



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Making Remote Work

National Remote Work Strategy



Prepared by the Department of
Enterprise, Trade and Employment

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Foreword

The pandemic has changed our world. It has also changed the world of work forever. Millions of people and businesses around the world had to change overnight moving from the office to home working and from interactions that occurred in person to interactions that occurred mainly on-line. This shift might have taken decades if it had been planned. Instead it took days.

I believe that when the pandemic is over, many of us will return to the office, but things will never be the same again. Video-conferencing will be more common and travelling for work much less so. While some people will work full-time from the office or from home, most of us will be blended workers, working sometimes from the office and other times from home, a hub or on the go.

On balance, these will be changes for the better. Less commuting, more time for family & leisure, and fewer transport greenhouse gas emissions will be among the benefits. New job opportunities will be created for people who want to live in Rural Ireland, people with disabilities and people with caring responsibilities. Small towns and villages will see new investment, greater footfall and spend. But there are risks as well. We do not want to turn our homes into workplaces where we are always on. We want to spread jobs more evenly across the country, but we do not want to lose them to abroad. We want to retain the creativity and innovation that flourishes from people meeting each other and do not want people to become isolated. We want our city centres to remain vibrant places.

So, we need a plan. *Making Remote Work – National Remote Work Strategy* is that plan and its implementation will be driven by my Department. Among the main actions we will take are

- Mandating that home and remote work should be the norm for 20 percent of public sector employment
- Reviewing the treatment of remote working for the purposes of tax and expenditure in the next Budget
- Mapping and investing in a network of remote working hubs across Ireland
- Legislating for the right to request remote working
- Developing a code of practice for the right to disconnect
- Doing what we can to accelerate the provision of high-speed broadband to all parts of Ireland

I want to thank everyone who contributed to this document. It will point the way.



Leo Varadkar TD,
Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise,
Trade and Employment

Executive Summary

The increase in home working as a result of COVID-19 has brought remote working to the forefront of working life. Though the adoption of remote work was already increasing in Ireland, COVID-19 has greatly accelerated this trend making remote work a central part of the workplace today and into the future.

Whilst this arrangement has been beneficial for some, it is important not to conflate the experience of homeworking during the COVID-19 pandemic with remote working under a regular scenario. The sudden introduction of mass emergency homeworking often resulted in less than ideal working conditions for both employers and employees. In particular, there have been significant challenges faced over this period including from a lack of adequate remote working infrastructure, unsuitable home working environments and, at times, the non-availability of early learning childcare and schooling.

Despite these substantial challenges, the interest in remote working in the long term remains strong amongst employees. Research carried out in October 2020 found that 94 percent of participants would like to work remotely after the crisis.¹ This figure is almost 10 percent higher than it was in the first phase of the research published in May of the same year.²

This Strategy aims to build on the progress made in the adoption of remote work over this period. The objective is to ensure that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.

Public policy has an important role to play in the realisation of this vision. As outlined in the Department's 2019 [Remote Work in Ireland](#) report, there are multiple benefits that can be derived from remote work which will help to achieve numerous public policy objectives. These benefits include increasing participation in the labour market, attracting and retaining talent, enabling balanced regional development, alleviating accommodation pressures, improving work/life balance, improving child and family wellbeing, reducing the amount of time spent commuting, and reducing transport-related carbon emissions and air pollution.³

The impacts of increased remote work can be substantial and remote working has the potential to fundamentally change the nature of where, how, when and why people work. This in turn will bring about economic, spatial, environmental, cultural and societal change.

However, the increased adoption of remote work is not without challenges. Research has highlighted different impacts for employees and employers. In the case of employees, remote working is linked with negative effects on mental health, with workers experiencing feelings of isolation, loneliness and stress. Employees also experience difficulty switching off and keeping regular working hours.

1 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report](#)

2 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working During COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Initial Report](#)

3 [Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment \(2019\) - Remote Work in Ireland](#)



Employers too face challenges. Feedback provided to the Department has highlighted how remote working does not easily support creativity, group dynamics, shared ownership and collegiality. If these obstacles cannot be overcome, it could result in long-term impacts on firms' productivity. Research has also found that remote working can lead to an innovation deficit due to difficulties in collaborating with colleagues.⁴

On a broader scale, remote work could also have a negative impact on national employment levels. With remote work becoming increasingly popular, there could be challenges in attracting and retaining talent in Ireland. Whilst increased remote work could help to revitalise villages and towns across Ireland, it could result in challenges for cities as increasingly workers may choose to work from other locations. Another consideration is how the potential impacts of reduced visibility of remote workers could impact on gender equality in the workplace.

These are all important considerations which will inform policymaking into the future. The Government is committed to facilitating increased remote work adoption in a way that reaps the many benefits and mitigates negative side-effects. We will do this through removing barriers, developing infrastructure, providing guidance, raising awareness and leading by example.

⁴ [Microsoft, \(2020\) Building Resilience & Maintaining Innovation in a Hybrid World](#)

Strategy Outline

The Remote Work Strategy is built on three fundamental pillars which will be bolstered by underpinning conditions.

Pillar One is focussed on creating a conducive environment for the adoption of remote work. As remote working is a new way of working, it will need new and different measures in place to support it into the future. Changes to how and where people work will have impacts on a number of different areas such as the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees, health and safety legislation and tax arrangements. The actions in this pillar are centred on supporting employers and employees.

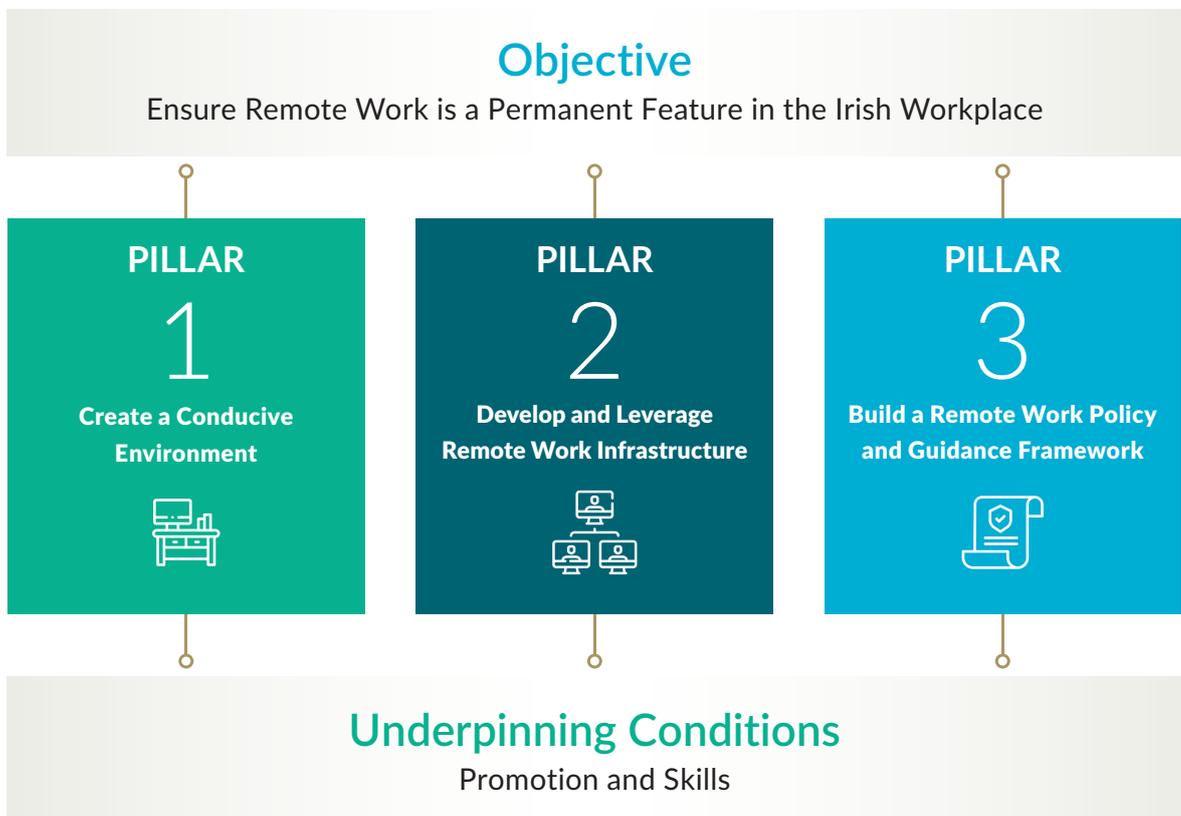
Pillar Two highlights the importance of the development and leveraging of remote work infrastructure to facilitate increased remote work adoption. Adequate infrastructure must be in place to allow employers and employees to avail of remote working opportunities both at home and in hubs.

The actions in this pillar are focussed on development and investment in the national hub infrastructure and the national delivery of broadband, both of which will be significant drivers in facilitating people to work remotely.

Pillar Three is centred on maximising the benefits of remote work to achieve public policy goals. To achieve this policymakers need to be aligned by a shared vision and supported by access to the most relevant data to inform evidence-based policy. The actions in this pillar will ensure that data and collaborative practices are used to best effect to achieve the State's multiple policy goals.

These three pillars are bolstered by underpinning conditions. These horizontal factors focus both on the promotion of remote work and best practice, and the skills needs from its increased adoption. This section also highlights the opportunity the public sector holds to lead by example and demonstrate best practice to employers nationally.

Through progressing actions in each of these areas the Government will realise the vision of this Strategy – to ensure remote work is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.



Pillar One: Create a Conducive Environment

1. Legislate to provide employees the right to request remote work. (DETE, Q3 2021)
2. Introduce a code of practice on the right to disconnect. (DETE, WRC, Q1 2021)
3. Provide employers and employees with ongoing up-to-date guidance on remote work. (DETE, HSA, Ongoing)
4. Taking account of the economic, financial and organisational implications arising from the experience of remote working during the pandemic, the Tax Strategy Group will review the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of (i) employees and (ii) employers, and assess the merits of further enhancements for consideration in the context of Budget 2022. (DFIN, Q3 2021)

Pillar Two: Develop and Leverage Remote Work Infrastructure

1. Make a significant investment in remote work hubs and infrastructure in underserved areas to underpin the development of the national hubs network. (DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, DETE, Q4 2021)
2. Extend the mapping and classifications of hubs- as completed by Western Development Commission on the Atlantic Economic Corridor - across the country to develop national data on hub infrastructure. (DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, Q1 2021)
3. Map commuter, skills and childcare facilities data to inform future hub development decisions. In addition, identify a set of appropriate economic metrics to track the impact of remote work (including both hubs and homes). (CSO, DETE, DoT, DCEDIY, Regional Assemblies, CCMA, EI, Q3 2021)
4. Investigate how existing hub classifications can be used to inform future funding decisions. This should consider how hub infrastructure aligns with the transition to the low carbon economy. (DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, DECC, DTCAGSM, DETE, Q3 2021)
5. Explore how the National Broadband Plan can be accelerated; delivering connectivity as soon as is feasible across rural Ireland as a central part of remote work infrastructure. (DECC, Q1 2021)

Pillar Three: Build a Remote Work Policy and Guidance Framework

1. Develop national data on the incidence and frequency of remote work, as part of a wider effort to improve data on flexible working arrangements, to provide an evidence base for future policy. (DCEDIY, DETE, CSO, Q4 2021)
2. Establish a centralised cross-departmental knowledge base on the costs and benefits associated with the increased adoption of remote working to understand impacts on areas such as, employment, transport, carbon emissions, broadband, and equality. (DETE, DRCD, DoT, DECC, DCEDIY, Q4 2021)
3. Convene meetings every four months of the Remote Work Strategy IDG to ensure that there is cross-departmental alignment to support the wider goals of the State. (DETE, Ongoing)

Underpinning Conditions: Promotion and Skills

1. Mandate public sector employers, colleges, and other public bodies to move to 20 percent home and remote working in 2021. (DPER, Q4 2021)
2. Raise awareness of existing remote work hub infrastructure in Ireland (DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, Q1 2021)
3. Promote remote work amongst businesses. This includes raising awareness of remote work training and advising on the skills interventions required for the successful adoption of remote work. Businesses should also be advised on best practice in relation to ensuring equal opportunity amongst remote and office-based workers. (EI, IDA, WDC, Skillnet Ireland, Q1 2021)

Defining Remote Work

The term remote work refers to the broad concept of an arrangement where work is fully or partly carried out at an alternative worksite other than the default place of work. Many phrases are used to refer to remote work including: telework, e-Work, mobile work, smart working, telecommuting, flexible working, hub-work, locationless work, co-working, home office, virtual office and platform work. These concepts are all related and share a degree of overlap with remote working being the broadest concept encompassing all of these terms.

As in the 2019 Remote Work in Ireland report, this strategy has adopted the definition of 'telework' described in the [2002 European Framework Agreement](#). This definition is being used in the context of work being carried out within the State.

The glossary defines the most commonly used words and phrases associated with remote work.

“A form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer’s premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis.”



Term	Definition
E-Work	E-Work is a method of working using information and communication technology in which the work is not bound to any particular location. Traditionally this has been understood as working remotely away from the office, usually from home, either full-time or for a period during the working week.
Mobile Work	Mobile work refers to work patterns characterised by the worker (whether employee or self-employed) operating from various possible locations outside the premises of their employer (for example, at home, at a client's premises or 'on the road'), supported by modern technologies such as laptop and tablet computers. This is different from traditional teleworking in the sense of being even less 'place-bound'.
Smart/Intelligent Working	Smart/intelligent working is a set of practices that add greater flexibility to work methods through innovative solutions. Flexibility on areas such as location, schedule, hours worked as well as shared responsibility are some of the markers of this style of working.
Telecommuting	Telecommuting refers to substituting telecommunications for commuter travel.
Flexible Working	Flexible working describes a type of working arrangement which gives a degree of flexibility on how long, where, when and at what times employees work.
Hubwork	An arrangement where an employee works from a hub close to or within their local community, either exclusively or some of the time.
Locationless Work	Locationless work refers to jobs without a fixed location. Jobs are advertised without a location and workers can live and work in a location of their choosing.
Co-working	A co-working space is a shared office space where collaboration and networking outside of one's team or organisation are encouraged.
Home Office	Refers to a work or office space set up in a person's home and used exclusively for business on a regular basis.
Virtual Office	An office with an address and telephone number, communication and administration services, and access to meeting rooms without the need for dedicated office space.
Platform Work	Platform work is an employment form in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services in exchange for payment.



Introduction

Context and Outline of Past Work

In December 2019, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE)⁵ published the [Remote Work in Ireland](#) report. The objective of this research was to understand the prevalence and types of remote working arrangements within the Irish workforce, the attitudes towards such arrangements, and the influencing factors for both employers and employees partaking in remote work. The report identified three key areas to be addressed to ensure that Ireland could reap the benefits of remote working: data, collaboration and guidance.

A lot has changed since the publication of this report. As a result of the COVID-19 response, those who have been able to work from home have been encouraged to do so. This has resulted in an emergency home working situation with many workers experiencing remote working for the first time.

As an initial response to these changed circumstances, DETE published 'Guidance for Working Remotely during COVID-19' on its website to provide clarity to employers and employees on existing legislation and advice related to remote working.

In July, DETE launched a Public Consultation on Remote Work Guidance. This consultation sought feedback on the existing guidance in place, to understand how it could be improved and to identify further areas of guidance which would be useful to employers and employees.

The consultation received 522 submissions from workers, employers, business groups, representative organisations and special interest groups. The majority of submissions indicated their support for remote working and many expressed a wish to continue to remote work into the future. The full results of the consultation are available on the [DETE website](#).

Based on the results of the consultation, DETE updated the guidance webpage to reflect the arising areas of concern. DETE also changed the focus of the webpage to providing guidance for remote working in the longer term. The [Guidance for Working Remotely](#) webpage now includes an [employer checklist](#) which outlines key considerations for employers considering adopting remote working arrangements over the long term. The webpage will continue to be updated regularly to act as a live resource to employers and employees.

However, whilst this guidance is a positive step in the right direction, more action needs to be taken in order to facilitate remote working to achieve the multiple benefits it offers for society. The [Programme for Government](#) includes multiple commitments on the topic. To this end, under the guidance of a wide-ranging Interdepartmental Group, this Remote Work Strategy has been developed to harness the opportunities remote work has to offer.

⁵ As a result of transfers of functions between Government Departments following the election of a new Government in June 2020, the Department's name changed from the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE) in November 2020. For ease of understanding, this document will refer to the Department, and attribute its publications, as DETE throughout.

Background

The vision for this Strategy is to ensure remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.

The State has an important role to play in the realisation of this vision. As outlined in the Remote Work in Ireland report, the benefits that can be derived from remote work will help to implement numerous public policies. These benefits include increasing participation in the labour market, attracting and retaining talent, enabling balanced regional development, alleviating accommodation pressures, improving work/life balance, improving child and family wellbeing, reducing commuting times and reducing transport-related carbon emissions and air pollution.

These benefits have the potential to have a significant impact on both the economy and the lives of people living in Ireland. For example, remote work provides the opportunity to reduce the congestion on our roads. In 2017, research carried out on behalf of DETE found that the average commuting time for those living in Dublin was 30.5 minutes. This study estimated a cost to the economy of commuting time for an individual in Dublin of around €4,000.⁶ The latest Census data showed that, in 2016, the number of people commuting to work was growing strongly, up by 11 percent on the previous Census. The data also showed that the number of people commuting by car had risen by 8 percent.⁷ Remote work provides the opportunity to reduce these numbers into the future.

A sustained reduction of commuters and commuting time will, over time, bring a reduction in transport carbon emissions. Depending on patterns of remote working, such savings could, however, be offset in the near term by increased emissions from buildings, in particular domestic dwellings. Previous work in this area indicated that, for each new full-time remote worker, an estimated average daily transport-related emissions savings of approximately 2.6-2.9kg CO₂, depending on petrol/diesel fuel mix, could be achieved. The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) is currently in the process of updating this analysis to inform the development of new actions to support Ireland's emissions reductions to 2030 under Ireland's Climate Action Plan. The impact of remote working on commuter journeys will be considered as part of the upcoming review of the [National Development Plan](#).

Remote work also has the potential to improve labour market participation amongst cohorts with lower participation rates, such as people with disabilities, older workers⁸ and people with caring responsibilities. In the case of people with a disability or a chronic illness, remote work offers a substantial opportunity by removing a commute and allowing for a more flexible schedule. Widespread remote working has the potential to attract people with a disability to the workforce whilst creating a better environment for career progression.

For older workers, remote working arrangements are important for facilitating sustainable employment. The arrangements can also act as a way of easing into retirement, encouraging longer working.

For those with caring responsibilities, remote working can have a positive benefit on parents, allowing them to work schedules that accommodate both their personal and professional demands. In particular, remote working can make it easier for women with families to stay in or re-join the workforce.

⁶ [Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment \(2018\) - Indecon Review of the Enterprise Agencies Economic Appraisal Model in Ireland](#)

⁷ [Central Statistics Office \(2017\) - Census 2016 Commuting in Ireland](#)

⁸ Workers aged 55 or over



Remote work also provides the opportunity for a better work/life balance and allows families to spend more time together. In this respect, mitigating the costs of early learning childcare is a significant benefit of remote working. In Ireland, the net cost of early learning and childcare is 28 percent of the average wage of a couple, while the EU average is notably lower at 12 percent.⁹ Recent research from Barnardos has indicated that parents of young children wish to spend more time with their kids and that affordable quality childcare would make the biggest difference to them as a parent.¹⁰

Further research has highlighted that parents need their employers to adopt more flexible working conditions and become more family friendly in order to promote greater work-life balance.¹¹ Whilst remote working should never be used as a substitute for any form of childcare, it provides families with more flexibility around which they can base their early learning and childcare choices.

Remote work also provides the opportunity to relieve accommodation pressures in cities where demand has caused rent and house prices to increase significantly above the national average. Remote work can facilitate workers to move to less congested urban and rural locations, supporting balanced regional development. Already the rapid onset of remote working has resulted in an increase in interest for rural properties. According to analysis from MyHome.ie, searches for properties under €100,000 have increased by six times in counties Cork and Leitrim and by five times in Galway, Wexford and Mayo. On top of this, searches for properties valued at under €300,000 in Cork and Wexford increased by eight times and these patterns can be seen across the country.¹²

In research undertaken by NUIG's Whitaker Institute and the Western Development Commission (WDC) amongst employees, 23 percent of respondents indicated that, based on their experience of remote working, they would consider relocating to another location in Ireland. A further 16 percent said they may consider relocating. Interestingly, 7 percent of respondents indicated that they have already relocated due to their experience of remote working during COVID-19.¹³

As presented through the potential benefits discussed above, the impacts of remote working will be significant and the scale of opportunity presented is substantial. Increased remote working has the potential to fundamentally change the nature of where, how, when and why people work. This in turn will bring about economic, spatial, environmental, cultural and societal change and is likely to result in consequences that we are not presently able to envisage.

The increased adoption of remote working will support a wide range of national policy goals. There are already a significant number of remote working hubs across the country which are a national, regional and local economic asset. This provides the State with the opportunity to align these facilities with the development of electric vehicle charging, walking and cycling infrastructure. Alignment between remote working and town centre regeneration, health promotion and community volunteerism also present great opportunities.

9 [National Competitiveness Council \(2019\) - Cost of Doing Business in Ireland](#)

10 [Barnardos \(2018\) Survey - 95% of Parents Feel Overwhelmed at Times](#)

11 [Katherine Howard Foundation \(2018\) Giving our Children the Best Start in Life: The Voices of Parents. Dublin.](#)

12 [Hunt, J \(2020\) 'Interest in coastal cottages doubles as online property searches surge 50%'. *The Irish Times*. 15 October](#)

13 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report](#)



However, remote work is not without its challenges. For workers, research has identified that remote work can have negative effects on mental health, with employees experiencing increased feelings of isolation, loneliness and stress. The impacts of these feelings can be different depending on where and how an employee is working. Employees also experience difficulty with switching off and often feel obliged to work longer hours.

Employers too face challenges. Feedback provided to the Department from employers has highlighted how remote working does not easily support creativity, group dynamics, shared ownership and collegiality. If these obstacles cannot be overcome, it could result in long-term impacts on firms' productivity. Research has also found that remote working can lead to an innovation deficit due to difficulties in collaborating with colleagues.¹⁴

On a broader scale, remote work could also have a negative impact on national employment levels. With remote work becoming increasingly popular, there could be challenges in attracting and retaining talent in Ireland. Whilst increased remote work could help to revitalise villages and towns across Ireland, it could result in challenges for cities as increasingly workers may choose to work from other locations. Another consideration is how the potential impacts of reduced visibility of remote workers could impact on gender equality in the workplace.

These are all important considerations which will inform policymaking into the future. The State is committed to facilitating increased remote work adoption in a way that reaps the many benefits and mitigates any arising negative impacts. Remote work is already a key consideration in government policy documents such as the National Economic Plan, the Climate Action Plan, the Town Centre Living initiative, the Smarter Travel Policy and the forthcoming Sustainable Mobility Policy. The State is committed to increasing remote work adoption in Ireland through removing barriers, developing infrastructure, providing guidance, raising awareness and leading by example in this area.

However, progress on remote working can't be made by the State alone. Employers will have a crucial role in moving the remote working agenda forward. It is important that employers review their businesses to determine if remote work is suitable for their business model. Whilst remote work is an option for many employers, not all roles are compatible with remote working arrangements.

For example, this might include roles in which employees undertake a large number of manual tasks or employees who need to be physically present onsite to do their work. For employers who choose to adopt remote work, it is crucial to their success that they review their systems and processes to ensure that their employees are supported in this transition.

It is paramount that employers discuss remote working arrangements with their employees and come together to manage the resulting implications, costs and expectations. This includes actions such as implementing a remote work policy that sets out clear criteria under which employees can request remote work, establishing a review or appeal process for those who are turned down and providing adequate training to all staff. Employers also must ensure that they are in compliance with employment rights and industrial relations legislation, including those to be observed in line with employee privacy.

¹⁴ [Microsoft, \(2020\) Building Resilience & Maintaining Innovation in a Hybrid World](#)

Impact of COVID-19 on Remote Work

The increase in home working as a result of COVID-19 has brought remote working to the forefront of working life. Whilst this arrangement has been beneficial for some, it is important to acknowledge that remote working implemented as a result of the COVID-19 response should not be conflated with remote working in a regular scenario. The sudden introduction of mass emergency homeworking often resulted in less than ideal working conditions for both employers and employees. In particular, there have been significant challenges faced over this period including from a lack of adequate remote working infrastructure, unsuitable home working environments and, at times, the non-availability of early learning childcare and schooling.

However, despite these substantial challenges, the interest in the transition to remote working in the long term remains strong amongst employees. NUIG's Whitaker Institute and the WDC carried out a study based on responses from employees across a wide range of industries and sectors over a one-week period at the start of October 2020. The study found that 94 percent of participants would like to work remotely after the crisis.¹⁵ This figure was an increase from the first phase of the research, published in May, which found that 83 percent of respondents favoured working remotely.¹⁶

The trade union Fórsa also carried out a survey on this topic in July 2020. With 4,335 respondents, primarily from the Public Service, the survey found that 86 percent of respondents would be interested in working remotely in the future.¹⁷

Both surveys returned similar results as to the benefits and challenges of remote working, indicating that the main advantages of remote work were increased flexibility and the elimination of a commute. Interestingly, the results of these surveys broadly mirror the findings of DETE's Employee Survey on Remote Working undertaken in October 2019.

A hybrid model of working that can balance the efficiencies and quality of life from remote work with the benefits of social interactions of working in person with others is popular amongst workers. In the Fórsa survey, over 80 percent of those who are interested in remote working expressed a preference for a hybrid arrangement in which they work some time at home and some in the workplace. Whilst in NUIG's Whitaker Institute and WDC study 67 percent of respondents indicated they would like to work remotely several times a week or month.

The social distancing restrictions, implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, have had a profound effect on the adoption of remote working practices. There has been a significant long-term shift in attitudes to remote work amongst both employers and workers throughout the country.

With remote work expected to continue and with a majority of employees wishing to adopt a hybrid model, remote working hubs offer significant potential. Working from hubs can help to combat the known risks of isolation and loneliness and assist with balanced regional development. Hubs have the potential to allow workers to live and work in a place of their choosing, reduce commuting times and reduce traffic congestion. They also offer employers a chance to reduce their business costs, improve staff retention and access a greater pool of talent.

15 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report](#)

16 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working During COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey Initial Report](#)

17 [Fórsa \(2020\) - Public Consultation on Guidance for Remote Working](#)

Remote Work and Productivity

Businesses can benefit from remote working arrangements by gaining access to a broader pool of talent, promoting retention, and improving cost-effectiveness while engaging in more sustainable ways of working. Productivity increases come from remote workers benefitting from a quieter work environment which allows them to concentrate on complex tasks and from a reduction of sick leave. However, adequate technology to enable and support remote work is necessary to improve productivity. Basic collaboration and networking tools, mobile devices and supportive network infrastructure need to be in place in order to achieve productive outcomes in the context of remote working.

Studies measuring productivity and remote work have had mixed results. As detailed in the Remote Work in Ireland report, research carried out by the University of Melbourne¹⁸ and Stanford University¹⁹ have outlined increased productivity in remote workers.

More recently researchers have tried to measure productivity during COVID-19. These studies have also produced mixed results. It is important to note that these studies include employers and employees who were working remotely in a sudden emergency scenario and do not represent a fair test of remote working under planned and regular conditions. Nevertheless, research from Japan has found reduced productivity for those working at home compared to the office.²⁰ In contrast to this, research polling 9,000 managers and employees in large firms in 15 European countries found that productivity at companies that had moved to remote working remained stable or increased for the majority of companies.²¹

An employer survey, carried out by the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, found that, based on employer perceptions, there was little overall impact on productivity during the crisis. In the survey 37 percent of employers stated that there had been no impact on productivity. Overall, the number of employers who perceived positive effects (30 percent) and those who perceived negative effects (28 percent) were similar.²²

NUIG's Whitaker Institute and the Western Development Commission's national survey of employees found that the majority of them perceived that their productivity had increased. In the survey 62 percent either agreed or strongly agreed that working remotely increased their productivity, while 14 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 14 percent indicated no change.²³

Ultimately, it is difficult to measure the impact of remote work on productivity during COVID-19. For many, the transition to remote working has been involuntary as physical distancing measures have forced workplaces to introduce remote working hastily and on a large scale. The forced transition to remote working left many workers without the necessary infrastructure needed for effective remote working. Furthermore, reported decreases in productivity can be attributed to multiple reasons including: the switch to remote working occurring during a period of additional stress caused by COVID-19; parents looking after children being faced with additional pressures due to the closure of schools and early learning and care arrangements; and newly remote-working companies not yet establishing a sense of community and ensuring a flow of communication.

Remote working has been widespread since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and is likely to be a permanent feature of the future working environment. Nevertheless, the effect that remote working has on productivity remains unclear.

18 [Bosua, Rachele & Gloet, Marianne & Kurnia, Sherah & Mendoza, Antonette & Yong, Jongsay. \(2012\). Telework, Productivity and Wellbeing. Telecommunications Journal of Australia.](#)

19 [Nicholas Bloom & James Liang & John Roberts & Zhichun Jenny Ying. \(2015\) "Does Working from Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment." The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Oxford University Press, vol. 130\(1\)](#)

20 [Morikawa Masayuki. \(2020\). "Productivity of Working from Home during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from an Employee Survey." Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry \(RIETI\).](#)

21 [Microsoft. \(2020\) Building Resilience & Maintaining Innovation in a Hybrid World](#)

22 [CIPD. \(2020\) Embedding new ways of working: implications for the post-pandemic workplace. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.](#)

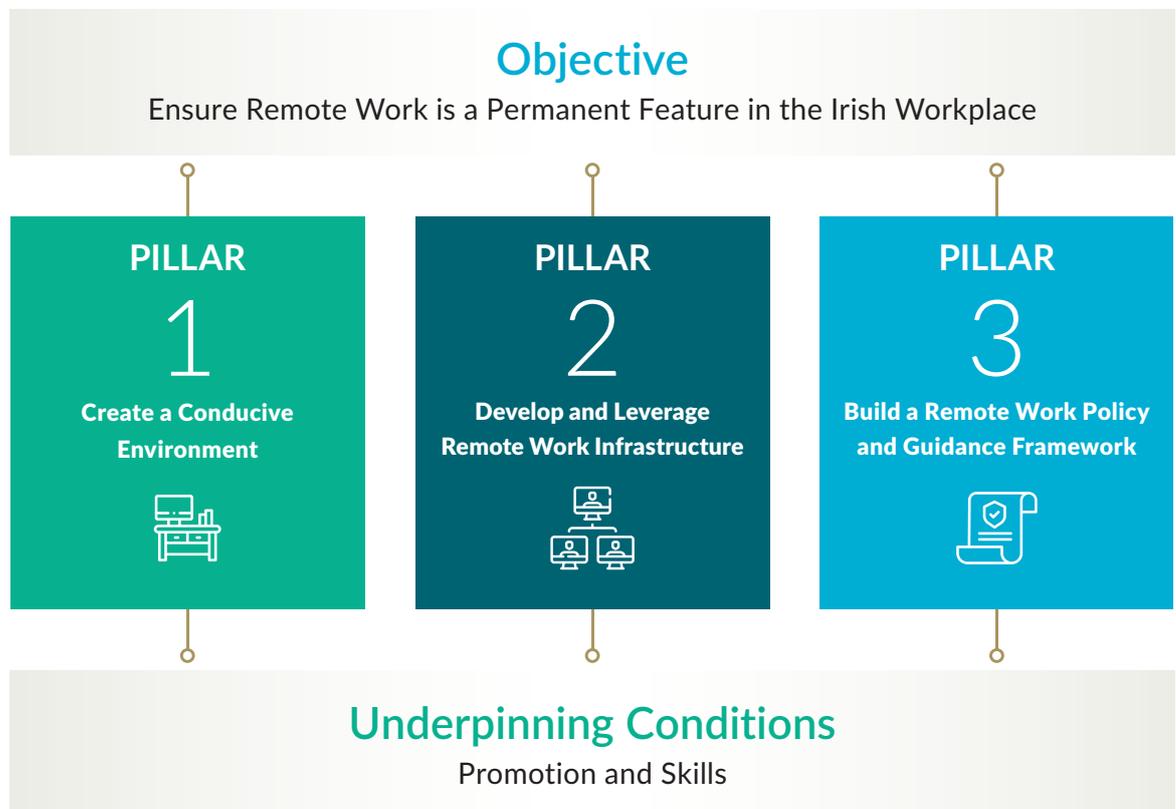
23 [NUJ Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report](#)

Actions

The Government's vision is to ensure remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.

To achieve this, the national Remote Work Strategy is built on three pillars which will be bolstered by underpinning conditions. In each of these areas there are immediate actions to be undertaken which will progress remote working now and inform decision-making into the future.

The cost of these actions will be met within existing and planned resource envelopes.



1. Create a Conducive Environment

A conducive environment for remote work is essential in order to facilitate its increased uptake. Remote working is a new way of working which may need new and different measures in place to support it into the future. Changes to how and where people work will have impacts on a number of different areas such as the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees, health and safety legislation and tax arrangements. Employers and employees will need to be supported as they transition to increased remote working options.

The creation of the DETE [webpage](#) on 'Guidance for Working Remotely' is a good first step towards providing increased direction to employers and employees interested in engaging in remote work. This webpage draws together all the existing laws, regulations and guidelines in place for employers and employees engaging in remote work. It also includes an [employer checklist](#) for those employers considering adopting remote working arrangements in the longer term. This webpage will be continually updated as new guidance is developed, acting as a live resource for employers and employees.

However, further steps need to be taken to ensure that those adopting remote work are supported by an environment that facilitates remote working options.

The Right to Disconnect

The increased adoption of remote working has brought new questions on when and how we work to the forefront of working life. Advancements in technology have allowed employees to be constantly accessible in ways in which they never were before. This can create pressure for employees to always be on call. The sudden onset of remote working, as a result of COVID-19, has blurred the boundaries between people's professional and private lives.

A worker's right to be able to disengage with work and refrain from engaging in work-related electronic communications, such as emails or other messages, during non-work hours and holidays is referred to as the 'right to disconnect'.²⁴

In Ireland, this area is governed by the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. Under this Act, responsibility lies with employers to ensure employees are afforded sufficient time away from their workplace for rest. The Act details the breaks, consecutive rest hours, and annual leave that employees must be provided. The Act is enforced by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC).

Submissions to the Public Consultation on Remote Work Guidance indicated mixed views on this topic. However, a common theme throughout submissions was that employees should not, or feel obligated to, work longer hours than they would have when based onsite. It was acknowledged that employees encountered difficulties in maintaining boundaries and switching off from work. Where submissions differed was on whether new specific legislation on the right to disconnect was required. It was highlighted that the over-regulation of remote working could undermine its flexibility, one of its fundamental benefits. Concerns were also raised in terms of how such legislation would affect employers who operate across time zones and so accommodate different schedules.

The Government is aware of the need to find the right balance. Whilst the right to disconnect does not just relate to remote work, it is clear that over the course of the COVID-19 restrictions that employees have faced difficulties in switching off from work. In order to ensure that employees are protected from overwork, the Government has asked the WRC to draw up a code of practice in this area for approval by the Minister. It will be possible to refer to the code of practice in disputes and adjudications.

²⁴ [Eurofound \(October 2019\) The Right to Disconnect](#)

The Right to Request Remote Work

Submissions to the Public Consultation also highlighted the general positivity towards remote work. This is a sentiment that has been evident also in recent surveys undertaken in 2020, with many employees wishing to continue to work remotely, to some degree, in the long term. NUIG's Whitaker Institute and the WDC's national survey in October 2020 found that 94 percent of participants would like to work remotely after the pandemic.²⁵ This was an increase from the first phase of the research, published in May 2020, which found that 83 percent of respondents favoured working remotely.²⁶

In August 2019, the Work-Life Balance Directive came into force in EU Member States. This Directive introduced a new set of legislative actions aimed at better supporting work-life balance for parents and carers. This Directive includes the right to request flexible working arrangements for carers and working parents of children up to eight years old. Member States have three years to comply with the Directive.

The definition of flexible working is much broader than remote work and may include the possibility of starting or finishing work at different times, doing compressed hours, having access to flexi-time, and shared working options.

Currently in Ireland, all employees can request the right to remote work from their employers but there is no legal framework around which a request can be framed. Introducing legislation on this topic will provide employees a framework around which such a request could be based. Equally it could provide clarity to employers on best practice on dealing with such requests.

Health and Safety

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) is the body responsible for health and safety in the workplace in Ireland. The HSA is clear that responsibility for health and safety rests with the employer whether or not work is being done remotely. In October 2020, the HSA published [Guidance on Working from Home](#) for employers and employees which outlines the responsibilities for both parties. This guidance includes useful information on risk assessments, the home office environment, equipment provision and communication.

Health and safety legislation is governed by EU law. With the increasing desire and necessity for remote work arrangements, the EU is reviewing their related directives on the topic. The Workplace Directive (87/391/EEC) is the basic safety and health legal act that contains principles concerning the prevention and protection of workers against occupational accidents and diseases. The EU Directive on Display Screen Equipment (90/270/EEC) governs the minimum health and safety requirements for work with display screen equipment. Both of these Directives are currently under review by the EU Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work. The HSA is participating in this review on behalf of Ireland. Based on the findings of these reviews, it is possible that there will be changes to international health and safety guidelines in the future.

²⁵ [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report](#)

²⁶ [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working During COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Initial Report](#)



Tax/Financial Incentives

Currently employees working from home can be paid €3.20 per day by their employers to cover their expenses. This payment is tax free for the employer and is aimed at assisting employees with the increased costs of electricity, heating and broadband.

Where an employer chooses not to pay €3.20 per day to their employee, the employee can claim for costs incurred in relation to electricity and heating, apportioned on the basis of business and private use. As announced in Budget 2021, employees may also claim a proportion of their broadband costs in 2020. This concession is available in light of the changes to the work environment arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and will be applicable for the duration of the pandemic.

Concern regarding the costs of working from home featured strongly in the Public Consultation on Remote Work Guidance. Submissions detailed the additional costs employees were incurring as a result of working from home including the costs of broadband, electricity, heating, phone calls, and equipment. There is no legislation governing costs associated with remote working. However, the Workplace Relations Commission has indicated that in remote working arrangements, costs are generally agreed between the parties and provided for as part of the terms and conditions or contract of employment.

In the context of Budget 2022, the Department of Finance will review tax arrangements for remote working for employers and employees and assess the merits of further enhancements.

Actions:

1. Legislate to provide employees the right to request remote work. **(DETE, Q3 2021)**
2. Introduce a code of practice on the right to disconnect. **(DETE, WRC, Q1 2021)**
3. Provide employers and employees with ongoing up-to-date guidance on remote work. **(DETE, HSA, Ongoing)**
4. Taking account of the economic, financial and organisational implications arising from the experience of remote working during the pandemic, the Tax Strategy Group will review the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of (i) employees and (ii) employers and assess the merits of further enhancements for consideration in the context of Budget 2022. **(DFIN, Q3 2021)**

Remote Work and Disability

According to the latest comparative research carried out by the European Disability Forum, Ireland has the lowest rate of employment amongst persons with disabilities of all European countries (32.3 percent). Ireland also has the highest employment gap between people with disabilities and the general population (42 percent).²⁷

These low employment rates relate to the many barriers to employment that people with disabilities face. Mobility, transport and physical access issues may make attending a work place difficult. Working from home for persons with disabilities in some cases is the only viable alternative.

The sudden onset of remote working has led to a broader acceptance by employers of remote/home working as a viable longer-term possibility, with many companies likely to retain working from home as an option even when it is not required for public health reasons. The potential benefits of a broader acceptance of remote working are significant for people with disabilities. Widespread remote working provides an opportunity for people with a disability to work where otherwise it may not have been possible.

One concern is that with higher levels of remote working people with disabilities' careers could suffer as a result of reduced office visibility and employers must include measures to avoid this. Persons with disabilities that are capable and want to work on the employer's premises must enjoy the same right as persons without disabilities and allowances should be continued for those who wish to attend the workplace.

²⁷ [European Disability Forum \(2020\) – Poverty and Social Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities – European Human Rights Report – Issue 4](#)

2. Develop and Leverage Remote Work Infrastructure

The development and leveraging of remote work infrastructure is a crucial component to the progression of increased national remote work adoption. Adequate infrastructure must be in place to allow employers and employees to avail of remote working opportunities both at home and in hubs. Further developing and leveraging the existing remote work hub infrastructure and the delivery of broadband nationally will be a significant driver in facilitating people to work remotely and realise its full potential.

Hub Infrastructure

Ireland's remote working hub infrastructure presents significant opportunities for the development of remote work across the country. Remote working hubs provide a valuable solution for employers and employees seeking to adopt remote working arrangements. For employers, remote working hubs offer the chance to have their employees working closer to home but still within an office environment. For employees, these can result in the benefits of a reduced commute, access to office facilities, and reduce the risk of isolation or loneliness.

A national network of remote working hubs provides a solution for those who are often required to travel across the country for work and aids the transition of employees moving from a fixed workplace model. Remote working hubs also provide the opportunity for potential dynamism between employees from different firms working in the same environment.

In particular, the use of remote working hubs can have a transformative impact on local economies and communities and can facilitate a more equal geographical distribution of high-value knowledge economy roles. The presence of remote working hubs with high speed broadband could facilitate many to work locally and result in increased regional employment and lower carbon emissions.

When published in December 2019, the Remote Work in Ireland report stated that there was already an extensive remote working hub infrastructure in Ireland. Estimates in 2020 have identified over 330 hubs operating in Ireland.²⁸ Despite this, the report found that there was a lack of national data available on the infrastructure of remote working hubs in Ireland. It was noted that this was a barrier to promoting the adoption of remote work in hubs. Since the report was published, a lot has happened in this space in 2020.

Western Development Commission and the Atlantic Economic Corridor

The WDC has played a strong role in the development of hubs across the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC). In 2019 the WDC carried out an audit of hubs in the AEC region to determine their functions, facilities and governance.

Over the course of 2020 the WDC has built further on this work. The WDC is now focussed on developing a network of over 100 hubs in the AEC region. The AEC Hubs Network initiative has developed a project methodology involving steps that could serve as a framework for the upscaling of the project to deliver a national hub network. The work completed to date has included: extensive data gathering, surveying and [online mapping](#); a comprehensive consultation process; a hub classification system; hub network engagement and promotion.

As part of this work, an IT system will be developed for the network to allow individual hubs to have a hub website platform, an online automated booking engine and a hub management system. These tools will be used to help promote the hubs, ease the burden of hub management and facilitate the creation of the hub network community and ongoing participation in it.

28 [Regional Assemblies of Ireland \(2020\) – Regional Co-Working Analysis](#)

Regional Assemblies Co-Working Analysis

The Regional Assemblies have also been working on quantifying and classifying the national hub infrastructure. A [collaborative study](#), carried out by the three Regional Assemblies, was published in October 2020. The study has mapped the number of private sector workers who are capable of working remotely across Ireland. The report includes a breakdown of these workers by county and then compares this figure to the number of hubs operating in each county.

Using CSO data, the analysis estimated that more than 25 percent of private sector workers in Ireland are capable of working remotely.²⁹ As such, the report noted that the development of co-working hubs with highspeed broadband has the potential to open up an array of economic and environmental opportunities and stimulate inclusive recovery across regions.

As well as estimating remote working capability, the report provides a listing and mapping hubs across Ireland. The Regional Assemblies adopted the same classification for hubs as developed by the WDC and have created a useful State resource which can be used to help inform future decision-making.

National Hub Network Working Group

The Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD) has created a new interdepartmental National Hub Network Working Group. Chaired by the Secretary General, this Group has been formed to investigate the feasibility of mapping and developing a national network of remote working facilities, based on the model of the AEC region.

This Working Group will develop and map hub infrastructure. It will raise awareness of the hubs and the network effects of the hub ecosystem to support remote working nationally. The Group will also identify: funding arrangements and gaps; barriers and obstacles to network capacity and development; and appropriate development models for remote working facilities.

The Working Group will ensure the recognition of these facilities as a national economic asset and support their integration into wider planning and policy development. In providing centralised and active data gathering, and GIS map data output, the Group will feed into wider planning and policy development across government.

An additional €5 million has been allocated to DRCD in Budget 2021 to fund the development of the national hubs network, as well as to aid the upgrading of existing facilities across the country.

Next Steps

It is evident that there has been a lot of progress on infrastructure data since the Remote Work in Ireland report was published in December 2019. However, there are still areas that further research could help build upon and provide policymakers with a more informed picture of the hub landscape. An increased understanding of factors such as their economic impact and their demand levels will allow for hubs to be treated as a national strategic economic asset into the future.

Broadband

Facilitating access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of remote working. The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasised this importance so citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) is focussed on providing high speed and future-proofed broadband services to all premises in Ireland. The plan covers 1.1 million people living and working in over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The deployment plan forecasts over 90 percent of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband by 2024.

²⁹ [Regional Assemblies of Ireland \(2020\) – Regional Co-Working Analysis](#)



Among the first deliverables of the National Broadband Plan, Broadband Connection Points (BCP) will ensure that approximately 300 remote areas will be provided with some public access to high-speed broadband while waiting for the NBP to reach them. BCPs are publicly accessible locations which have been selected to receive high-speed connectivity in the first year of the NBP. The locations of the BCPs have been selected by the local authorities and include public facilities such as community halls, libraries, sports centres, digital hubs, tourist locations and other public spaces. It is expected that approximately 200 public access points and 75 school BCPs will be available for connection by the end of 2020. Further installations are planned for 2021, to bring the total number of connected public access points to approximately 300.

The Programme for Government has committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of COVID-19.

Aside from the NBP, it is also imperative that commercial operators continue to invest in their networks in order to enhance the level of service provided. The regulatory landscape should continue to facilitate the availability of high-speed broadband across the State.

Actions:

1. Make a significant investment in remote work hubs and infrastructure in underserved areas to underpin the development of the national hubs network. **(DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, DETE, Q4 2021)**
2. Extend the mapping and classifications of hubs - as completed by Western Development Commission on the Atlantic Economic Corridor - across the country to develop national data on hub infrastructure. **(DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, Q1 2021)**
3. Map commuter, skills and childcare facilities data to inform future hub development decisions. In addition, identify a set of appropriate economic metrics to track the impact of remote work (including both hubs and homes). **(CSO, DETE, DoT, DCEDIY, Regional Assemblies, CCMA, EI, Q3 2021)**
4. Investigate how existing hub classifications can be used to inform future funding decisions. This should consider how hub infrastructure aligns with the transition to the low carbon economy. **(DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, DECC, DTCAGSM, DETE, Q3 2021)**
5. Explore how the National Broadband Plan can be accelerated; delivering connectivity as soon as is feasible across rural Ireland as a central part of remote work infrastructure. **(DECC, Q1 2021)**

3. Build a Remote Work Policy and Guidance Framework

Remote work has been increasing in Ireland over recent years. COVID-19 has accelerated this significantly and it is clear that remote working will be a central feature of the future of work. This needs to be underpinned by an agile policy and guidance framework.

The Remote Work in Ireland report identified three areas to be addressed to ensure that Ireland could reap the benefits of remote working: data, collaboration and guidance.

As previously outlined, DETE has developed a [webpage](#) on remote work guidance that provides information and advice for those seeking to engage with remote work solutions. To provide employers with a quick way to navigate the adoption of remote working arrangements, the webpage also provides a [checklist](#) for working remotely. The webpage will continue to be updated regularly to act as a live resource for employers and employees.

As such, it is crucial to address the other two areas of the report's findings, collaboration and data. To reap the benefits of remote work policymakers must be aligned under a shared vision and supported by access to the relevant data to inform evidence-based policy.

Collaboration

The Remote Work in Ireland report found that there is a large volume of work currently underway to promote remote working across Government Departments and State Agencies. Whilst a number of policies and strategies relevant to remote work have been pursued across Government, this work has been undertaken from a variety of different perspectives. Undoubtedly, there has been some collaboration between the bodies pursuing the work to date but this has not taken place in a way that involves all parties. This created a fragmented landscape that has the potential to result in confusion on the definition, purpose and impacts of remote work.

A key focus of this Strategy is connecting policymakers so that there is a shared vision for remote working across Government. In order to develop this Strategy a broad-based Interdepartmental Group (IDG) was formed.³⁰ After the publication of the Strategy, this IDG will continue to meet regularly to ensure that work being carried out across Government is aligned. DETE will convene regular meetings to promote this alignment and information sharing in order to support the wider goals of the State, such as increasing participation in the labour force, balanced regional development, transport infrastructure development, carbon mitigation, and improving work/life balance.

Data

The Remote Work in Ireland report identified that there was a dearth of data available on remote working. It acknowledged that this lack of data on remote working presented obstacles for making informed policy in this area. In the case of employees, it found a lack of national labour force data available capturing the prevalence and types of remote work. As a result of this, it envisioned a dedicated periodic data-gathering exercise being undertaken on people engaging in remote work to capture the types and frequency of remote work.

The report also found that there is a need for quantitative evidence on employers adopting remote work solutions. The collection of this data would help to create a fuller picture of the adoption of remote work and could be used to monitor and understand trends.

As previously mentioned, over the course of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, datasets on remote working have become available. NUI Galway's Whitaker Institute and the WDC carried out a survey on remote working during COVID-19 which amassed in excess of 7,000 responses in its first phase in May.³¹ A second phase was carried out in October garnering over 5,000 responses.³² This research has produced some interesting insights into people's experiences of working from home during COVID-19.

30 Membership of the IDG is available in Appendix

31 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working During COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Initial Report](#)

32 [NUI Galway Whitaker Institute & Western Development Commission \(2020\) - Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey - Phase II Report](#)

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Fórsa trade union carried out a remote working survey amongst 4,300 workers in July 2020. The majority of respondents were civil and public servants. The survey provided data on the experience of working from home during COVID-19 and covered the obstacles and benefits encountered.³³ Interestingly, the results of the survey broadly mirror the findings of DETE's Employee Survey on Remote Working which was undertaken in October 2019.

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) has also collected data in respect of firms engaging in remote working arrangements during COVID-19 in their [Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey](#). In the first wave of this survey, carried out in May 2020, the CSO included a question which captures the working location of a firm's staff. These data indicate that 30.1 percent of enterprises had the majority of their workforce working remotely at the time with over a twenty percent variance between small and large firms.³⁴ The final wave of this survey, carried out in August 2020, identified that office-based enterprises had an average of 57.7 percent of staff working remotely.³⁵ This survey also identified that over 40 percent of office-based enterprises planned to make remote working a permanent fixture in some capacity.³⁶

So whilst there has been significant progress in terms of data availability in 2020, there continues to be a lack of official data that measures remote work engagement outside of the pandemic and includes working from locations other than home, such as remote working hubs or whilst travelling. Data that captures both employer and employee engagement with remote work is still needed. These data need to be captured officially and regularly to provide policymakers with a baseline against which future trends, targets and policy impact can be measured.

In order to develop a remote work data infrastructure against which progress can be measured, a number of different strands of research will be carried out. The results of these actions combined will provide policymakers with a fuller picture of the impacts and potential for remote work in public policy. These actions will provide significant insight on remote working in the longer term and aid policy development.

Actions:

1. Develop national data on the incidence and frequency of remote work, as part of a wider effort to improve data on flexible working arrangements, to provide an evidence base for future policy. **(DCEDIY, DETE, CSO, Q4 2021)**
2. Establish a centralised cross-departmental knowledge base on the costs and benefits associated with the increased adoption of remote working to understand impacts on areas such as, employment, transport, carbon emissions, broadband, and equality. **(DETE, DRCD, DoT, DECC, DCEDIY, Q4, 2021)**
3. Convene meetings of the Strategy IDG four times a year to ensure that there is cross-departmental alignment to support the wider goals of the State. **(DETE, Ongoing)**

33 [Fórsa \(2020\) - Public Consultation on Guidance for Remote Working](#)

34 [CSO, Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey 4 May to 31 May 2020](#)

35 [CSO, Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey 27 July to 23 August 2020](#)

36 [CSO, Business Impact of COVID-19 Survey 27 July to 23 August 2020](#)

Remote Work and Gender Balance in the Workplace

One of the fundamental elements in promoting gender equality in the workplace and reducing the gender pay gap is ensuring that women and men have equal access to the workplace. Remote working, as part of a broader flexible working policy, presents an opportunity to address some of the barriers to the full participation of women in the workforce.

A major factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in the workplace is the difficulty of balancing paid work and unpaid care work, of which women disproportionately bear the burden. According to OECD statistics, women in Ireland average almost 5 hours of unpaid work per day.³⁷ By comparison men in Ireland average just over 2 hours of unpaid work per day. Remote work can facilitate access to the workplace for people who would otherwise struggle to manage caring responsibilities with a lengthy commute time or physically working outside the home. Encouraging uptake of remote work by both men and women can also support policies which seek to ensure a greater balance in caring responsibilities.

Increasing women's representation in senior positions is an important aspect of addressing the gender pay gap. A lack of flexible working opportunities is often cited as one of the reasons behind the scarcity of women in senior jobs. Increased remote and flexible working has the potential to improve women's representation at senior level.

Policy on remote working can support this by ensuring that remote working does not limit career development. Employers have a responsibility to ensure that the Employment Equality Acts are being adhered to regardless of whether an employee is working remotely or not.

One concern expressed amongst remote workers is that their career could suffer as a result of reduced office visibility. However, by law, those working remotely must be afforded the same opportunities as their on-site counterparts. For instance, employees working remotely must have equal access to career development, training and promotion opportunities as those working on-site.

Employers should be mindful of any potential negative impacts of remote work and actively take steps to mitigate any negative unintended effects. For example, employers should promote remote working equally across their organisation. Employers should also apply a gender lens to decisions related to remote work to ensure no policies or procedures have a disproportionate impact on one gender. The collection of data on areas such as career development, training and promotions amongst remote and non-remote workers can support employers with this. Employers should also encourage senior leaders to be role models and to manage their staff in an inclusive way.

Remote working, as an element of wider flexible working, presents significant opportunities in creating a more equal workforce. The Remote Work Strategy will inform and complement existing work underway by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on flexible working and family leave policy.

³⁷ Women were identified to carry out 4 hours 52 minutes unpaid work per day. Men were identified to carry out 2 hours 7 minutes per day. Available at: <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54757>

Underpinning Conditions

The three pillars of the Strategy will be bolstered by a number of important underpinning conditions. Post COVID-19, remote working will continue to be a central feature of work in Ireland. The promotion of benefits and best practice will be vital to the successful uptake of remote work. To ensure a smooth transition and to achieve the benefits associated with an increased remote workforce, employers must be aware of employee's skills needs and support new remote practices.

The Public Service's commitment to increasing remote working provides an important opportunity to lead by example and demonstrate best practice to employers.

Promotion and Awareness Raising of Remote Work

The significant benefits of increased remote working have been demonstrated throughout this report. Remote work can serve to increase participation in the labour market, widen the talent pool for employers, facilitate balanced regional development, alleviate accommodation pressures, improve work/life balance, improve child and family wellbeing, reduce commuting times, and reduce transport-related carbon emissions and air pollution. It is crucial that these benefits are promoted, communicated and understood by employers to facilitate remote work adoption.

There is an emerging consensus that remote working will become a central feature of the future of work. The OECD, while identifying challenges, acknowledge that it will be part of the 'new normal'.³⁸ As a feature of the work in the long term, it is vital that employers are prepared for this shift. Employers will need to support both career development and career progression.

In practice, this will mean supporting new entrants, identifying ways to ensure peer learning, providing access to mentorship and helping to develop a professional network. It is critical, particularly in workplaces which consist of remote and office-based workers, that remote working does not become a barrier to progression. Employers should consider options such as 'remote first' policies, where meetings are either all virtual or all in-person by prior arrangement to ensure that remote workers are not disadvantaged. To work to maximum effect, approaches such as these should be endorsed and led by employers and senior leaders within the organisation, to embed and sustain remote work.

In order to aid the transition to an increased remote workforce, employers need to be made aware of best practice in this area and supported in their adoption of remote work policies.

Leading by Example

The [Programme for Government](#) has committed that public sector employers, colleges and other bodies move to 20 percent home and remote working in 2021. This provides the State with an important opportunity to lead by example and pave the way forward with an ambitious and forward looking remote working policy being extended to its employees.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) have worked in consultation with colleagues across the Civil and Public Service Organisations to provide guidance on working from home over the course of the pandemic. The large-scale move of staff to these arrangements has highlighted the strong desire amongst the Civil and Public Service workforce to incorporate more remote and flexible working arrangements for suitable roles on an ongoing basis.

DPER is continuing to work with employers across the Civil and Public Service to develop both the long-term approach to remote working in the public sector and implement the specific Programme for Government commitment on 20 percent home working in the public sector in 2021.

38 [OECD \(2020\) - Productivity Gains from Teleworking in the post-COVID 19 era](#)

While the 20 percent target is an average across the civil and public service, it is acknowledged that some sectors are more amenable to remote work. Achieving 20 percent in certain sectors of the Public and Civil Service (such as in the health sector where the vast majority of workers are frontline staff) poses practical and other issues. This could have very serious impacts on service delivery to the public and will need to be carefully managed to ensure that there are no negative impacts.

Skills Requirements

The widespread adoption of remote work as a permanent feature of the future of work, will have implications for skillsets. New skills will be required to fully realise the opportunities presented by technology and new ways of working. Employers will need to determine what types of training are appropriate for their businesses and the need for formal training courses, on-the-job learning, or a mixture of both.

Research for the Remote Work in Ireland report has identified that for the adoption of remote work practices to be successful, employees must be assisted with the right supports and training. For example, dedicated training in areas such as communications, management skills, leading remote teams, IT skills, performance management, culture change, and building trust are major enablers in the successful adoption of remote work policies.

This training is already underway in many organisations including in conjunction with Education and Training Boards (ETBs), the IDA and the Training Learner's Skillnet.

To support remote work in the long term, current and future economic and skills policies should take account of the skills requirements needed to facilitate increased remote work. The impacts of remote working on skills should be monitored to increase the successful uptake of remote work and to facilitate its successful adoption amongst employers and employees. In the longer term, wider skills issues may need to be considered such as the interplay between remote working and digital literacy, remote onboarding and workload management.

Actions:

1. Mandate public sector employers, colleges, and other public bodies to move to 20 percent home and remote working in 2021. **(DPER, Q4 2021)**
2. Raise awareness of existing remote work hub infrastructure in Ireland. **(DRCD - National Hub Network Working Group, Q1 2021)**
3. Promote remote work amongst businesses. This includes raising awareness of remote work training and advising on the skills interventions required for the successful adoption of remote work. Businesses should also be advised on best practice in relation to ensuring equal opportunity amongst remote and office-based workers. **(EI, IDA, WDC, Skillnet Ireland, Q1 2021)**



Next Steps

The Remote Work Strategy is built on three pillars which are bolstered by underpinning conditions. In each of these areas there are immediate actions to be undertaken which will progress remote working now and inform decision-making into the future.

Each action has an agreed delivery date of Quarter 1, 2, 3 or 4, 2021. While many actions involve collaboration between departments and agencies, individual departments and agencies will take leadership of the progression of actions and commit to deliver them over the agreed timeline.

Progress on actions will be reported to the Interdepartmental Group run by Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. These meetings will not only monitor the progress of the actions, they will also promote alignment and information sharing in order to support the wider goals of the State, such as increasing participation in the labour force, balanced regional development, transport infrastructure development, carbon mitigation, improving child and family wellbeing, and improving work/life balance.

Appendix

Relevant Policy Documents

[Project Ireland 2040](#)

[The National Broadband Plan](#) – Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications

[Climate Action Plan](#) – Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications

[2019-2020 Regional Enterprise Plans](#) – Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

[Future Jobs Ireland](#) – Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

[Town Centre Living Initiative](#) – Department of Rural and Community Development

[Smarter Travel Policy](#) – Department of Transport

[‘Work Smarter. Live Better’ 2019-2024](#) – Western Development Commission

[First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families](#)

– Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

[Powering the Regions](#) – Enterprise Ireland

[Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering Communities](#)

– Department of Rural and Community Development

[Programme for Government – Our Shared Future](#)

Membership of Interdepartmental Group

David Hegarty (Chair)	DETE – Enterprise Strategy, Competitiveness and Evaluation Division
Kevin Daly	DETE – Labour Market and Skills Unit
Ruth Morrissy	DETE – Labour Market and Skills Unit
Patrick Condon	DETE – Labour Market and Skills Unit
Colm O'Neill	DETE – Regional Strategies and Enterprise Initiatives Unit
Siobhán O'Carroll	DETE – Inward Investment and North South Unit
Áine Maher	DETE – Industrial Relations and Workplace Relations Liaison Unit
Paul Norris	DETE – Employment Rights Unit
Stephen Curran	DETE – Safety, Health and Chemicals Policy Unit
Joe Cullen / Mairéad Ross	DFIN
Joanna Cullen	DoT
Clare Dowling	DSP
Caroline Henry	DECC
Turlough O'Brien	DRCD
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List of Abbreviations

AEC	Atlantic Economic Corridor
BCP	Broadband Connection Point
CCMA	County and City Management Association
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DECC	Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DFIN	Department of Finance
DoT	Department of Transport
DRCD	Department of Rural and Community Development
DSP	Department of Social Protection
DTCAGSM	Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
EI	Enterprise Ireland
HSA	Health and Safety Authority
IDA	International Development Authority
IDG	Interdepartmental Group
NBP	National Broadband Plan
NUIG	National University of Ireland Galway
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
WDC	Western Development Commission
WRC	Workplace Relations Commission

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