Smarter working: a remote working strategy for Wales

How we will encourage remote working across Wales.

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Ministerial foreword

Lee Waters MS, Deputy Minister for Climate Change:

" The changes to how many of us work have been a significant impact of the Coronavirus era and many of us have found that these changes work for us.

" Along with other kinds of flexible working, remote working can have fair work and environmental benefits. Therefore while we recognise not all jobs can be done remotely, we still see great value in promoting more remote working across Wales.

" Every individual's experience of remote working is unique; and the needs of businesses and organisations are different. This is why our approach focuses on choice and flexibility, rather than a one size fits all. We know that for many, the future is not just working remotely, it's a mixture of working in the office, at home, locally in a hub or another location.

" It's important that workers are given the flexibility to make these choices.

" We understand that central offices may still be needed, for those who work productively in that environment and for shared collaboration spaces. Future office designs will need to adapt for hybrid working and meetings will need to work for virtual and on-site attendees.

" However, imposing remote working without consultation may also present us with new forms and increased cases of exploitation and unfair work. This is why we want to support employers and work with trade unions to showcase what good looks like - we believe these new ways of working should be introduced and be maintained in line with fair work and social partnership principles.

" The shift to remote working at the start of the pandemic has not worked for everyone and our aims for more remote working in the future are

centred on flexible options.

" Our focus is on increasing and enabling remote working, helping workers stay local while making it a sustainable model for future generations to come.

" For years, people have commuted sometimes long distances every working day, creating congestion and pollution, and often creating a poorer work-life balance.

" This type of working can strengthen local communities and bring benefits for the climate and for well-being as we lessen the dependence on the traditional commute and we are in no doubt that less commuting can be a key contributor to achieving our net zero targets by 2050. "

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has accelerated the move to remote working. It has made employees and businesses think about how and where they work, both now and in the future.

This strategy outlines our approach to achieving 30% of the Welsh workforce working at or near to home in this Senedd term. It sets out the economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits of remote working, and explains how we plan to embed remote working for the long-term in the Welsh workplace.

While the remote working policy is a far reaching and cross-cutting programme of work affecting all sectors, we will not mandate targets for employers or individuals. Rather, we will work to encourage more flexibility, voice and choice for workers, and greater agility for businesses and organisations.

We want to support employers to adopt remote working practices, learn from research and best practice, and showcase excellence and innovation.

What is remote working?

We define remote working as working outside of a traditional workplace or central place of work for all or for part of an individual's working hours. It includes working at home and close to home in your local community.

Remote working is based on the idea that some jobs do not need to be done in a specific place, all or part of the time, to be done successfully.

Remote working is a form of flexible working. It is also known as agile or smart working. Similarly, hybrid working may be used to describe work where time is split between a central workplace and other locations.

Flexible working covers a wider range of arrangements than remote working. Appropriate flexible working arrangements can give employees choices over when, where and the hours they work, and play a part in more fair work. We are working across government to promote and encourage different ways of working flexibly.

Remote working vision

Introduced in September 2020, the **remote working policy** promotes a workplace model where staff can choose to work in the office, at home or in a hub location.

Our vision is to embed a culture that values and supports more options for remote work in the workplace, in ways that are consistent with our commitment to fair work.

We want to:

- see 30% of the workforce working remotely on a regular basis
- work in partnership with employers, workers, trade unions and others to support a shift to more people working remotely, helping them to build on

progress made during the pandemic and better understand the benefits of remote working

- take action against climate change by reducing the need to travel thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with transport
- improve air quality by reducing congestion and softening rush hour peaks
- create inclusive workplaces in our local communities that have equality at the heart of decision making
- promote a hybrid workplace model of office, home and local hubs to enable people to live and work in their local communities
- increase opportunities for more fair work and promote well-being and work-life balance in the Welsh workforce.

Benefits and risks

During the first lockdown in 2020, it became clear that the benefits of remote working were far wider than simply that of slowing the spread of COVID-19. We saw benefits for many workers, local communities and the environment.

Coming out the other side of the pandemic, we now need to make sure these positive impacts are maximised and that employers implement these new ways of working in a positive and fair way.

Whether people work remotely will depend on a number of factors unique to the worker and employer. Through the remote working strategy, we can enable mutually beneficial changes that enhance social, environmental, economic and cultural well-being. We have identified and discussed these benefits and risks with a range of stakeholders and social partners.

Benefits

The benefits of remote working complement the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which defines 7 wellbeing goals,

We will use the five ways of working set out in the Future Generations (Wales)

Act 2015 as our guiding principles to deliver the strategy. This will allow us to develop an approach which will maximise the benefits of remote working in Wales for current and future generations. This approach is outlined in Annex 1.

Social and well-being benefits

- offers greater choice and flexibility, which can improve well-being, mental health, work-life balance, job satisfaction and productivity reduces the time and expense associated with commuting.

Real-life example: time benefits

One current hub user previously worked five days per week in Cardiff. Now they work in a local co-working space in Swansea part of the week. Over the space of a year, they have reclaimed an estimated 20 days of time back when they would have been commuting.

Environmental wellbeing

- reduces work-related travel, which will help ease congestion, reduce noise and carbon emissions, and improve air quality in some areas
- reduces traffic to create a better environment for pedestrians, cyclists and other highway users
- encourages walking, cycling and e-bike use to improve health and promote sustainable ways to travel.

Economic wellbeing

- creates more job opportunities for people based in any location in Wales – in particular workers in rural and semi-rural communities
- attracts citizens back to their country of birth
- gives employers access to a wider and more diverse workforce
- can increase productivity and reduce sickness absences

- helps local economies and brings more footfall to high streets and town centres.

Cultural well-being

- nurtures and encourages a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.

Risks

Increases in levels of remote working can lead to the emergence of several risks, so it is important we recognise these as the first step to mitigating them. We will work with stakeholders, employers and trade unions to understand and manage risks, which include:

Health and safety

Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for people working remotely as for any other worker and need to consider the employee's:

- mental health and levels of stress
- use of equipment and the need for display screen equipment assessments
- working environment and its suitability

Unsuitable conditions

Unsuitable conditions in remote working can take a number of forms. People may not have appropriate or safe spaces at home, or they may feel isolated or disconnected from their colleagues and support structures. Offering the flexibility to work in a variety of locations means some of the negatives of the enforced working from home we saw throughout the pandemic can be avoided.

City centres

Many of the long term economic challenges and opportunities facing Wales remain as before the epidemic, but the rapid growth of remote working is both a new challenge and an opportunity. More remote working means people can work – and live locally. Early indications are that larger centres will be able to reinvent themselves, but there are likely to be particular risks for urban areas with lower levels of amenity, of which there are a number of examples in Wales.

A report commissioned by Welsh Ministers: **Wales Centre for Public policy Remote Working** indicates that there may be a shift in footfall from city centres to the suburbs as people spend more time at home or in their local area, but that cities will survive through adapting design and use of urban space. We need to monitor the situation to understand evidence to inform policy decisions in the recovery period and beyond.

Technology

Technology is a great enabler of remote working, giving so many employees the ability and freedom to work away from the office during the course of the pandemic, but at the same time we have seen significant growth in the use of monitoring software on employees who are working remotely. When deployed responsibly, technology provides us with greater flexibility and enables greater productivity. But it can also put pressure on people to feel they should always be available, particularly in teams or organisations where there are different working patterns.

Power imbalances

Power imbalances between employees and employers should not lead to exploitation, such as over working, working unsocial hours, intrusive monitoring of workers or working without adequate breaks.

Two tier workforces

Two tier workforces are among the potential risks and unintended consequences of increased remote working is the emergence of workplace tensions between those who can work remotely and those that cannot. This has the potential to disproportionately impact women and disabled people. Conversely there is also potential for hybrid working to narrow the gender and disability employment and pay gaps and diversify some better paid sectors and roles - for example, by ensuring jobs are advertised as flexible opportunities. Our evidence base has shown that this greater flexibility in terms of hours and locations is particularly important to some groups of people.

Disabled workers are not expected to work remotely without the required reasonable adjustments being put in place.

A reasonable adjustment such as being allowed to work from home is not a benefit of remote working but a pre-existing right, but we recognise that the changes we have seen in the last two years have been of benefit to some disabled people as they have been given the flexibility they have long asked for.

What we will do?

We are working across government and with partners to achieve our remote working vision.

We will lead the way with an ambitious smart working programme within Welsh Government

The Welsh Government will be an exemplar for remote working and is pursuing an ambitious programme to retain its benefits. When it is safe to do so, we aim for no more than 50% of our workforce working from a central office at any one time.

The Welsh Government will lead by example and ensure better decision making and more equal outcomes for all in society. We are shaping our approach to develop our people, design our places and invest in tools and new ways of working that will support our workforce as we transition through the months and years ahead.

We are doing this in partnership with our three recognised Trade Unions in Welsh Government.

We will engage with stakeholders and partners to understand and share best practice

The remote working strategy has been developed with input from employer representatives, Trade Unions and stakeholders in the public, private and third sectors. We will continue to engage to ensure we share good practice and raise awareness of the benefits of remote working.

What have we done so far?

Sought views: initially we established a communication and engagement action plan that outlined key priorities, firstly seeking policy development views with key stakeholders which included special interest groups.

We engaged with the public:

- we ran a 6-week online public engagement survey which ran from February to March 2021. This included questions about where people would like to see local remote working hubs, why they were needed and what facilities people would like. A summary of the report was published in March 2022.
- we have designed hub-user questionnaires to seek feedback and collect data about usage.
- we presented at business events and seminars, providing further information about remote working

We collaborated:

- creating guidance and support.
- developed case studies

We shared knowledge and outcomes across Welsh Government policy-making departments.

We established a communication and engagement plan, working with key stakeholders to ensure inclusivity - including people with protected characteristics and other disadvantaged groups are presented in policy and programme work.

We are working in social partnership with the Workforce Partnership Council's Task and Finish Group for flexible and agile working. The group aims to co-produce best practice guidance for public bodies.

We have additionally worked with a range of businesses and organisations to produce a series of remote working case studies which showcase the experiences of a diverse range of businesses, these are here: **Remote working case studies**.

We will monitor progress and share results

We intend to continue monitoring as the remote working landscape in Wales matures and changes. We have set out the definition of remote working to enable measurement of progress in achieving the Welsh Government's ambition of 30% of people working remotely on a regular basis.

Remote working is a rapidly developing area, so we have developed a high level monitoring framework to collect data, track trends and enable us to understand the impacts on the workforce and individual employers. We will share trends and conclusions from our research so businesses can better understand the advantages and disadvantages of a remote workforce.

While these proposed indicators will be helpful for the wider picture and long

term trends, we know that it will not be possible to attribute any changes directly to the remote working strategy. Bespoke research may be needed in the future, but it is crucial that we monitor these trends to ensure these changes continue to work for Wales.

There is currently less remote working employer data available than that for employees. We will therefore identify and develop appropriate opportunities to fill these data gaps.

Remote working questions are being included in national surveys for the first time, including the Labour Force Survey and the National Survey for Wales. The results of these surveys will further raise public awareness and understanding of remote working.

Progress indicators

The following core indicators will be tracked over time to monitor progress:

- percentage of people who work remotely on a weekly basis
- average distance travelled per person
- percentage of journeys by purpose
- percentage of people moderately or very satisfied with their job
- average delay per kilometre of travel by road
- total vehicle kilometres travelled
- level of air pollutants from the transport sector
- greenhouse gas emissions from the transport sector centre for cities: high street recovery tracker.

We will additionally develop bespoke key performance indicators and continue to horizon scan for emerging threats and opportunities.

Whilst these core indicators measure activity that is likely to be affected by this policy, there will be others, such as availability of broadband, and house prices in rural areas that will need to be monitored. We may also consider including progress indicators which recognise improvements in removing barriers to remote working.

We recognise remote working encompasses a number of strands of evidence and analysis, and widespread evidence gathering is important. In addition to quantitative evidence, we will continue to gather qualitative evidence and the lived experiences of employers and employees. We will maintain an ongoing conversation with employer representatives and Trade Unions in order to do so.

We want to be proactive and able to respond to new trends and outcomes as they occur in this evolving area of work.

We will understand potential risks, unintended consequences, and wider impacts

We have undertaken a full Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) to identify possible positive and negative impacts of the remote working policy in relation to protected characteristics as defined under the Equality Act, Children's Rights, Welsh Language, climate change and low income households. The purpose of this assessment is to maximise positive opportunities and remove, reduce or mitigate negative impacts where they are identified. The IIA is available here: **Remote working strategy: integrated impact assessment**

To keep these considerations at the heart of remote working, we will continue to work with stakeholders.

Ceridwen Powell **#UnlockedLives video blog**:

> " "Everybody's talking about the 'new normal' aren't they….I don't want to go back to that normal anyway, because it excluded me. So why would you want to go back to something that was bad for you and didn't meet your needs? "

We will promote the pilot hubs, review and evaluate

Working from home is not always possible or desirable. As an alternative, local hubs can focus on providing the right environment to allow people to work remotely near to their home. This could be from an existing commercial facility, a public sector space or a community building. We want to use such local spaces to enable sustainable remote working in communities.

These local work spaces have been brought together to test the appetite for and feasibility of near-to-home working and inform both the public and private sector's approach to this new way of working.

Abdullah Imran, Hub user, Costigan's in Rhyl:

> " "I wasn't able to manage my time well so I thought maybe a change of space would help me and also bring some structure to my life…It has made my life so easy and simpler. I've literally doubled the amount of work I was able to do before. "

We hope local work hubs will bring more people into the heart of their community where they will spend their working day, do their shopping, buy lunch and socialise or take part in activities. Research is currently underway via our network of pilot hubs to assess uptake, benefits and successful delivery models.

We will collate quantitative and qualitative evidence from both users and suppliers and gather feedback and data on how they work, delivery models, demand, benefits and changes to travel patterns. This includes whether workers are spending more time in their town, if their spending habits have changed and if they get to work using public transport or active travel rather than a private car.

Pilot studies will continue throughout 2022 and at the end of the year we will evaluate uptake, effectiveness and future needs. Details of the pilot local hubs currently available can be found here: **Find your local remote working hub**.

We understand stakeholders are looking to the Welsh Government for leadership and enabling actions. When looking at how remote working may work, a consistent priority has been to unify hub information so that users can easily identify their local hub, book a desk or space as needed. Working with stakeholders, hub providers and users, we will develop a service that meets user needs.

We will support businesses and individuals

We recognise the importance of supporting businesses and individuals to help them reap the benefits of more flexible ways of working. We have therefore published: **Remote Working guidance on Business Wales** in relation to supporting employees with specific needs.

We will improve our pages on Business Wales with better signposting to other guidance, such as Access to Work, the HMRC's working from home tax relief, Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) guidance, and advice that trade unions provide.

For the individuals we will promote the latest and current advice on employment law, HR processes and will showcase best practices.

In addition, we will consider other levers that are available to government, such as planning, procurement and social partnerships. We work with private, third and public sector bodies to find out what works in their communities.

Business Wales will create an online learning package as part of its **Business Online Support Service (BOSS)** to support businesses to learn more about remote working and offering advice on how to choose the right technology, run hybrid meetings and create the right environment for people to work in.

Working with other governments

Welsh Government is committed to working with our colleagues in UK Government and other devolved administrations to ensure we can influence future workplace regulations and identify best practice. We call upon the UK Government to provide employees with stronger rights in relation to flexible working. This could include rights for 'nomad workers' and prevention of 'one-sided flexibility', where arrangements are imposed upon employees, should be avoided.

Conclusion

We want to encourage employers to offer employees the choice of more flexible working arrangements, so that the people of Wales can make choices that best suit their needs. Ultimately, we believe offering increased flexibility is in the mutual interests of employers and employees.

Working from home has been one of the most important and visible changes during the pandemic, with fixed working, site based workplaces radically changing as remote working has become part of many people's daily routines.

Some people see significant benefits, enhancing their work-life balance, enabling more time and location flexibility or combining a career with family life. Many businesses have already started to take steps to introduce a more agile and flexible approach and we want that to continue.

The growth of remote working is not without its challenges but we believe it can create a fairer workplace and offer jobs previously inaccessible to parts of the population in Wales.

Everyone has a part to play: public, private, third sector organisations and individuals, the path of our journey is not fully mapped out. We will continue to spread the message, encourage and support to make sure the emerging hybrid workplaces are empowering, collaborative and inclusive spaces physical or

virtual.

Annex 1

Strategic fit

The programme for government 2021 to 2026 strives for a more prosperous, equal and greener Wales. It sets out to:

- seek a 30% target for remote working
- develop new remote working hubs in communities

Our aim to foster a positive culture towards remote working has an impact on many different areas and activities across government, both in Wales and the UK.

Wales Transport Strategy

Llwybr Newydd: the Wales Transport Strategy 2021 commits to planning ahead for better physical and digital connectivity, more local services, more home and remote working and more active travel, to reduce the need for people to use their cars on a daily basis.

Net Zero Wales

In 2018 transport was responsible for 17% of Welsh greenhouse gas emissions: 62% from private car use, 19% from Light Goods Vehicles and 16% from bus and Heavy Goods Vehicles: **Llwybr Newydd: the Wales Transport Strategy 2021**.

The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 requires the Welsh Government to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases in Wales to net zero by the year 2050, with a system of interim emissions targets and 'carbon budgets'. Welsh Ministers need

to prepare and publish a report for each budgetary period setting out their policies and proposals for meeting the carbon budget for that period.

The new Net Zero Wales Plan fulfils this duty for Carbon Budget 2 (2021-25) and responds to the latest advice from the Climate Change Committee.

Remote working is set out under Policy 30 - Enable people to work at or near to home and envisages a range of carbon savings.

Equality Act 2010

Remote working can contribute to meeting the requirements of the Equality Act and the need to show due regard to the General Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 sets a legally-binding common purpose for national government. It defines 7 wellbeing goals and 5 ways of working to help public services meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Well-being goals which are particularly relevant to the remote working policy include:

- a healthier Wales: "A society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood"
- a globally responsible Wales; "A nation which, when doing anything to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales, takes account of whether doing such a thing may make a positive contribution to global well-being"
- a more equal Wales: "A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances (including their socio economic circumstances)"

Our strategy also aligns with the 5 ways of working:

1. Long term: We are aware that factors can change over time, therefore we will continue evaluate and monitor trends and will utilise a range of effective interventions to support our aims and objectives for the long term.
2. Prevention: we will work cross-government to inform future policy thinking and will share data and insights between public bodies to encourage early intervention.
3. Integration: we have adopted a whole government approach. For example, we are working on high-quality internet connections for people across Wales which is essential to the development of remote working. We're also addressing the future of town centres through the Transforming Towns fund and providing guidance through the Business Wales website.
4. Collaboration: the key focus of this strategy is that there is a share vision for remote working across Welsh Government - the whole of the organisation will ensure its' ambition is delivered. Additionally, we work with the Shadow Social Partnership Council whose membership includes trade unions, employers, public services and Welsh Government.
5. Involvement: we want the Welsh public to be involved and have their say.

We have conducted a public engagement survey on remote working for which we saw over 2,000 responses to seek views about remote working hubs. We know further employer and employee engagement on remote work is required to provide policymakers across government with a baseline against which future trends, targets and policy impact can be measured and will encourage all organisations to continue to involve their employees and communities.

Social Partnership and Fair Work: we are committed to making Wales a fair work nation. Greater opportunities for remote working, when delivered in consultation with the workforce and with trade unions in workplaces where they are recognised, empowers employees to exercise greater choice in how they work. This can contribute to fair work.

Progressing the Economic Resilience and Reconstruction Mission

The Programme for Government also includes the above commitment. At his Economic Summit on 18 October the Minister for Economy outlined his ambition for economic resilience to include addressing the long-term demographic challenge facing the Welsh economy, an ageing working age population.

Greater opportunities for remote working is seen as one of the conditions which will enable citizens to feel confident about planning their futures in Wales.

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