

Remote working futures: what are the likely spatial implications in Wales and beyond?

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The COVID-19 crisis has precipitated the largest ever forced experiment in remote working. While this experiment is still ongoing, there is a growing consensus that while predictions of the death of the office are premature, it is likely that there will be a permanent shift towards increased remote working. Some kind of hybrid arrangement of split working time between the office and the home (or other 'third space') seems the most likely outcome. Of course, not all occupations lend themselves to remote working and for this reason alone the spatial implications are likely to be uneven. There will in turn be second order effects shifting the demand for travel, leisure, hospitality and retail spending. The benefits of remote working include reduced time spent commuting, and by implication reduced environmental impact, while the potential downsides are increased isolation, and the further blurring of work-life balance. The trade-off for any individual will depend on their specific set of circumstances. While the UK government has remained rather ambivalent regarding permanent and large-scale shifts towards remote working, the Welsh Government has set out a long-term ambition for 30% of the workforce in Wales to work remotely on a regular basis, and in this context has begun a consultation on potential locations for local remote working hubs.

The collated evidence in this paper provides a basis for understanding the spatial implications of homeworking and the potential for local coworking (working in shared workspaces) and the promotion of community working hubs. Findings that are drawn from a number of rapidly available data sources in January 2021 suggest that Wales will be well-placed to respond to an increase in homeworking through the promotion of local coworking as a means to provide alternative flexible working spaces for workers who partly or mainly work from home if the pre-COVID-19 coworking infrastructure can be maintained in the current economic situation and further adapted for the use of employees (i.e. those who are not entrepreneurs and/or mobile professional workers who were previously targeted by coworking spaces).

All local authorities in Wales, both in urban and rural areas, had lower homeworking rates pre-COVID-19 than in most English local authorities. Mainly working from home has substantially increased during the pandemic in Wales in both urban and rural areas. Proportionately more people who are new to mainly working from home in rural areas than urban areas in Wales wish to continue with this workstyle in post-COVID-19 times when distancing measures are not in place anymore.

Wales had a good coworking infrastructure pre-COVID-19 including in rural areas thanks to small independent and member co-operative space providers. Bigger commercial coworking chains were less prevalent. Based on estimates of the spatial patterns of homeworking preferences and the suitability of jobs that can be done from home, an increased demand in coworking post-COVID-19 is predicted for Ceredigion and Denbighshire as well as for Swansea.

Small independent coworking spaces have been particularly hard hit by COVID-19 mitigation measures. There is the risk that small providers in low density areas have to close for good. These businesses require support with their fixed costs in order to maintain their business activities. In return, through flexible user schemes coworking space providers can support flexible access to desk and meeting space and digital infrastructure for an increasingly diverse remote working workforce.

Employees, including in administration and government, could be encouraged to work in coworking spaces when no mitigation measures are in place through voucher schemes as part of organisational staff support packages of flexible working. The City of Milan has implemented such people-focused schemes successfully in the past.

Building a community of local remote workers may also help to mitigate negative impact of working mainly from home for individual workers such as the feeling of social isolation. Informal coworking groups or 'pop-up' coworking in under-used communal spaces could be promoted for this purpose.

Homeworking will decrease congestion and have transport benefits through people avoiding peak travel times and reduced commutes. However, people's overall travel may not significantly decrease if service infrastructure is not responding to spatial changes in daytime population. Equally, planning needs to provide attractive cycling and walking infrastructure in residential areas to exploit the increase of remote working for boosting active travel and to this end the health and wellbeing of people.

We suggest that for the remote working pilot phase in Wales, clarity regarding the criteria that will be used to judge success or otherwise will be vital? Moreover, by definition people using these spaces will be 'satisfied customers' - it is thus important to capture the views of those who do not use them but who potentially could.

In addition, are these spaces conceived as alternatives to the office or to working at home (or both)? These are likely to involve different activities. To this end, we argue that there should be associated research on how people use them & why? how they travel, what they spend locally, and what they would be willing to pay assuming free provision is not a long-term option.