

Appetite for homeworking has increased since start of pandemic, report shows

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Homeworking will be one of the major and lasting outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Cardiff University academic predicts.

Professor Alan Felstead was commissioned by the Senedd's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee to compile a report for their inquiry

into remote working.

His findings have fed into their concluding report, which has come up with a series of recommendations for the Welsh Government as it develops its remote working policy. Last year, it set a long-term target that 30% of Welsh workers would be working from home or near to home in the future.

Professor Felstead's most recent analysis of data from the UK-wide Understanding Society COVID-19 Study shows the appetite for working at home has increased over time. Nine out of ten (88%) employees who worked at home in June 2020 reported that they would like to continue working at home in some capacity. The same question asked in September 2020 showed a rise to 93%.

Two-fifths (41%) of homeworkers reported in June 2020 that they were able to get as much work done as they had six months earlier and more than quarter (29%) said they got more done. The September 2020 data suggest that 85% of employees who continued to work at home were just as productive, if not more, than they were before the pandemic. The equivalent figure in June 2020 was 70%.

Nearly half (46%) of full-time homeworkers put the increase in their productivity down to fewer interruptions, and around three out of ten (28%) put it down to not having to commute to and from work.

But the report also shows homeworkers found it more difficult to reconcile home and [work life](#), were working longer hours than they used to, and were more frequently feeling drained and isolated.

It notes a fall in air pollution has been seen since the increase in homeworking as well as a negative impact on town and city centers, with fewer people visiting.

Professor Alan Felstead, based at Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences, said: "Coronavirus will have a long-lasting effect on the way we work. Even when social restrictions are fully lifted, it is unlikely there will be a full return to the traditional office setting. Instead, the last twelve months has revealed a strong appetite for homeworking among employees and has proved to employers that flexible working can bring business benefits.

"However, these changes are not going to be straightforward. We will need to rethink and reimage our notions of home and work, the nature of our towns and cities, and assess whether our transport and telecommunications infrastructure is fit for purpose. By setting a target for remote working and launching an inquiry into the phenomenon, Welsh Government and the Senedd are leading the way. Today's report marks the start not the end of that process."

In Wales, the number working exclusively at home rose from 56,000 people before the pandemic to 485,000 in April. It fell back to 231,000 in September before rising to 308,000 towards the end of the year.

The potential for homeworking in Wales is much lower than elsewhere in the UK. ONS data shows more than half of workers Wales (56%) would not be able to work at home even if they and their employer wanted them to do so, compared to 44% in the Midlands, the nearest comparable English region.

Those who work at home in Wales are disproportionately more likely to have better quality jobs as measured by the level of skill they exercise and the pay they receive. It has also been strongest in sectors—such as banking and finance—where Wales has disproportionately fewer workers and slowest in sectors—such as public administration—where Wales has more than its fair share of workers. But the growth of homeworking has been spread more or less equally by gender, disability

and ethnicity.

Professor Felstead added: "Homeworking brings benefits to the environment, businesses and workers, but there are challenges too, not least for those who find it difficult to work in this way.

"Nevertheless, the Welsh Government's target of '30% of Welsh workers working from home or near to home' is certainly achievable given that it has been exceeded on many occasions in the last nine months. Greater clarity is now needed around what precise type of working arrangement the Welsh Government is intending to encourage, how the target will be monitored, and how its benefits and drawbacks will be assessed."

Russell George MS, Chair of the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee said: "The office isn't dead but remote working is here to stay, and it comes with risks. The "Great Homeworking Experiment" has busted myths and demonstrated huge environmental benefits. But the Welsh Government's ambition for 30% of workers to continue working 'at or close to [home](#)' has far-reaching implications.

"The widespread hope and expectation is that a healthier hybrid model of flexible working will emerge, and that this will be a good thing. However, a lot of work is needed by the Welsh Government to maximize the potential benefits of remote working. It will need to address risks by supporting communities through the transition, protecting all workers' rights, ensuring that managers have the right skills to support healthy remote working, and preventing the development of a "two tier" workforce.

"It's vital that as we recover from COVID-19 that we get the balance right for our communities and that no one is left behind."

More information: Remote Working: Implications for Wales.

senedd.wales/media/nbbhxbrn/cr-ld14202-e.pdf

Provided by Cardiff University

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