There is a government intention that legislation will follow to support this code.

Attracting remote-working start-ups and 'digital nomads'

10. Attracting digital start-ups (the most mobile of the mobile high technology FDI firms) is a long-standing goal for some countries, such as Iceland and Estonia. The pandemic and the wider adoption of remote working has created an opportunity to compete for these workers and potential start-ups that might follow (NCPC, 2021). Survey findings indicated that 40% of US millennials say job flexibility is a key priority when choosing opportunities. Broadband accessibility and speed, access to affordable housing in attractive locations and a good lifestyle are now important locational factors.

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11. In 2018, Tulsa Remote was an initiative by a non-profit in Oklahoma City to attract 'digital nomads'. It offered a $10k grant, assistance in securing accommodation and an offer of co-working facilities to assist in the incubation of new businesses. This has been followed by a similar scheme in Tuscon, Arizona. An initiative in Brandenburg, Germany, began in 2019 to target remote workers in the creative and digital sectors. Private investors developed a co-working space for these workers and the local authority provides housing at low rents.

12. The mobility of these remote workers/ digital start-ups creates a very competitive market in which the cost of living and of doing business; the level and timing of incentives; and the quality of infrastructure will all remain pressure points. Some of the most attractive locations (including Barbados and the Canary Islands) make offers on a 12-month basis on the assumption that remote workers will form a pool of labour before moving on to the next location to be replaced by new 'nomads'.

Remote working hubs and co-working spaces

13. In recent decades facilities have been established to meet demand from those not working in traditional office spaces, but work in more informal, freelance jobs and generally living in larger towns and cities[15]. This trend has expanded rapidly since 2010 and now has a formal commercial business model (e.g. WeWork) and a more informal version including 'maker spaces', shared studios and access to under-used spaces (e.g. in the hospitality sector). These formal and informal models share several common traits including: short-term rental of desks (per day, week, month); open-plan design; flexibility around access; and continuously changing users (Merkel, 2019).

14. The CoWorkLand initiative by the Heinrich Boll Foundation and the German federal government's rural development programme was established in 2018 and has taken the co-working concept into rural areas. This began as a cooperative pilot in the Schleswig-Holstein province and has since spread across much of northern Germany. The facilities range widely from former disused factory spaces and public buildings to containerised workspaces.

15. One key finding from the pilot was that rural and urban hub offerings need to have different business models with the first more reliant upon 'company as clients' or firms paying memberships to have their teams or individuals in

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[15] For more see IPPR (2016), *Start me up: The value of workspaces for small business, entrepreneurs and artists in London*; Merkel, J. (2019), '"Freelance isn't free": Co-working as a critical urban practice to cope with informality in the creative sector', *Urban Studies*, 56:3, 526-547.

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the hubs with fewer freelancers and self-employed than might be found in cities and larger towns.[16]

16. A broader initiative is taking shape around the commitment to have a remote working policy in Ireland. This covers the networking and upgrading of existing enterprise hubs; an increase in the number of hubs; and the improvement of broadband connectivity in rural areas.[17] An online platform (at www.connectedhubs.ie) has also been launched to allow remote workers to book spaces in the 400 remote working hubs identified so far.

Supporting home-based businesses

17. The support for home-based business has also taken a number of forms, particularly in the Netherlands, and includes:

   • assistance with insurance premia costs (due to a change in use of the home);

   • support for tenancy agreement alterations;

   • exemptions from some or all of property taxes;

   • planning guidelines which enable business owners to change the use of space with fast-track applications;

   • better access to business advice, mentoring and to larger networks of self-employed and entrepreneurs;

   • recognising the need for collaborative opportunities, some local authorities (including in Vienna and Milan) have offered vouchers or free spaces on co-working facilities to home-based business owners.

18. Similar schemes have operated in some German regions, but additional support (up to €1,100) has also been provided to assist both self-employed and freelancers set up their home offices and to help meet their IT and cyber-security needs.

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[16] For more on this interesting development see
https://www.zukunftderarbeit.de/2020/11/19/coworking-spaces-im-laendlichen-raum/
[17] For details see https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/64df6-connected-hubs-fund/

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

Concluding points

19. Remote working did not just become established in 2020, however, the pandemic has created a momentum for policy innovations, which have been driven by three changing approaches to remote working:

    - A change in perspective – from necessity driven by COVID-19 to opportunity;

    - A change in scale – from being a niche way of working to one adopted by a significant proportion of the workforce (at least some of the time); and

    - A change in rationale – from a practice adopted on a temporary basis by firms to a permanent working arrangement.

20. The extent to which policy in Northern Ireland will need to adapt and evolve to address this changing working environment, will depend on the extent to which the rationale, perspective and scale will also change.

7. Summary and policy considerations

Introduction

1. This final section of the report sets out a summary of the key research findings and identifies regulatory, connectivity and skills enablers and spatial impact issues that could form part of ongoing policy considerations as well as wider public consultations.

Commuting will remain important, but the future of work is changing

2. Prior to the pandemic, commuting accounted for one in five journeys and almost a third of the distance travelled. **Most commuting journeys are relatively short (on average 10.5 miles)** and the vast majority (outside Belfast) are by car[18]. This indicates that most workers live close to their work, which is typically their nearest town or city. **Belfast remains the key destination for commuters, in 2019 more than a quarter (26.7%) of NI's workplace jobs were located in the city** and almost half (47%) of these jobs are filled by commuters travelling every day or regularly into the city.

3. Pre-COVID, home-working (complete or regular) applied to less than 10% of the NI labour force. This increased to 41% in April 2020 and fell slowly to 30% in May 2021, but even with the lifting of restrictions homeworking remains at 17%. **The most recent Google mobility data (14 January 2022) confirms this trend with workplace mobility levels still 29% lower than the January-February 2020 baseline**. The levels of workplace mobility can be expected to rise further as Government guidance on returning to the office changes.

4. This data demonstrates that most jobs remain workplace-based. However, the pandemic has opened the debate around the number of jobs that could be done remotely, either in part or all. **The research identified in this paper indicates that between 41% and 60% of current jobs in NI could in the future be completed remotely (at least in part)**. This demonstrates the scale of change that may come in time as discussions about new working arrangements take place across NI.

5. The employee survey findings show support for continued remote working, particularly in those occupations where it can be more facilitated such as managerial, professional and administrative roles. **The results suggested greatest support for a return to the office for 2 to 4 days per week**. The results were broadly consistent across groups and ages, but returning to

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[18] NISRA, *Northern Ireland Travel Survey, 2017-2019* (July 2021). The headline results for 2018-2020 will be due later this year.

the workplace was marginally more popular for men, younger people and those in the private sector.

6.   This hybrid/ mix of working from home and in the workplace was also supported in the qualitative responses, with respondents recognising the need to balance the benefits of home working (typically around flexibility and no need to commute) with the costs (typically around isolation, the need to 'switch off', concerns about career development and training and the need to collaborate with colleagues). Interestingly, **the flexibility associated with home working focused on both 'where to work' (i.e. home or the office) as well as 'when to work' (e.g. to facilitate caring responsibilities)**.

> **Policy considerations:**
>
> In the first instance, new working arrangements are best identified through discussions between employers and employees. It is not clear at this point that a new regulatory framework is required from government or simply a broader public discussion and the development of guidance around the following issues:
>
> - the 'right to request' remote working and the impact on equity and efficiency at work.[19]
>
> - the 'right to disconnect' and understanding the implications for both employers and employees.
>
> - greater understanding of the economic implications of higher levels of remote working in NI including attracting more talent from outside NI.

Employers must balance the costs and benefits of remote working

7.   The attitudes of businesses to remote working have evolved over the past 22 months. National survey data suggests that a solid core, often a majority, of UK businesses remain doubtful that an increased level of homeworking will become a permanent feature of their future business model. However, **there is a clear change in attitude in many firms and there is a belief that some form of hybrid working will become a permanent feature**.

8.   The consultations for this research found that in general, where suitable, hybrid working will remain in the longer term for a significant proportion of staff. The **benefits** identified by employers focused on:

- recruitment and retention of staff;

- reduced sickness levels;

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[19] Currently being taken forward in the Republic of Ireland.

- improved staff well-being; and

- reduced overheads (for a small number).

9. The consultees also identified a range of **concerns** with long-term home working and these included:

- the loss of collaboration between staff (impacting innovation and creativity);

- morale and well-being of staff due to isolation;

- staff training and development (particularly younger members of staff); and

- managing the shift towards a hybrid model while ensuring fairness in the workplace.

10. These views were expressed by both public and private sector employers and indicate that any transition to permanent hybrid working will need to be carefully managed. This will include consideration of the following:

- ensuring that any move to a hybrid model must be fair to staff and not negatively impact their well-being;

- overcoming technical constraints such as broadband connectivity;

- developing new management approaches to deal with dispersed teams that will ensure measurable future gains in productivity, retention/recruitment of staff and business growth.

Policy considerations:

Policy should focus on ensuring wider competitiveness, productivity improvements and increased adoption of innovation. These might include:

- Accelerated roll-out of the higher speed broadband connectivity to all parts of NI.

- Increased levels of digital adoption by firms to reflect changes in behaviour of employees and customers.

- Promote NI as an attractive location for remote working and allowing employers access to a much larger talent pool.

- Encourage the economically inactive back into the labour market with increased flexibility and through digital skills courses.

- Support management and leadership training to address productivity and innovation/creativity challenges created by managing dispersed teams.

Where next for remote working in Northern Ireland?

'Zoomshock' and the impact on urban centres

11. 'Zoomshock' refers to the impact on large urban areas (in particular city centres) that are much more reliant on commuter spending and less spending from residents. In a hybrid working world, footfall and hence spending in these areas will fall, impacting the 'flat white economy' (De Fraja, Matheson and Rockey, 2021). In NI, **'Zoomshock' will most likely have an impact on Belfast,** though could also be an issue, to a lesser extent, in other larger towns.

12. The impact of 'Zoomshock' is difficult to estimate given the levels of uncertainty over the extent to which employers will ultimately embrace a hybrid working model. Conversely, **consumption patterns could be merely displaced and sub-urban/ residential areas could become the beneficiaries**.

13. Changing work patterns also creates the potential for remote working hubs. The new Connect2 programme (with 10 possible sites to be opened by 2023) is the public sector response to this emerging trend, however, most respondents to the survey completed for this research were not that interested in working a remote hub.

14. Importantly, there are also several 'third party' co-working spaces and enterprise hubs across NI currently in operation. These offer an alternative to working from home for freelancers and the self-employed. Perhaps there is an opportunity to work in partnership with these organisations prior to making a significant investment in a hub network.

> **Policy considerations:**
>
> Given the range of uncertainties, policy responses should focus on monitoring changing working and consumption patterns to understand what this means for:
>
> - High streets – the current taskforce addressing this issue should include impacts of hybrid working models on footfall and the nature of retail and hospitality offerings.
>
> - Office space and commercial property – this is being considered as part of DfE's 10X research strategy and the findings of this can help inform policy makers.
>
> - Remote working hubs – an initial mapping of hubs and co-working spaces and further research on demand for these facilities could help ensure they meet expectations and will be used by staff (see www.connectedhubs.ie)

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About UUEPC

UUEPC is an independent research centre focused on producing evidence-based research to inform policy development and implementation. It engages with all organisations that have an interest in enhancing the Northern Ireland economy. The UUEPC's work is relevant to Government, business and the wider public with the aim of engaging those who may previously have been disengaged from economic debate.

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