Rural Community Network

The policy landscape for remote working and rural development in Northern Ireland:
A comparative study

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June 2022

5G new thinking

Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD
By Kate Clifford, Director of Rural Community Network

Rural Community Network is a regional, voluntary, membership-based organisation supporting rural communities across Northern Ireland. RCN works with rural communities to address issues relating to poverty, inequality, community, and good relations and strives to develop the capacity and skills of groups to articulate their voice at a policy influence level.

Since 2018 we have been engaged with the 5G New Thinking Project, funded through the UK's Department of Culture Media and Sports. 5G New Thinking was designed to empower rural communities to take control of their connectivity. The project sought to provide these communities with the practical tools, services, support, and guidance they needed to consider building and operating their own communications networks. The project brought together a consortium of organisations from across the public, private and academic sectors, working closely with communities in the Orkney Islands, the Borderlands, and Northern Ireland.

However, while the 5G New Thinking project was being implemented, Project Stratum went live across Northern Ireland,[1] providing significant investment in full fibre to premises (FFTP) for up to 84,000 rural households.[2]

With the Project Stratum investment and the fact that 5G was only available in Belfast city, RCN realised that the possibility of building a community owned and managed communications network wouldn't be achieved in the lifetime of this project. However, we knew there were lessons to be learned and harnessed from our partners about unlocking the digital potential of rural communities. We sought out greater exploration of the transformative power of digital connection in rural regions. The project enabled us to connect with the Scotland 5G Centre and the work they have done to create rural hubs, innovation centres and address barriers to rural service provision and exclusion, and to look to the Republic of Ireland to learn more about what they were exploring and investing in across rural Ireland.

Then in March 2020 the whole world experienced a digital revolution of sorts. Covid-19 saw us largely locked down and shut away from others as we tried to manage a virus that put lives at risk. As a result of that lockdown many of us turned to digital devices to keep us connected with family, friends and work. We began to discover online meetings, online learning and remote working. For many of us it was the impetus to think about how else we could use technology to undertake everyday tasks and reduce the busyness in our lives.

For many living in remote rural areas, "not spots" (those areas with no connection or poor connections) and those without the means to afford connectivity or devices, the picture was quite different. They were excluded from so much and the gap between those who could connect and those who couldn't widened.

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[1]   Department for the Economy, Project Stratum.

[2]   See Rory Winters, "Digital exclusion concerns voiced over Stormont's £200m broadband scheme", thedetail (28 February, 2022).

Over this time RCN began to think about Digital in a different way too. We noticed the desire to maintain remote working, we saw the increased value of rural spaces for those who wanted to leave the cities, achieving greater work life balances and we saw a potential in the creation of incubation hubs and centres of good digital connectivity that could unlock creativity, entrepreneurship and access to global markets and connections irrespective of location. We also understood that investment in rural digital infrastructure was essential to reduce gaps in rural inequality relating to access to services, and could contribute to better quality job opportunities and revival of many rural towns and villages. We also saw that rural and remote digital investments could start to address some of the issues of climate change which are connected to the daily commute to cities and service centres.

Rural areas cannot afford to be left behind as the world moves online. Rural areas must be supported and encouraged to exploit digital opportunities. We are delighted that the new Rural Development Framework for NI makes mention of the opportunity for remote working across NI:

> *Access - Promote remote working across NI. This could involve identifying and tackling barriers to accessing services and support innovative solutions to service provision in rural areas through collaboration with the voluntary/community sector and social economy. This could include regeneration of rural towns and villages and the piloting of socioeconomic hubs to provide enhanced access to service provision.*[3]

As a rural development agency that strives to articulate the needs of rural communities and to support them to reach their potential we commissioned this report to identify the policy actions which could drive a revival of rural areas through increased digital connectivity and capacity.

This report drew upon international policy landscapes and sought perspectives from policy makers and stakeholders from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. We are enormously grateful to those who gave their time to helping us compile this report.

Special thanks must also go to Anthony Soares of the Centre for Cross Border Studies who undertook the research on our behalf and to Nigel Mc Kinney who had the vision to bring about this research.

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[3]   Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Rural Policy Framework for NI (2021), p.106.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report, commissioned by Rural Community Network, sets out the public policy context in Northern Ireland for remote working, and considers what actions could be taken to exploit the potential opportunities arising from remote working in support of community and social benefit in rural Northern Ireland. It takes the Republic of Ireland as a key comparator, and the recommendations it offers are informed by interviews with key policymakers and stakeholders from both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The following is a summary of the principal findings from the research, along with the recommendations arising from the analysis of public policy detailed in the body of the report.

- Internationally, the public health restrictions put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic meant mass moves to working from home for those not employed in essential services. Prior to the pandemic, although the uptake of remote working practices had been increasing, the rate of growth was slow. In 2019, only 5.4% of workers in the EU-27 usually worked from home, with little change from a decade earlier, although the share of employed working at least sometimes from their homes increased from 5.2% in 2009 to 9% in 2019. In the United States, the percentage of those who worked primarily from home in 2019 was 6%, compared to 4% in 2009. In the UK, 4.97% of employed people worked mainly from home in 2019, compared to 3.6% in 2011.

- In 2019, 3.99% of workers in Northern Ireland worked mainly from home (a small increase from 2018, when it was 3.33%); in 2020 the percentage stood at 7.07%. In the Republic of Ireland, in 2018 18% of workers were estimated to work from home on some basis; by May of 2020, 34% had started to work from home, while 12% had increased their hours of working from home.

- The general consensus within OECD countries and the European Union is that the adoption of remote working practices can contribute to a number of core policy objectives:
    - o rural development;
    - o balanced regional economic development;
    - o carbon reduction and other environmental targets;
    - o increased labour-market participation rates (including for women and those with disabilities); and
    - o citizens' wellbeing.

- Core public policies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have also identified the post-COVID-19 retention of remote working practices as enabling regionally-balanced economic development, and that this would be of particular benefit to rural communities. However, there is comparatively more public policy and financial investment in remote working in the Republic of Ireland, which has a National Remote Work Strategy.

- Significant investment in relation to high-speed broadband in rural areas has been made in public policy and interventions in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, with the provision of digital skills to rural communities also being seen as a key priority.

- Rural development policy in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has highlighted the potential of remote working practices for rural regions, and to differing extents they have also pointed to the role that digital or remote working hubs can play in this. In the Republic of Ireland, a National Connected Hubs Network has been established, partly as a result of the identified need to map and categorise the growing number of hubs. In Northern Ireland there is currently no equivalent mapping of digital hubs, although there are a number of significant developments of sectoral-specific hubs.

- In terms of the appetite for remote working post-COVID-19, of those in employment in the Republic who can work remotely surveyed by the Central Statistics Office in 2021, 88% would like to continue to do so when all pandemic restrictions are removed. Of these, nearly three in 10 (28%) said they would like to do so all the time. Six in 10 (60%) said they would like to work remotely some of the time. A 2021 online survey undertaken in Northern Ireland by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) found that respondents overwhelmingly backed a return to the office, but only if it was combined with home working. According to the survey, similar trends in responses from both the public and private sectors suggested strong support for a return to the office 1-3 days per week.

- Both the Dublin and Belfast administrations have adopted policies to ensure public servants are able to continue remote working, including through the use of hubs. Northern Ireland's Department of Finance has led the establishment of the Connect2 Regional Hubs programme.

- The results of the most recent national survey in the Republic of Ireland (May 2022) by the Whitaker Institute and the Western Development Commission show that of those who would like to work remotely, 8% would like to work from a mix of home and hub, 5% from a mix of home, hub and onsite, with only 0.5% indicating that they would like to work solely from a hub. In Northern Ireland, the 2021 survey by the UUEPC showed that most respondents were not interested in working in remote hubs, and of those who expressed an interest, their preference was to work in a hub dedicated to their organisation.

- Rural development policies in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland identify the benefits of North-South cooperation, and within the community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland there are all-island initiatives with a focus on rural connectivity and development, and digital inclusion and remote work.

The following eight recommendations are made as a result of the analysis of public policy detailed in the body of the report:

- In order for policymakers in Northern Ireland to be able to develop appropriate policy and make investment decisions where the evolution of patterns of remote working are of relevance, consideration should be given to either the Office for National Statistics extending its coverage to Northern Ireland in relation to workers' future plans, or to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collecting this data. If these are not considered to be viable options, then support should be given to a suitable organisation that may have already engaged in gathering such data.

- The Northern Ireland Civil Service to undertake an immediate audit of existing core government strategies and policies to identify elements relevant to remote working, to be gathered and developed into a single coherent policy document on remote working in Northern Ireland.

- Establish a Digital Uplift Interdepartmental Group to include within its remit remote working, led by either the Head of the Civil Service or a designated Permanent Secretary, with consideration to be given to the establishment of Departmental Groups to feed into the Interdepartmental Group.

- To lead by example and support the promotion of remote working practices in Northern Ireland both in the public and private sectors, the most senior members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service should adopt some element of remote working themselves, and ensure that career progression is not impeded by remote working.

- A mapping exercise to be undertaken to identify existing and planned digital hubs and providers of digital skills in Northern Ireland,[4] and to classify them adopting and refining to local circumstances the classification system used by ConnectedHubs.ie.

- Investigate the feasibility of opening up regional hubs under the Connect2 programme to rural enterprises and community groups.

- Encourage sectoral hubs, especially those with public funding, such as those related to advanced manufacturing, agri-food, communications and information technology, and fintech (financial technology, as in software and other technologies used to deliver financial services), to provide spaces to rural enterprises and communities for the delivery of relevant digital skills.

- To support the establishment of a platform for the sharing of best practice among rural digital hubs in Northern Ireland.

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[4]   This is also a recommendation made by the UUEPC, which in relation specifically to remote working hubs, suggests 'an initial mapping of hubs and co-working spaces and further research on demand for these facilities' (The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.38).

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report, commissioned by Rural Community Network, is to identify policy and actions that could exploit the potential opportunities arising from remote working in support of community and social benefit in rural Northern Ireland.[5] While the practice of remote working had been on the rise internationally as advances were made in terms of communications technology, the COVID-19 pandemic saw many more workers and employers forced to adopt it due to the imposition of public health restrictions.

Northern Ireland was no different, going into lockdown on 23 March 2020, with educational establishments, venues, facilities, amenities, places of worship and many businesses closing, while travel restrictions were put into place as the first wave of the pandemic spread. One of the immediate results, repeated in subsequent waves, was that many employees saw themselves working from home, which in many cases meant no longer commuting from a rural location to an urban place of work.

As the threat from COVID-19 has receded and public health restrictions have been lifted, in Northern Ireland the value of retaining the practice of remote working has been a central topic of debate for employers, workers and policy-makers. Part of that debate has focused on the extent to which remote working practices could provide a key catalyst to economic development in rural areas and to a more balanced regional economy, and to how the digital provision of services could improve access to rural communities, as well as to how the continuation of remote working could contribute to other policy objectives, not least in terms of the reduction in carbon emissions. It is a debate taking place elsewhere, including in the Republic of Ireland.

This report looks at how that debate is reflected in current policies and their related initiatives, taking the Republic of Ireland as the key comparator. However, before it sets out the policy contexts in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and identifies any key commonalities or potential points of learning, it briefly examines the wider international policy landscape in relation to remote working and rural development.

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[5] The author of this report, Dr Anthony Soares, is the Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies (www.crossborder.ie).

Although largely based on desk research involving the analysis of relevant policies and related documents, this report is also informed by the perspectives generously offered by a number of key policymakers and stakeholders from both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The interviewees, to whom we are enormously grateful, were chosen due to their experience in the development and/or implementation of rural development policies developed by government departments in Ireland and Northern Ireland, or their involvement in the development of local strategies, as well as those responsible for previous analysis of the potentials and practices of remote working.

The report begins with a brief consideration of the extent to which policies internationally have recognised remote working as contributing to rural development, and whether the phenomenon of remote working will continue to be a significant element in the medium to long-term.

It then turns to the priority given to (re)balancing regional economic development by the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, before highlighting how policies and actions developed by the two administrations have placed remote working as contributing to rural development. It concludes by setting out cross-overs between policies in the two jurisdictions and identifying potential opportunities for cross-border learning or activity.

Rapid advances over recent decades in Information Communications Technology (ICT) and the increasing (although not necessarily even) ability of ever more citizens across the world to access broadband has seen a rise in the number of people working from home rather than their usual place of work. However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in the numbers of people working from home was slow rather than dramatic, and more prevalent within certain sectors in developed economies.

According to an OECD report, the rise of remote working in the EU – or teleworking – in the years from 2009 to 2019 was a slow or even negligible one in terms of those who usually worked from home, although the numbers are more significant in relation to those working from home occasionally.

In fact, as of 2019, only 5.4% of employed in the EU-27 usually worked from home – a share that remained rather constant since 2009. However, over the same period, the share of employed working at least sometimes from their homes increased from 5.2% in 2009 to 9% in 2019.[6]

A similar picture emerges from the United States. Based on data from the US Census Bureau, the National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI) comes to the following conclusions on the proportions of Americans working from home before the COVID-19 pandemic:

In 2019, fewer than 6% of Americans worked primarily from home [...]. [R]emote work as a primary arrangement has increased only from 4% to 6% since 2009, a large percentage gain but only still a minority of workers overall.

However, while relatively few people work primarily from home, many more do some work from home. Before the pandemic, almost a quarter of American workers did some work at home [...].[7]

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6   Santo Milasi, Ignacio González-Vázquez and Enrique Fernández-Macías, "Telework before the Covid-19 pandemic: Trends and drivers of differences across the EU" (January 2021), p.5.

7   Patrick Coate, NCCI, "Remote Work Before, During, and After the Pandemic" (25 January 2021).

The greater incidence of those doing some work from home – of practicing a "hybrid" form of working – pre-COVID is not an isolated phenomenon. As can be seen in the chart below, there was a relatively small increase in the percentage of employed people in the UK working mainly from home between 2011 and 2019, which was not a widely adopted practice. However, the percentages of those doing some work from home are more significant, with an increase also noted in the same period.[8]

% of employed people in UK working from home
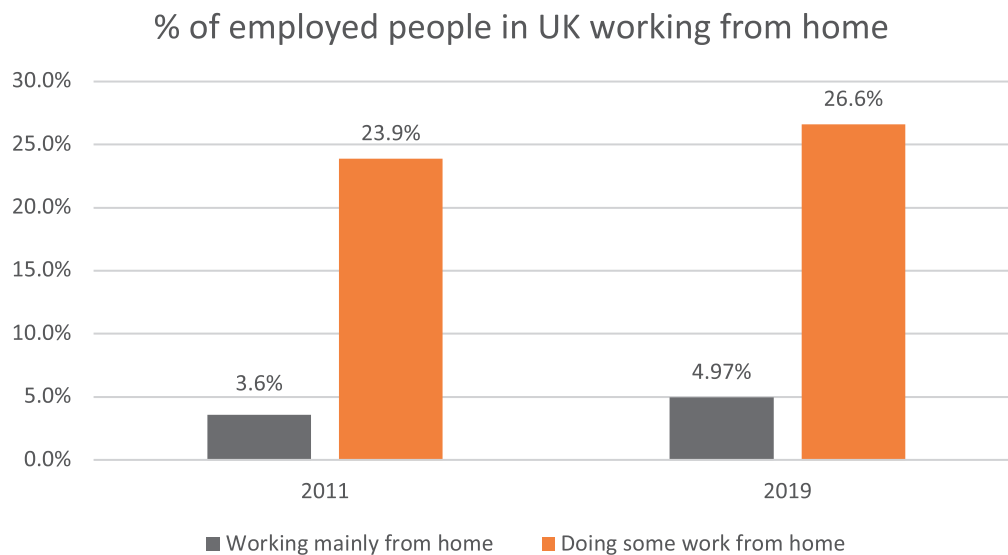
As well as the numbers of people remote working being greater when including those who do it occasionally rather than primarily, the practice of remote working pre-Covid was also more established in certain sectors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, according to the OECD teleworking was already comparatively prevalent in knowledge- and ICT-intensive services, with '40% of workers in IT and other communication services […] already working from home regularly or at least with some frequency in 2018 in the EU-27'.[9]

However, there is an uneven global and regional distribution of the sectors with a more established pre-Covid practice of remote working and of internet access. A World Bank report highlights these disparities in relation to the percentage of jobs that could in theory be done remotely (telecommutable jobs):

Developing countries are doubly disadvantaged; not only [do] they have fewer telecommutable jobs, but also internet access is far more binding when compared to richer economies. In low income countries, 10.2% of all jobs are telecommutable. However, only 3.8% of those jobs can be effectively performed from home. […] In contrast, internet access constraints in high income countries only prevent 1 of every 12 telecommutable jobs (3.3 percent of 38.8 per cent) from being performed from home.[10]

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8   Data from the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that in 2011, out of a total of 28.96 million employed people (employees and self-employed people) 1.03 million employed people in the UK mainly worked from home. That figure was 1.61 million in 2019, out of a total of 32.39 million. Those doing some element of work from home rises from 6.91 million in 2011 to 8.62 million in 2019 (26.6%); ONS, "Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020" (19 April 2021).

9   "Telework before the Covid-19 pandemic: Trends and drivers of differences across the EU", p.5.

10   Daniel Garrote Sanchez et al, "Who on Earth Can Work from Home?" (July 2020), pp.9-10.

Disparities also exist in terms of rural versus urban connectivity and the levels of digital skills necessary to maximise any opportunities arising from remote working and the ability to cooperate and network. This has been the situation within the EU, as set out by the European Commission in its vision for rural areas:

Limited infrastructure and low accessibility and digital connectivity also act as barriers to cooperation, networking and sourcing of knowledge from outside for innovation, as they limit access of people and businesses to new markets and services (including innovation support services) and educational opportunities. This can also limit the attractiveness of rural areas as places to live and work for innovative people and businesses. [...] Beyond the infrastructure challenges, there are barriers in rural areas around digital skills and uptake of digital technologies by both people and businesses which need to be lifted simultaneously as the infrastructure is provided.[11]

An important point to note here is how improving broadband infrastructure in rural areas is not seen as of itself ensuring optimum digital connectivity, innovation or economic development. These can only be achieved by improving digital skills and the adoption of digital technologies by rural citizens and businesses.

In its assessment of the EU's rural areas, the European Commission makes an explicit link between the challenges posed by increasing digitalisation and the inherent characteristics of and existing initiatives within rural communities that provide potential opportunities to rise to those challenges. However, very much in the spirit of the EU's LEADER programme, where 'decisions are made by local people about their own areas based on the premise that they are the ones who know best what their local area needs',[12] it is also noted that to properly exploit such opportunities the approach taken must be participatory and place-based.

[D]igitalisation can be beneficial for rural areas and communities only if the basic conditions in terms of infrastructure, skills and accessibility are met quickly enough to enable rural businesses to remain competitive, especially in remote areas, if the potential labour-saving effects of digitalisation are mitigated with the creation of new rural jobs and adequate training or re-skilling for workers, where necessary. A further condition is that relevant applications matching the specific needs of rural actors are developed through participatory and place-based approaches. Important opportunities come from developing digital innovation hubs, local technology hubs, brokers or intermediaries (e.g. local fablabs, smart villages etc.) that ease access to digital tools and needed skills for community actors or small entrepreneurs and SMEs that have no direct digital production process or activity. Many actors of the social economy, for example social entrepreneurs, are involved in such programmes (open food networks, local taxi platform cooperatives, coops/community organising delivery, mobility, sustainable tourism like fairbnb) which help them use digital technologies to optimise profitability.[13]

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[11] European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document (Part 2), "A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040" (2021), pp.86-87.

[12] Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, "About LEADER".

[13] "A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040", p.89.

Rural communities' response to the Coronavirus outbreak is also acknowledged by the European Commission as exemplifying how many of their characteristics equipped them to face this unprecedented situation, with 'local rural communities coming forward with their own solutions to tackle challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic in a spirit of community solidarity, and a strong interest for sharing this knowledge and experiences facilitated also by digitalisation'.[14] Moreover, during the pandemic many rural areas in the EU not only witnessed a renewed interest in rural tourism as a result of international travel restrictions, but also the move of many of their residents to remote working instead of commuting to their usual places of work in cities. This, as the European Commission notes, raises the potential prospect of attracting new residents to rural areas in the context of a post-Covid increase in the practice of remote working.

The need to cope with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic brings opportunities around evolution in working methods, distance learning and telework that could trigger skilled people to relocate to rural areas, especially in the most accessible rural areas.[15]

The OECD shares this assessment, believing that 'numerous companies at the global level are considering shifting to mass teleworking on a permanent basis even after the COVID-19 health crisis has been addressed',[16] which could benefit rural areas without necessarily coming at the expense of cities.

While a decline of cities seems unlikely, mass teleworking could promote a relocation of some jobs away from large metropolitan areas and represent an opportunity for regions lagging behind to catch up. This may be the case for small and medium-sized towns, semi-dense and rural areas with high-speed internet, which could attract growing shares of teleworkers and retain more residents, in a world where more jobs can be accessed from anywhere.[17]

Indeed, although with sectoral and national differences, the COVID-19 pandemic provoked a dramatic increase in the practice of remote working internationally. While in April 2020 up to half of American workers were working from home, which was more than double the percentage of those who worked from home at least occasionally in 2017-2018,[18] the phenomenon was similar elsewhere.

All countries for which comparable observations are available experienced increased rates of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic, though the extent of the increase varies widely […]. Based on self-reported information […] 47% of employees in France and the United Kingdom teleworked during the first lockdown periods (March-May 2020). Australia also reached the same rate by December 2020.

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14 "A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040", p.90.

15 "A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040", p.90.

16 OECD, "Exploring policy options on teleworking: Steering local economic and employment development in the time of remote work" (2020), p.5.

17 "Exploring policy options on teleworking: Steering local economic and employment development in the time of remote work" , p.5.

18 "Exploring policy options on teleworking: Steering local economic and employment development in the time of remote work" , p.8.

[...] In France, teleworking more than doubled compared to one year before, increasing by 25 percentage points, while in the United Kingdom, teleworking in April 2020 was 1.8 times the level before the pandemic, i.e. a 20-percentage point increase. In Australia, teleworking in December 2020 was 1.5 times the level "before March 2020", i.e. a 15-percentage point increase.

In Japan, which did not institute a nationwide lockdown in 2020, telework rates increased markedly from 10% in December 2019 to almost 28% in May 2020 [...].

In Italy, teleworking rates in the second quarter of 2020 were over 4 times the level before the pandemic, increasing by 15 percentage points on an annual basis. Finally, teleworking in Brazil doubled from 5% in 2019 to over 10% in May 2020.[19]

'Since a hybrid form of remote working is likely to be one of the lasting legacies of the pandemic, and potentially further accelerated by technological progress and investments', the OECD concludes, 'governments need to facilitate and enable this transition'.[20] If governments do so and the changing patterns of working that accelerated during the pandemic continue, then – with the appropriate policies and supports – rural areas would be set to benefit, while also contributing to a range of core policy objectives, such as carbon emissions reductions, regionally balanced economies, improving wellbeing, and widening access to employment.

Remote working opens up opportunities for regions outside large cities to attract new residents, boost economic activities and revitalise communities. In recent decades, rural regions have faced lower growth in living standards and higher population decline and ageing than cities. Attracting new workers and firms that embrace remote working offers rural regions the possibility to mitigate or reverse these trends. People with the potential to work remotely could be attracted to relocate to regions outside large cities offering affordable and suitable housing, lower costs of living and better access to environmental amenities.[21]

In terms of access to employment, data gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest women were more likely to work remotely than men.[22] In light of the expected post-Covid adoption of increased remote working practices, this represents a potential benefit for women in rural areas, although women's participation in the labour force remotely does not in any way obviate the need to ensure proper childcare provision in rural areas.

[W]omen in rural regions tend to have jobs more amenable to remote working than in denser areas. In fact, regions with higher than 25% of the population living in an area characterised as rural see a statistically significant impact of having higher rates of female employment on remote working. This is a clear avenue for governments looking to attain dual goals of more remote working and equality in the workforce. [...] For rural areas, this also means placing more focus on childcare arrangements for women who are less likely to work from home due to the task-based nature of their jobs.[23]

19 OECD, "Teleworking in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Trends and Prospects" (September 2021), pp.4-5.

20 OECD, "Implications of remote working adoption on place based policies: A focus on G7 countries" (2021), p.3.

21 "Implications of remote working adoption on place based policies: A focus on G7 countries" (2021), p.3.
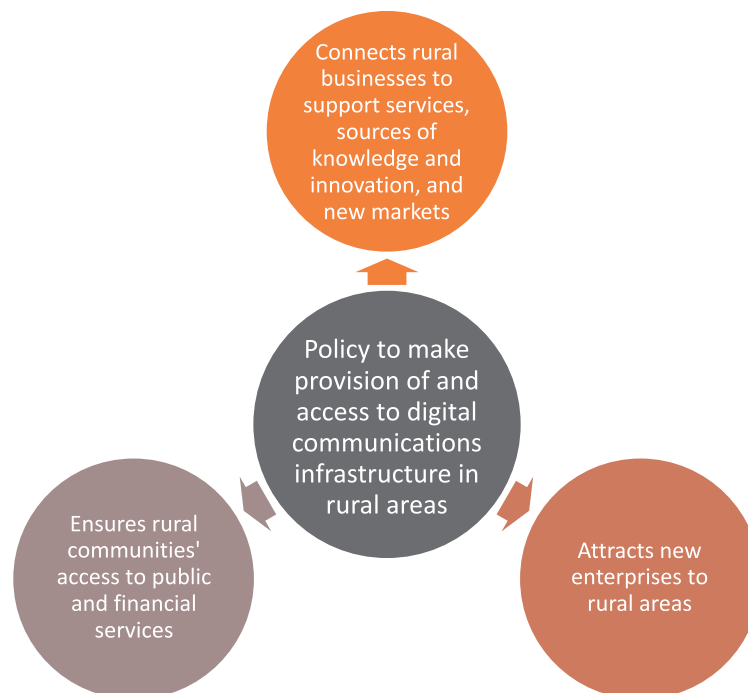
22 "Teleworking in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Trends and Prospects", p.6.

23 "Implications of remote working adoption on place based policies: A focus on G7 countries", pp.55-56.

Whilst it highlights the example of Japan as an 'an outstanding case of a country with a national strategy promoting teleworking as a tool to reverse the population decline as it seeks to reduce the excessive concentration of the population in the Tokyo metropolitan area and revitalize non-metropolitan economies',[24] the OECD sees regional governments as the main sources of initiatives to support the adoption of remote working practices. As well as creating strategies to attract workers and businesses interested in adopting or expanding remote working to their regions, regional governments have also 'aimed to improve remote work conditions by providing in-kind facilities for co-working such as industrial parks or co-working spaces'.[25] The provision of these spaces is not only seen as a means of reducing office costs for newcomers, but also creating a 'space for exchanging ideas and agglomeration economies among firms and workers, recreating the in-person contact that cities offer'.[26]

However, these regional policies and strategies aimed at encouraging rural residents to stay and attracting incoming workers and businesses are to some extent reliant on the continuation or further adoption of remote working practices that became widespread as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, the OECD poses the core question: 'Is this increase only temporary or will it last in the future?' Its response is: 'The answer is likely to depend on the balance between the pros and cons of teleworking for both workers and businesses'.[27]

Nevertheless, irrespective of the future take-up of remote working, there are some core policy implications in relation to rural development that arise from the insights gathered internationally. These arise from the more fundamental drive for policy to deliver on the provision and access to digital communications infrastructure in rural areas, and what this can deliver for rural communities and businesses, as outlined in the diagram below.

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24   "Implications of remote working adoption on place based policies: A focus on G7 countries", p.107. For a brief overview of policies a number of nations and regions have put in place in order to take advantage of models of working made possible by advances in digital communication technologies, see OECD, "The future of remote work: Opportunities and policy options for Trentino", pp.11-12.

25   "Implications of remote working adoption on place based policies: A focus on G7 countries", p.107.
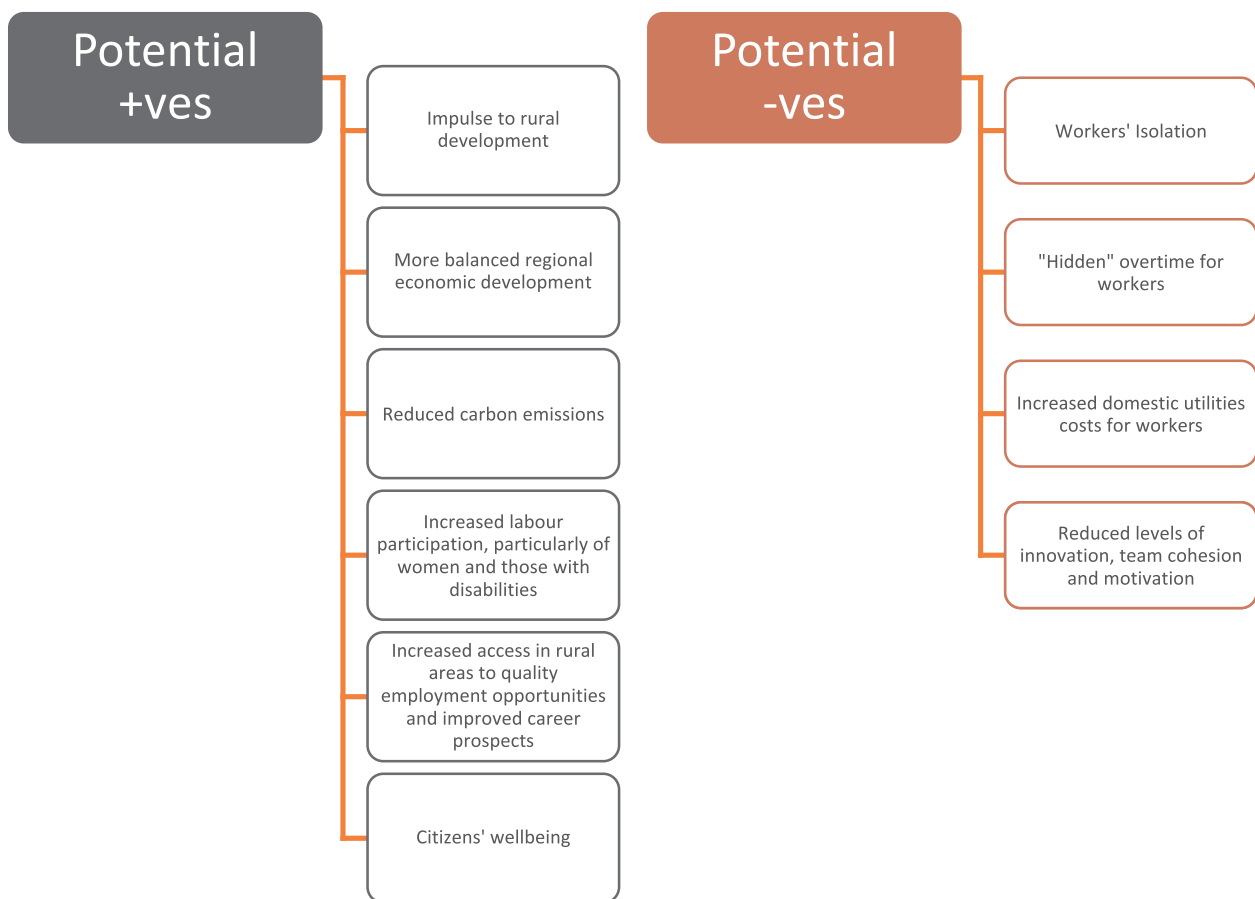
26   "Implications of remote working adoption on place based policies: A focus on G7 countries", p.107.

27   "Teleworking in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Trends and Prospects", p.8.

However, in order for these outcomes to be achieved, what international experience shows is that there are some crucial needs and factors that have to be taken into account and acted upon:

- Rural communities and enterprises must be equipped with the necessary digital skills to have equality of opportunity in adapting to and exploiting the opportunities provided by the advancement in digital technologies.

- The precise means of addressing the challenges presented to rural communities by increasing digitalisation will vary according to local characteristics, and must be place-based and shaped in collaboration with communities and identified needs.

Although it is perhaps too early to be conclusive as to the extent to which and in what forms remote working practices will be maintained by employers and employees in the post-Covid context, and whether the views expressed by both in surveys on their preferred models of working going forward will hold,[28] internationally many countries and regions are putting in place policies and strategies to exploit opportunities arising from what they anticipate will be a changed world of work. Drawing on how these make explicit links to rural development, there are some key factors to highlight in terms of the potential positive and negative impacts of the adoption of remote working practices:

Potential +ves	Potential -ves
Impulse to rural development	Workers' Isolation
More balanced regional economic development	"Hidden" overtime for workers
Reduced carbon emissions	Increased domestic utilities costs for workers
Increased labour participation, particularly of women and those with disabilities	Reduced levels of innovation, team cohesion and motivation
Increased access in rural areas to quality employment opportunities and improved career prospects	
Citizens' wellbeing	

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[28] For an overview of a number of those surveys, see "Teleworking in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Trends and Prospects", pp.8-9. A more recent ONS survey from August 2021 – "Coronavirus (COVID-19) and future working from home plans: August 2021" – on workers' future work plans showed 6% indicating that they would work all their hours from their usual place of work, 22% indicating they would work mostly from their usual place of work and sometimes from home, 18% that they would split their time evenly between their usual place of work and home, 49% that they would work mostly from home and sometimes in their usual place of work, and 4% that they would work from home and not return to their usual place of work.

In order to mitigate the potential negative impacts, policies and/or legislation need to be put in place to give workers the right to disconnect, and policies are also necessary to avoid workers facing increased costs related to working spaces or IT equipment. In terms of support to avoid increased costs associated with remote working, and to address potential impacts of isolation and loss of innovation or team cohesion for employers, the provision of co-working or shared spaces is seen not only as a means of mitigating for these factors, but also as a potential key factor for rural development, particularly for rural towns.

On the other hand, if national or regional governments recognise the future of work to involve remote working, and that remote working can invigorate rural development and regionally balanced economies, then that recognition needs to be put into practice through the creation of a policy context that is encouraging of remote working – that multiplies the "pros" and mitigates for the "cons". This includes using the possibilities of remote working in attracting new businesses to rural regions. A vehicle with significant potential to support further cooperation in this area is PEACE PLUS and its Smart Towns and Villages Programme, which is aimed at delivering better socioeconomic outcomes, particularly to rural communities.

3. BALANCING REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Core policy drivers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

The administrations in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland have recognised the need for more balanced regional economic development, with policies developed to ensure prosperity is not overly concentrated within particular regions of Ireland or Northern Ireland. A perhaps unexpected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the enforced move to remote working for many, has been a renewed focus on the potential merits of a greater dispersal of economic activity that includes rural areas. The chart below shows the increase in the percentage of workers in Northern Ireland working mainly from home between 2018 and 2020.[29]

% of workers in Northern Ireland working mainly from home
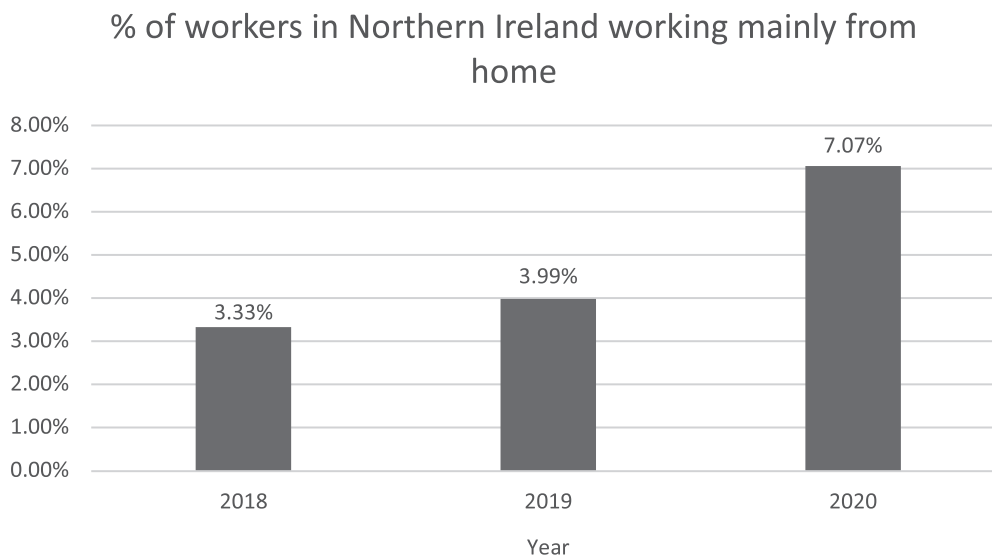
Although with greater percentages, a similar trend was seen in the Republic of Ireland. In 2018, 18% of workers were estimated to work from home on some basis; by May of 2020, 34% had started to work from home, while 12% had increased their hours of working from home.[30]

3.1 Policy in the Republic of Ireland

The recognition of the need for balanced regional economic development within the Belfast and Dublin administrations is evident within their respective core policy frameworks. The Irish Government's Programme for Government (PfG), for example, notes how the 'benefits of prosperity must be felt in every part of our country not just concentrated in a part of it', and that the Government 'has a crucial role to play in achieving balanced regional development that benefits the entire country'.[31] With the implicit acknowledgement that economic growth and prosperity have been largely concentrated around Dublin,[32] Ireland's PfG makes an explicit commitment to

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[29]   ONS, "Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020" (April 2021); Table 22, Percentage (%) of workers in each work from home status, by NUTS 1 region, 2018 to 2020.

[30]   The Western Development Commission and Whitaker Institute NUI Galway, Remote Working: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications – Report of the Expert Group on Remote Working (December 2020), pp.14-15.

[31]   Government of Ireland, Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (2020), p.60.

investment in rural areas that references new ways of working and the decentralisation of government bodies:

> This Government will invest in key infrastructure that will facilitate new working opportunities and foster enterprises in rural Ireland. We will support vital programmes for rural development and ensure the state plays an active role in opening new sites for state bodies outside the capital.[33]

Further detailed commitments are made to rural development as a core part of achieving balanced regional development, which include:

- Supporting 'the development of Broadband Connection Points across the country, as well as digital hubs that can support remote working in as many of the Broadband Connection Points as possible';

- Expanding 'the provision of free-to-use wireless internet connectivity in rural areas, through the roll-out of Broadband Connection Points, WiFi4EU public W-Fi networks and the Digital Innovation Programme'; and

- Developing 'a national remote working policy to facilitate employees in working from home, or from co-working spaces in rural areas, and to support the retention of skilled young people in rural communities'.[34]

Among the other core policy drivers in Ireland for balanced regional development are its National Development Plan and National Planning Framework, both central elements of Project Ireland 2040.[35] The *National Development Plan 2021-2030*, which is an updated and revised version of the *National Development Plan 2018-2027*,[36] while also having "Compact Growth" as one of its ten National Strategic Objectives (NSOs) makes clear its objective to invest in ways that will support regional development and a post-pandemic economic recovery that is felt across the country:

> Investment under the revised NDP will support the strong emphasis on regional development, a balanced and inclusive recovery, and the over-arching focus on climate [...]. In doing so, it will generate local employment and support substantial direct and indirect regionally dispersed job creation over a period of time.[37]

The National Strategic Objective focusing on the economy (NSO 5, "A Strong Economy, supported by Enterprise, Innovation and Skills") is not only explicit in its aim of 'attracting further investment

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[32] The Dublin NUTS3 region outstrips all other regions in the Republic of Ireland in relation to key indicators. According to CSO statistics on County Incomes and Regional GDP in 2019 Dublin was, for example, the region with the highest Gross Value Added per person (at €96,794 compared to the national average of €67,721), and with the highest disposable income per person (€25,696 compared to the national average of €22,032).

[33] Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, p.60.

[34] Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, p.61.

[35] For more on Project Ireland 2040, see https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/09022006-project-ireland-2040/.

[36] Government of Ireland, National Development Plan 2018-2027 (2018).

[37] Government of Ireland, National Development Plan 2021-2030 (2021), p.17.

to regions outside Dublin', but also commits to an enterprise and innovation strategy 'with a particular focus on regional economic and employment growth to secure competitive and innovative regional enterprises'.[38]

Alongside its wider commitments to regional development, the NDP also has a specific rural focus. Its third National Strategic Objective is "Strengthened Rural Economies and Communities", which begins by stating:
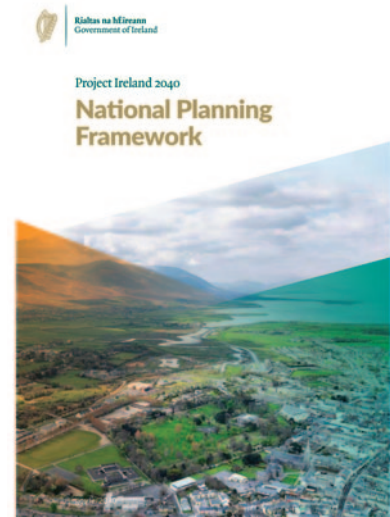
> The participation of rural communities […] is imperative to successfully achieving the full potential of the strategic outcomes detailed in the National Development Plan. This applies both in terms of the traditional pillars of the rural economy, as well as those emerging from such developments as improved transport connectivity, national broadband delivery, climate action and rural economic development.[39]

The NDP takes up the commitments made to rural development in the Programme for Government, and makes reference to its five-year policy for rural development, *Our Rural Future 2021-2025*, the main objectives of which are recalled in the NDP:

> The main objectives of the policy are to help more people live in rural Ireland, settling in our towns, villages and on the islands and help reverse population decline, to facilitate more people to work in rural Ireland, for rural areas to contribute to, and benefit from, the transition to a low-carbon and more sustainable society and for rural towns to be vibrant hubs for commercial and social activity.[40]

Meanwhile, Ireland's National Planning Framework (NPF) offers a succinct vision of where the country needs to be in terms of regional balance:

> From an administrative and planning point of view, Ireland is divided in to three regions: the Northern and Western, Southern, and Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly areas. We need to manage more balanced growth between these three regions because at the moment Dublin, and to a lesser extent the wider Eastern and Midland area, has witnessed an overconcentration of population, homes and jobs. We cannot let this continue unchecked and so our aim is to see a roughly 50:50 distribution of growth between the Eastern and Midland region, and the Southern and Northern and Western regions, with 75% of the growth to be outside of Dublin and its suburbs.[41]

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Project Ireland 2040
National Planning Framework

Where it offers specific and comprehensive focus on rural development, the NPF notes how although rural Ireland has faced a number of significant challenges over recent decades, 'The emergence of new technologies and improved infrastructural connectivity provide opportunities for diversification into new employment sectors and to build on the success of many Irish and

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[38] National Development Plan 2021-2030, p.92.
[39] National Development Plan 2021-2030, p.68.
[40] National Development Plan 2021-2030, p.69.
[41] Government of Ireland, National Planning Framework (2018), p.11.

foreign-owned companies supporting employment in rural areas'.[42] Bearing in mind that the NPF was published in 2018, and therefore predates the COVID-19 pandemic, it is of interest to note how it had already taken into consideration changing ways of working enabled by new technologies and digital connectivity:

[A]s digital links and opportunities for remote working and new enterprises continue to grow, employment is likely to increase in areas such as agri-tech, ICT, multi-media and creative sectors, tourism, and an added-value bio-economy and circular economy.[43]

What can be seen, then, in this brief look at some of Ireland's core policies is how the rural dimension is a key component of balanced regional development, and how the opportunities presented by increased digital connectivity and the emergence of new technologies are seen as prime factors in increasing the prosperity of rural areas.

3.2 Policy in Northern Ireland

For Northern Ireland, there is the same broad aim of a more regionally-balanced economy that offers access to opportunities across the jurisdiction. Indeed, the New Decade, New Approach agreement that led to the re-establishment in January 2020 of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly sets out how 'A top priority of the Executive will be to develop a regionally-balanced economy with opportunities for all'.[44] The Draft Outcomes Framework for the Programme for Government subsequently put out for consultation by the Northern Ireland Executive stresses the need for balanced regional economic development, noting how:

A strong, regionally balanced, inclusive economy is essential if we are to tackle the social and economic challenges facing us. This will be very significant in terms of the impacts of exit from the EU and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.[45]

Indeed, this need is expressed in relation to one of the draft PfG's core outcomes: "Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral". And within the specific aim of growing the economy to stimulate and attract investment across Northern Ireland, is the key objective of 'encouraging business start-ups and development through City and Growth Deals and supporting sustainable development of rural industries'.[46] Moreover, and of relevance to the context for new forms of working and rural connectivity, is the commitment to 'Developing our digital, energy and physical infrastructure to provide opportunities to grow business in all areas' as another key priority under this core outcome.[47]

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[42] National Planning Framework, p.68.

[43] National Planning Framework, p.75.

[44] Northern Ireland Office, New Decade, New Approach (January 2020), p.8.

[45] Northern Ireland Executive, Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document (25 January 2021), p.22.

[46] Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document, p.23.

[47] Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document, p.23. It is perhaps interesting to note that this is the only key priority area ("Infrastructure") under this core outcome where the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is not listed as one of the government departments with responsibility for implementation. It is the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for the Economy, and the Department of Finance who are given that responsibility.

As it outlines its core objectives, the PfG Draft Outcomes Framework points to a number of other policies seen as contributing to them. Among those identified as contributing to a regionally balanced economy is Northern Ireland's economic strategy, which not only sees the City and Growth Deals programme being able to 'make a major contribution to driving inclusive economic growth in the regions',[48] but also notes the role changing ways of working can bring new jobs and new people to rural areas:

> Investment in Northern Ireland will make it attractive as a place to work, learn and visit, and help retain and attract the talent needed to drive the innovation led economy of the future. The Covid-19 pandemic alongside digital advancements has driven transformative change in attitudes to remote working. For people in remote locations this change opens up the opportunity to participate in high value employment, and for people currently in cities there is an opportunity to retain their high value jobs but also live in a spectacular part of Northern Ireland.[49]

The draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland takes up this theme, with a commitment to 'maximise the benefits that digital networks offer to create a more regionally balanced, sustainable economy based on the principles of Green Growth', and forecasting 'increased home/remote working'.[50]

Connectivity in its broad sense is one of the five Thematic Pillars of Northern Ireland's Rural Policy Framework. Two of its four associated priority interventions also make the link between how the connectivity of rural areas and improved access to digital communication are fundamental to assisting in more balanced regional development. They are: 'To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres'; and 'To support improved telecommunications infrastructure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live'.[51]

However, if greater digital connectivity and technological innovations offer the potential to foster balanced regional economic development to the benefit of rural areas, this can only be properly captured with the necessary skills. Northern Ireland's economic strategy recognises this, especially as it identifies five key strategic clusters as drivers of economic success in which digital technologies and innovation are fundamental.[52] Therefore, enhancing digital skills is seen as a key priority:

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48   Department for the Economy, A 10X Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation (May 2021), p.31.

49   A 10X Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation, p.33.

50   Northern Ireland Executive, Infrastructure 2050: The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland – Draft Consultation Document (2022), p.48.

51   Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Rural Policy Framework for NI (2021), p.14.

52   These clusters are: Digital, ICT and Creative Industries; Fintech/Financial Services; Life and Health Sciences; Agri-Tech; and Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering.

Keeping pace with the rapid technological change in the global economy will require transformation in the digital capabilities of our population. The priority clusters identified in this vision where Northern Ireland can develop a unique, competitive proposition are intrinsically reliant on advanced digital skills; bolstering the supply of such skills will be key to our success. Beyond that, however, some level of digital capability is essential in almost every modern workplace and as the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated, is increasingly linked to an individual's capacity to participate in modern life. We need to look across the digital skills spectrum, boosting the supply of high level skills and ensuring everyone has the capacity to participate in, and benefit from, Northern Ireland's emerging economic prosperity.[53]

With City and Growth Deals being referenced in Northern Ireland's PfG Draft Outcomes Framework and other core policy documents, it is important to note how these also pay particular attention to the potential of digital technologies to boost regional development. The Mid South West's Regional Economic Strategy, for example, highlights how within its region, in Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council 'there is a particular strength in the digital tech sector – IT services, computing and advanced electronics, software and communications'.[54]

Similarly, the terms of the City Deal for Derry City and Strabane District Council describe how its immediate economic impacts 'will be further enhanced by the catalytic effect of the investment in knowledge capital that the region can expect to achieve in tandem with greatly improved infrastructural linkages, in particular digital connectivity'.[55] It is also worth noting how cross-border networks of local authorities have identified the potential of digital connectivity for their regions, as exemplified by the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), which points to how 'The growth in connected/remote working, largely driven by COVID-19 and associated public health responses, coupled with the emerging demand/need for basic services, have the potential to rejuvenate rural towns and villages'.[56]

Although many of the core policy documents for Northern Ireland remain in draft form given the particular circumstances in relation to the functioning of a Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, there can be little doubt that balanced regional development will remain a policy priority. There can also be little doubt that decision and policy-makers in Northern Ireland will have to deal with and exploit the opportunities arising from changes to working practices and increased digital connectivity. One of the challenges, however, will be the extent to which policies are put into practice that will be of benefit to rural communities.

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[53] A 10X Economy: Northern Ireland's Decade of Innovation, p.28.

[54] Mid South West Economic Engine, Regional Economic Strategy (2020), p.57.

[55] UK Government, Northern Ireland Executive and Derry City and Strabane District Council, Heads of Terms: City Deal and Inclusive Investment Plan (February 2021), pp.4-5.

[56] ICBAN, The Framework of Regional Priorities for the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland, 2021-2027 (2021), p.12.

4. REMOTE WORKING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: Policy and practice in Ireland and Northern Ireland

Policy in both Ireland and Northern Ireland has, perhaps with different degrees of intensity, placed balanced regional economic development as a priority for the respective administrations, with attention being paid to the development of rural areas and communities. Policy in both jurisdictions has also highlighted the opportunities presented by greater digital connectivity and technological advances to economic development in general, and to contributing to achieving more balanced regional development that includes rural areas. As noted in the previous section, core policy documents also make reference to the positive role changing working practices accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic can potentially make to rural communities. This section, therefore, takes a closer look at what policies in Ireland and Northern Ireland have to say about remote working, and what may be happening in practice.

4.1 Policy and practice in the Republic of Ireland

As we have already seen, Ireland's Programme for Government had committed to developing a national remote working policy 'to facilitate employees in working from home, or from co-working spaces in rural areas, and to support the retention of skilled young people in rural communities'.[57] That commitment was fulfilled with the publication of the National Remote Work Strategy, which states at the outset that its primary 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'.[58]

'Though the adoption of remote work was already increasing in Ireland', the Strategy highlights how 'COVID-19 has greatly accelerated this trend', and that it 'aims to build on the progress made in the adoption of remote work over this period'.[59] It also references how 94% of respondents to an October 2020 survey expressed a desire to continue to work remotely after the pandemic.[60] This is seen as evidence to support national policy investment in the future of remote work in Ireland, although the momentum for this investment in terms of a National Remote Work Strategy was already building prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

In 2019 the Irish Government published a report – Remote Work in Ireland – prepared by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, which examined how flexible working solutions could foster participation in the labour force. The focus was on remote working which, the report states, 'is increasingly viewed as an intervention with the potential to widen the talent pool across Ireland, stimulate regional growth, lessen accommodation pressures in cities and support the transition to a greener economy'.[61] It identifies a growing trend among businesses to engage in remote working practices, especially larger companies in electronic, financial and other services. The report also highlights the role played by hubs within this growing remote working landscape:

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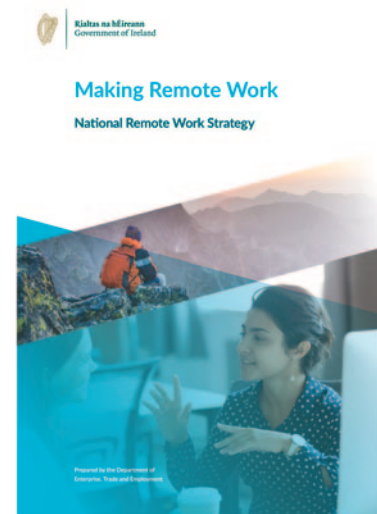
57 Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, p.61.

58 Government of Ireland, Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy (January 2021), p.2.

59 Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.2.

60 Alma McCarthy et al, Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey – Phase II Report (2020).

61 Government of Ireland, Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019 (2019), p.6.

The uptake of remote work is also being facilitated by the growing number of hubs that have been established across the country with informal estimates putting the number at 300. According to an audit undertaken by the Western Development Commission, a majority of hubs in the West offer facilities to remote workers, providing services including office space, hot desks, meeting rooms and networking/event spaces. However, remote work is usually part of a broader remit, with most hubs identifying as community enterprise centres, digital hubs or innovation centres.[62]

Although the report acknowledges that 'the full extent of remote working practices remains unknown in Ireland',[63] it is nevertheless able to point to a number of government initiatives that, along with independent and industry-led initiatives, were aimed at facilitating and promoting remote work. Among them is the Department of Rural and Community Development, which was said to be 'undertaking extensive work around remote work to support rural regeneration, in particular through collaboration with the Western Development Commission, which has committed to the development and promotion of a cohesive network of enterprise and remote working hubs, resources and supports along the Atlantic Economic Corridor'.[64]

However, the report goes on to note that although there were a growing number of hubs, particularly outside the Dublin region, there was 'no official consensus on the number of hubs operating in Ireland, and indeed, little consensus on their classification and occupancy rates', which made it 'difficult to measure the prevalence or effectiveness of hub-working in Ireland'.[65] Nevertheless, when it comes to rural and community development, the promotion of remote working as a tool for rural and community development 'is focused on supporting the creation of hubs and the practice of hub-working'.[66]

The 2021 National Remote Work Strategy picks up on the 2019 Remote Work in Ireland report's comments on the lack of accurate knowledge of the precise number, type and usage of hubs.

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.[67]

Therefore, one of the conclusions reached by the National Remote Work Strategy is that data on remote working trends, including the use of remote working hubs, needs to be 'captured officially and regularly to provide policymakers with a baseline against which future trends, targets and policy impact can be measured'.[68] This conclusion is translated into three of the five actions set out in the strategy in relation to the development and leveraging of remote work infrastructure:

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[62] Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019, p.7.
[63] Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019, p.8.
[64] Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019, p.8.
[65] Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019, p.19.
[66] Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019, p.32.
[67] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.22.
[68] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.23.

- Extending the mapping and classification of hubs across the country in order to develop national data on hub infrastructure;

- Mapping of commuter, skills and childcare facilities to inform future hub development decisions, and identify appropriate economic metrics to follow the impact of remote working in both hubs and homes; and

- Assess how existing hub classifications can inform future funding decisions, with specific consideration of how hub infrastructure aligns with the transition to a low carbon economy.[69]

Again, although the National Remote Work Strategy is clear on the actions needed to gather official data on the number and nature of hubs, commuting patterns, digital skills and childcare facilities, it nevertheless makes clear that investment in hubs is another of the priority actions. Indeed, the first action listed on the development and leveraging of remote work infrastructure is: 'Make a significant investment in remote work hubs and infrastructure in underserved areas to underpin the development of the national hubs network'.[70] The last action listed is to seek to accelerate the National Broadband Plan, and to deliver connectivity 'as soon as is feasible across rural Ireland as a central part of remote work infrastructure'.[71]

A significant indication of the practical outworkings of the National Remote Work Strategy, as well as the fulfilment of a key commitment of the Irish Government's rural development policy – *Our Rural Future* – was the official launch on 31 May 2021 by the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD, of the National Connected Hubs Network and Connectedhubs.ie.[72] With the stated ambition of seeing over 100 hubs connected by the end of 2021, this initiative is viewed as playing a key role in rural development, as noted by the Minister:

"Hub working can support the development of employment opportunities and career paths in rural areas. This will help to give young people the choice to stay closer to home while pursuing their careers and also to encourage people living in cities to consider moving to a more rural location".[73]

Crucially, however, the development and leveraging of remote work infrastructure is only one of the three pillars of the National Remote Work Strategy. Integral to the strategy's overarching objective of ensuring that remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace are the other two pillars: creating a conducive environment for remote working, and building a remote work policy and guidance framework. Moreover, the strategy also sets out what are seen as the underpinning conditions to support the three pillars, which consist of the promotion of remote working and best practice, as well as the skills needed for the increased adoption of remote working.

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[69] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.21.

[70] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.21.

[71] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.21.

[72] ConnectedHubs.ie 'is designed to simplify and standardise the process of sourcing and booking spaces, desks, offices and events in a hub for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer. ConnectedHubs.ie is operated by The National Hub Network, a Government of Ireland initiative that provides a vehicle for individual hubs to come together to maximise the economic opportunity of remote working'; https://connectedhubs.ie/about-connected-hubs.html.

[73] Department of Rural and Community Development, "Our Rural Future: Minister Humphrey launches National Connected Hubs Network" (31 May 2021), https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/afcc6-our-rural-future-minister-humphreys-launches-national-connected-hubs-network/.

In terms of the creation of a conducive environment for remote working, this is based on ensuring clarity on the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees, health and safety legislation, and taxation. To prevent the increased adoption of remote working from leading employees to work longer hours than would have been the case if they were working from their usual place of work, blurring the boundaries between people's professional and private lives, the strategy states that 'the Government has asked the [Workplace Relations Commission] to draw up a code of practice in this area', making it 'possible to refer to the code of practice in disputes and adjudications'.[74] The National Remote Work Strategy also highlights how the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Employment's webpage on 'Guidance for Working Remotely' 'draws together all the existing laws, regulation and guidance in place for employers and employees engaging in remote work'.[75]

Legislation on employees' right to request to work remotely is also addressed in the strategy, which notes how the position in Ireland was that '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'.[76] It, therefore, notes the need for such legislation to be introduced, with the Government subsequently presenting on 25 January 2022 the Right to Request Remote Work Bill 2021, which is currently in its pre-legislative scrutiny phase.[77]

As for the health and safety implications of the increased adoption of remote working practices, the National Remote Work Strategy points to the position of the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), which is the body responsible for health and safety in the workplace. It notes how 'The HSA is clear that responsibility for health and safety rests with the employer whether or not work is being done remotely',[78] and highlights the guidance issued to employers and employees by the HSA.[79] However, importantly the strategy also points out how 'Health and safety legislation is governed by EU law', and that relevant EU Directives are currently under review by the EU's Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work.[80]

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[74] *Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy*, p.15. The Workplace Relations Commission is the body with responsibility for enforcing the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997, under which 'responsibility lies with employers to ensure employees are afforded sufficient time away from their workplace for rest', and the Act sets out 'the breaks, consecutive rest hours, and annual leave that employees must be provided'. Updated on 25 January 2022, the Workplace Relations Commission's position on breaks and rest periods while working from home is: 'The same rules regarding statutory breaks and rest periods apply whether you are working remotely or on-site' (https://www.workplacerelations.ie/en/news-media/workplace_relations_notices/breaks-and-rest-periods-while-working-from-home.html).

[75] *Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy*, p.15. The webpage on 'Guidance for Working Remotely' can be found at https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Remote-Working/.

[76] *Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy*, p.15.

[77] See Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, *Right to Request Remote Work Bill 2021 (25 January 2022)*.

[78] *Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy*, p.16.

[79] See Health and Safety Authority, *"Guidance on Working from Home for Employers and Employees"* (October 2020).

[80] The relevant Directives are the *Council Directive of 29 May 1990* on the minimum safety and health requirements for work with display screen equipment (90/270/EEC), and the *Council Directive of 12 June 1989* on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work (89/391/EEC).

In terms of the taxation implications of remote working, the National Remote Work Strategy refers to some of the potential additional costs of working from home:

> 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.[81]

On this issue, it concludes with the commitment that 'the Department of Finance will review tax arrangements for remote working for employers and employees and assess the merits of further enhancements'.[82] This commitment was addressed by the Irish Government in tax policy changes as part of Budget 2022 and legislated for in the Finance Act 2021,[83] specifically to support and facilitate remote working. However, it should be noted that the issue of double taxation of cross-border workers resident in the Republic of Ireland but wishing to undertake remote work for employers in Northern Ireland, which came into focus during the COVID-19 pandemic, has not been resolved. 'Under current Republic of Ireland legislation', as explained by a report from the Centre for Cross Border Studies, 'cross-border workers who live in the Republic of Ireland and work for a Northern Ireland based company are unable to claim Trans Border Workers Relief […] if they perform any work-related activities in the Republic'.[84] Given that this meant such cross-border workers, obliged to work from home due to the imposition of public health restrictions, would be denied tax relief, the Irish Government introduced a temporary waiver. That waiver has been discontinued, and so, 'From the perspective of cross-border workers resident in the Republic of Ireland as articulated by the Cross Border Workers Coalition, it means that cross-border workers will not have the same flexible working conditions as colleagues who live in Northern Ireland post-pandemic'.[85] According to information received through the Centre for Cross Border Studies' Border People project,[86] it appears some cross-border workers are making use of remote working hubs or co-working spaces in the other jurisdiction in order to overcome these obstacles. However, it would be important that by employing the same spirit of innovation and flexibility found during the pandemic, a more permanent resolution is found to address this situation.

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[81]   Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.17. For more on the public consultation referred to, see Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, "Consultation on Remote Work Guidance 2020: Summary and analysis of submissions received".

[82]   Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.17.

[83]   As part of these changes, for example, in light of 'Government policy to facilitate and support remote working, the current tax arrangements for working from home will be enhanced and formalised so that an income tax deduction amounting to 30% of the cost of vouched expenses for heat, electricity and broadband in respect of those days spent working from home can be claimed by taxpayers' (Government of Ireland, Budget 2022: Tax Policy Changes, 12 October 2021, p.10). Section 3 (2) of the Finance Act 2021 sets out, for example, how: 'Where in any year of assessment a remote worker, having made a claim in that behalf, proves that he or she has incurred and defrayed relevant expenses […], he or she shall be entitled to claim a deduction' (Houses of the Oireachtas, Finance Act 2021, 21 December 2021).

[84]   Maureen O'Reilly, "The impact of COVID legislation and policy on cross-border integration: The Case of Cross-Border (Frontier) Workers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland" (2021), p.21.

[85]   "The impact of COVID legislation and policy on cross-border integration: The Case of Cross-Border (Frontier) Workers in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland", p.22.

[86]   For information on the Border People project, visit https://borderpeople.info/.

As for the pillar in the National Remote Work Strategy dedicated to building a remote work policy and guidance framework, we have already noted the acknowledged deficiencies on relevant official data on trends in remote working, which leads to the commitment to 'develop a remote work data infrastructure against which progress can be measured'.[87] However, given the cross-cutting nature of the effects of increased adoption of remote working practices, and of the Irish Government's stated intention to make remote working a permanent feature of the Irish workplace, this pillar stresses the need for collaboration. The strategy therefore states:

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. After the publication of the Strategy, this IDG will continue to meet regularly to ensure that work being carried out across Government is aligned. [The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment] 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.[88]

The National Remote Work Strategy's underpinning conditions in support of its three core pillars consist of the promotion and awareness-raising of remote work, the Government leading by example, and remote work training and advising on the skills necessary to successfully adopt remote working practices. In relation to leading by example, the strategy recalls the commitment made in the Programme for Government 'that public sector employers, colleges and other bodies move to 20 per cent home and remote working in 2021', and notes that the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform '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 per cent home working in the public sector in 2021'.[89]

Promoting and raising awareness of remote work is seen in the strategy as a necessity stemming from the transition to an increased remote workforce, where 'employers need to be made aware of best practice in this area and supported in their adoption of remote work policies'.[90] The specific key actions related to this include giving responsibility to the Department of Rural and Community Development and the National Hub Networking Group to raise awareness of the remote work hub infrastructure in Ireland, and to Enterprise Ireland, the IDA, the Western Development Commission and Skillnet Ireland to promote remote work amongst businesses, raise awareness of remote work training and advising on relevant skills, and advising on best practice in relation to ensuring equality of opportunity among remote and office-based workers. The pre-existing work of Grow Remote should also be noted here, which was founded in 2018 'as a response to the erosion of [...] rural communities', and believing that 'remote working is one of the essential keys to unlocking true freedom to live happily and sustainably, anywhere that you choose'.[91] Since March 2021, its work to promote and support remote working has been supported by an Advisory Panel that includes representatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.[92]

[87]   Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.23.
[88]   Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.22.
[89]   Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.25.
[90]   Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.25.
[91]   Grow Remote, Strategy 2021-2023 (2021).

Optimising digital connectivity forms a central plank of Ireland's rural development policy – *Our Rural Future*. The ambition from the outset is:

[To] transform digital connectivity for rural communities and enterprises through the delivery of high speed broadband to every part of the country, ensuring equality of access to digital services and supporting the diversification of rural economies and jobs through digital technologies. Our aim is to bridge the gap in urban-rural connectivity and enable rural businesses, particularly small and micro enterprises, to trade online and broaden their customer base.[93]
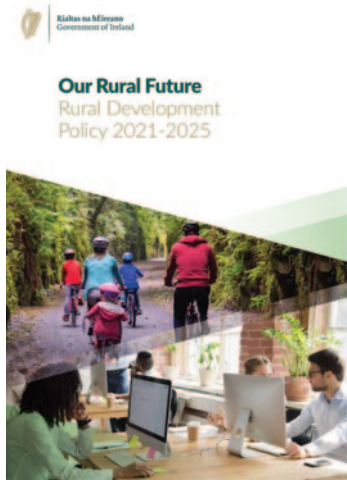
To this end, *Our Rural Future* brings together a number of Government initiatives as fundamental to rural development policy in relation to digital connectivity, and how the Department for Rural and Community Development 'will promote remote working in the public and private sectors and improve digital skills to ensure that all people can avail of the social and economic benefits afforded by digital technologies'.[94] This includes availing of the National Broadband Plan, where the State will intervene in areas where commercial operators are unlikely to invest in the delivery of high speed broadband, recalling that 'These intervention areas are primarily in rural locations'.[95] Additionally, in terms of the provision of digital connectivity infrastructure to rural areas, rural development policy will be to provide initial broadband access to the most remote rural communities through the rollout of approximately 300 community-based Broadband Connection Points (BCPs). In advance of the full rollout of the National Broadband Plan, these BCPs will offer free WiFi internet connectivity to remote rural locations, while in the longer term 'it is envisaged that many of the BCPs will act as a central point for the provision of digital services in the community'.[96]

Investing in remote working is seen as crucial in *Our Rural Future* as remote working 'has the potential to be transformative for rural Ireland'.[97] A major feature of Ireland's rural development policy is the investment in remote working hubs:

Supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, remote working can encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. Developing remote working hubs in rural town centres will have the added benefit of helping revitalise those towns.

The shift from the fixed workplace model will be supported by a national network of remote/co-working spaces and enterprise hubs which have the potential to support our national economic development.

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92 For the full membership of Grow Remote's Advisory Panel, see https://growremote.ie/our-advisory-panel/.

93 Government of Ireland, Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 (29 March 2021), p.30.

94 Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.30.

95 Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.31. The document also notes that 'Up to €2.7 billion of Exchequer funding will be invested in the intervention areas to provide a future-proofed high speed broadband network to nearly 600,000 premises, including new builds' (p.31).

96 Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.32.

97 Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.32.

They will enable many people to work locally and offer new or expanding companies the opportunity to locate in rural areas, either as primary locations or advance second sites.[98]

As was the case in the National Remote Work Strategy, which it makes reference to, and in light of the establishment of many public, private and community owned hubs across the country, *Our Rural Future* notes the need for these to be developed in a cohesive manner, and states that 'the Government will invest strategically in remote working hubs in rural areas and create a cohesive national network of available working facilities'.[99] This, as has already been pointed out, was addressed through the establishment of the National Connected Hubs Network, announced by the Minister for Rural and Community Development in May 2021, and the creation of ConnectedHubs.ie. Ireland's rural development policy in relation to digital connectivity also highlights the role of local authorities in the development of Local Digital Strategies, the importance of the availability of high speed broadband for rural schools and of connectivity to facilitate remote learning, as well as the need for individuals and communities to acquire digital skills. In all, *Our Rural Future* sets out twenty policy measures to be delivered by government in relation to optimising digital connectivity for rural communities.

Remote working, and in particular remote working hubs, are also seen by *Our Rural Future* to be central to supporting employment and careers in rural areas, and to realising the ambition of having 'more people working in rural Ireland, with access to quality employment opportunities and improved career prospects'[100]. In this context, hubs are positioned as being able to 'support balanced regional development by attracting multi-national corporations to locate in rural and regional centres, particularly as "landing space" locations in Ireland', and where the national hub network 'will not just support remote working, but will create an entrepreneurial ecosystem to encourage business start-ups and foster engagement and collaboration with other entrepreneurs'.[101]

To summarise, policy and practice in the Republic of Ireland in relation to remote working and rural development has some of its initial roots in commitments made in the Programme for Government, with greater guidance coming from the National Remote Work Strategy. Significant policy investment is made in the establishment of remote working hubs within a cohesive national hub network, underpinned by a digital infrastructure provided by the National Broadband Plan and the Broadband Connection Points. However, the potential success of remote working in contributing to rural development is also dependent on broader policy objectives, such as creating a conducive environment for remote working, and building a remote work policy and guidance framework. Allied to these, and underpinning them in the National Remote Work Strategy, is the requirement for promotion of remote working and best practice, as well as the skills needed for the increased adoption of remote working. While not specific to rural development, they are fundamental to ensuring remote working contributes to the future prosperity of rural communities, and can be regarded as key ingredients for success in this area.

98   Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.32.
99   Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.32.
100 Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.37.
101 Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.40.

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

Alignment between core policy (i.e. Programme for Government) and strategies

Remote working policy and strategy to implement it

Investment in digital infrastructure

Support for the growth of digital spaces and entrepreneurial ecosystems

Provision of childcare

Investment in digital skills

4.2 Policy and practice in Northern Ireland

Earlier in this report we highlighted how Northern Ireland's core policy frameworks placed importance on regionally-balanced economic development, digital connectivity, and digital skills. Those frameworks included the Draft Outcomes Framework for the Programme for Government, Northern Ireland's economic strategy, and the Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. The latter reflects the findings of the Working Group 'tasked with considering the issues that could contribute to the thematic pillar: "To improve connectivity between rural and urban areas"'.[102] Within the Working Group's findings are references to how remote working, remote working spaces and broadband hubs can benefit rural development and communities, while also contributing to efforts to address climate change.[103] Thus, positioned to address climate change, the Rural Policy Framework records the following views from the Working Group:

- Re-evaluating and reducing commuting will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions. This could be done via the development of broadband hubs in small towns and villages.

- Remote working could also lead to improvements in quality of life and health. If remote working is promoted in the region, it can lead to the development of remote working spaces that will re-use retail space in smaller settlements and support local businesses. Remote working will need to be actively promoted by the public sector as a positive way of working contributing to a sustainable living, working, active landscape valued by everyone.[104]

As the initial findings from the Working Group were presented before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Group was asked to consider whether the pandemic had impacted on the priorities it had identified. Among the impacts or implications set out in the Rural Policy Framework that relate to the findings highlighted above are:

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[102] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.102. As part of the process that led to the Rural Policy Framework, five Working Groups 'were established on the principle of collaborative working and included representatives of DAERA, other departments, councils, rural stakeholders and other relevant public authorities' (p.38). It should also be noted that, in the context of needing better urban-rural linkages, improving broadband provision was part of a key priority of DAERA's Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation – A New Framework (2016): 'Improve urban-rural linkages (e.g. through the provision of better transport and broadband services etc)' (p.38).

[103] In this regard it should be noted that in March 2022 the Northern Ireland Assembly passed the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill, which in Section 1 sets out that 'The Northern Ireland departments must ensure that the net Northern Ireland emissions account for the year 2050 is at least 100% lower than the baseline'. At the time of writing the Bill is awaiting Royal Assent.

[104] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.103.

- Some jobs can be done effectively remotely, whilst others cannot. Many more organisations invested in capacity and hardware and now have staff with the capability to continue remote working post-lockdown. Employees who were already IT literate were able to develop new skills quickly and utilise new platforms/technology effectively to enhance their remote working.

- Potential in broadband hub idea in small towns/villages to foster remote working and this can also complement active transport.[105]

Importantly, the priority interventions developed in the Rural Policy Framework for 'connectivity between rural and urban centres', are based on a number of specific recommendations, including one on remote working that refers to collaboration with community and voluntary sectors, and to the potential role of socioeconomic hubs:

Promote remote working across NI. This could involve identifying and tackling barriers to accessing services and support innovative solutions to service provision in rural areas through collaboration with the voluntary/community sector and social economy. This could include regeneration of rural towns and villages and the piloting of socioeconomic hubs to provide enhanced access to service provision.[106]

An illustrative example of work being done in this area is the initiative by Grow the Glens, a community group that received £300,000 from the UK Government's Community Ownership Fund to create a community digital hub in Cushendall, at the site of the former police station. The overall aim in establishing the hub is to create employment in the area, giving people the skills, capabilities and the appropriate facilities to capitalise on advances in digital technology and the changing world of work.

However, while the findings of the Working Group contained in the Rural Policy Framework refer to the potential benefits of remote working, remote working spaces and broadband hubs, they are also acutely conscious of the need for hard and soft infrastructure to enable rural communities to exploit the possibilities of remote working. Broadly speaking, hard infrastructure encompasses the provision of broadband and mobile communications services, while soft infrastructure refers to digital skills; without these rural areas are unlikely to have equality of access to the opportunities arising from the changes to working practices and of wider advances in digital connectivity.

In terms of the hard infrastructure, the Rural Policy Framework recalls how 'there has been a digital divide between urban and rural areas, and between some rural areas and other rural areas', and that 'Many parts of rural NI do not have sufficient access to broadband and lags behind urban provision'.[107] However, it also points to what is already being done to address this, and suggests further possibilities arising from UK Government initiatives. Thus, Project Stratum is highlighted as a key initiative already underway to improve rural broadband:

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[105] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.109.

[106] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.107.

[107] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.105.

Project Stratum, which is being led by the Department for the Economy, provides for a £165 million (including £15 million funding from DAERA) broadband rollout scheme in NI. This scheme seeks to improve connectivity for those unable to access broadband services of at least 30 megabits per second (Mbps). It is anticipated that around 76,000 premises, primarily in rural areas, are eligible for potential intervention as Project Stratum rolls out.[108]

Reminding us that as telecommunications is not within the competence of the Northern Ireland Executive, and is instead a reserved matter controlled by the UK Government's Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the Rural Policy Framework suggests making use of a number of UK-wide initiatives that provide a minimum of 30 Mbps to rural premises, which could address any gaps in the Project Stratum rollout. These include the Shared Rural Network, and the Rural Gigabit Connectivity programme, with the former resulting from a £1 billion deal between the UK Government (led by DCMS) and major mobile network operators 'to make poor and patchy rural phone coverage a thing of the past', and 'with the biggest coverage improvements in rural parts of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales'.[109]

According to the UK Government, the Rural Gigabit Connectivity programme 'aims to assist Building Digital UK (BDUK) which is part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and partner organisations, in delivering nationwide gigabit-connectivity in locations that are unlikely to benefit from commercial investment'.[110] The way in which the programme would be rolled out is set out as follows:

The RGC Programme is testing the Hub model approach. This operates by identifying public sector buildings that meet qualifying criteria set out by BDUK, and upgrading them to access gigabit-capable connectivity. The benefit of this approach is two-fold:

- By providing a gigabit-capable connection to a public building it enhances its service to the public
- The surrounding area may incidentally become increasingly viable for commercial intervention, stimulating the market to build more networks in these areas.

Alongside the Hub model, a Rural Voucher works in parallel to further encourage greater take-up of gigabit-capable connectivity to residents and businesses in the hardest to reach rural areas of the UK.[111]

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[108] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.105. For further information on Project Stratum, see the Department for the Economy (https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/topics/telecoms/project-stratum), and the portal developed by Fibrus, the company awarded the contract for the rollout programme (https://hyperfastni.com/).

[109] Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, "Press Release – Shared Rural Network: £1bn deal to end poor rural mobile coverage agreed" (9 March 2020). See also https://srn.org.uk/, and for an update on progress see House of Commons Library, "Gigabit broadband: Funding for rural and hard to reach areas" (21 June 2022).

[110] Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, "Rural Gigabit Connectivity Programme: Key Information Update – August 2020" (August 2020), p.2.

[111] "Rural Gigabit Connectivity Programme: Key Information Update – August 2020", p.3. The Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme sees the UK Government 'providing up to £210m worth of voucher funding as immediate help for people experiencing slow broadband speeds in rural areas' (https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/).

More recently, the UK Government has announced that more than 900 public buildings in Northern Ireland have been provided with improved broadband as a result of its programmes, which means that 'Vital local services including hospitals, community centres and fire stations across Northern Ireland can access internet speeds at least ten times faster than their old mostly copper-based connections'.[112]

Alongside the need to address hard infrastructure provision in rural areas, the Rural Policy Framework highlights what needs to be done in terms of digital skills – the soft infrastructure necessary to enable rural communities to benefit from advances in digital technologies and new ways of working. Therefore, in terms of access, the Rural Policy Framework states:

- Digital inclusion – digital inclusion means not only having access to internet connectivity but also the skills, motivation and trust to go online with confidence. Digital inclusion initiatives that address these key elements can help those that are excluded to reap the benefits of the internet that many take for granted, e.g. reducing social isolation, improving independence, financial inclusion and better quality of life. This is already a priority for [Full Fibre NI] and the Rural Councils.

- Investment in education is necessary to ensure people are trained to use digital services. This is true for businesses and residents, and particularly older people should be targeted to learn how to use online services, and how to use it as a tool to stay connected with family and friends. Training should be delivered locally, preferably in libraries where the infrastructure exists.[113]

Although a blog post by the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Services notes that 'In terms of addressing NI's existing digital skills gap, it is unclear if the NI Executive has a dedicated strategy in place',[114] an illustrative example of what is being done in this area with a specific focus on rural communities is the collaboration between the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and Supporting Communities. It enabled members of eight rural community groups to participate in a digital skills pilot project that provided essential skills, such as accessing public services and staying safe online.[115]

Initiatives such as this, and what the Rural Policy Framework has to say on digital skills, could be seen as rurally-sensitive iterations of the broader Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. Noting how stakeholder engagement and research leading to its development had stressed the critical importance of enhancing digital skills, the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland goes on to remark:

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[112] Building Digital UK and Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, "Press release: More than 900 public buildings in Northern Ireland get broadband boost" (30 May 2022).

[113] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.106.

[114] Niamh McHugh, "Addressing the Digital Divide in Northern Ireland", Northern Ireland Assembly Research Matters (9 December 2021).

[115] For more information, see Supporting Communities, "Digital Skills Pilot Project Targets Rural Communities" (12 April 2022).

The social and economic necessity of this could not have been more starkly portrayed than through the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has highlighted the growing digital divide, as those who could use technology, to stay in contact with family and friends and to minimise risk, did so by remotely accessing essential services. Similarly, in our labour market, many individuals continued to work remotely, while considerable numbers of others, largely lower skilled individuals in elementary occupations, faced furlough or redundancy.[116]

Acknowledging that 'It is incumbent upon Government to empower individuals to take the social and labour market opportunities that digital skills afford',[117] the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland is centred on three overarching aims that apply to digital social inclusion, digital skills for labour market inclusion, and advanced digital skills to drive economic prosperity:

- basic digital literacy needs to be improved to address social and economic inequalities;
- robust base of digital capability needs to be developed to enable labour market inclusion and to underpin economic expansion; and
- significant change is needed in the numbers of individuals following advanced digital skills pathways in computer science and software engineering.[118]

The importance of these aims being achieved within rural Northern Ireland is essential to ensuring equality of opportunity,[119] and to bring about a regionally-balanced economy. Again, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a prompter as the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Edwin Poots MLA, introduces his Department's Innovation Strategy:

The ability of our people and sectors to address challenges through exploitation of technology, is evidenced in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has seen the widespread and rapid adoption of digital and socially distant working practices to safeguard human health, bringing fundamental change to how our society, organisations and businesses operate.[120]

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[116] Department for the Economy, Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy (March 2022), p.85.

[117] Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy, p.85.

[118] Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland: Skills for a 10X Economy, p.90.

[119] The issue of digital inclusion is also referenced in terms of its rural dimensions in the Department of Finance's Making Lives Better: A Strategy for Digital Transformation of Public Services 2017-2021, which sets out how the establishment of Digital Resilience Foundation Programme will: 'Formalise strategic partnerships to enable the delivery of priority targeted interventions to support specific difficult to reach groups such as rural communities and the economically disadvantaged' (p.25).

[120] Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, DAERA Innovation Strategy 2021-2025 (April 2021), p.5.

However, although the Minister makes reference to remote working practices, DAERA's Innovation Strategy does not really explore the issue further, with its primary focus being on how to encourage innovation to contribute to and make use of three major areas: Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, and Transformative Bioeconomy. Instead, then, the issue of remote working receives comparatively greater prominence in the Rural Policy Framework.

A policy initiative on remote working that could be of benefit to rural communities, and perhaps more specifically to rural towns, is the rollout of the Department of Finance's Reform of Property Management Programme. In a written statement in 2021, the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy MLA, noted how the ability of Northern Ireland's civil servants to work remotely would contribute to this programme and to driving economic activity outside Belfast:

> Providing staff with the flexibility to work remotely is an important part of this [Reform of Property Management] Programme. Historically, places of work within the civil service have been concentrated in Belfast. Where people work influences where they spend their money, so assisting people to work throughout the region will promote regional economic balance.[121]

Once again, the recent public health crisis leads the Minister to state that 'the response to Covid has confirmed that remote working is feasible and productive',[122] although important recommendations to adopt remote working practices within the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the wider public sector can be traced back to what became known as the "Bain Review" and the report by Sir George Bain published in 2010. Among the report's conclusions were the following:

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF POLICY ON

Location of **Public Sector Jobs**

- Flexible working should be an integral part of any relocation strategy adopted in Northern Ireland.

- All public sector bodies should consider implementing flexible working approaches and include these within their business plans.

- The Northern Ireland Civil Service and other public sector bodies in Northern Ireland should explore developing a network of regional satellite offices that could serve mobile public sector workers from a range of organisations. This might involve building on the Department for Regional Development's teleworking scheme and making better use of the existing regional estate.

- The Northern Ireland Civil Service and other public sector bodies in Northern Ireland should develop an information and communications technology strategy for flexible working, which would deal, among other things, with security issues.

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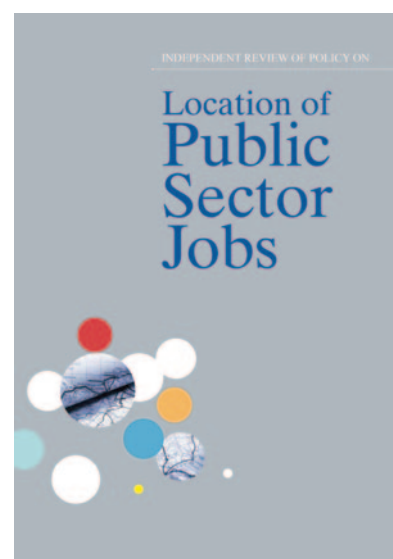
121 Department of Finance, Written Ministerial Statement – Connect2 Regional Hubs (18 February 2021), p.1.

122 Written Ministerial Statement – Connect2 Regional Hubs, p.2. The experiences of Northern Ireland Civil Service staff of having to work from home are reflected in a report – "Working during the pandemic: The lived experience of Northern Ireland Civil Service staff" (4 May 2021) – which, drawing on the implications of reduced commuting, suggests: 'to achieve the many benefits identified organisations should explore radical and innovative options that give staff the choice of where, when and how they work in order to reduce commuting' (p.151).

- The Northern Ireland Civil Service and other public sector bodies in Northern Ireland should move to finalise and agree policies on remote and home working as a matter of urgency.[123]

Perhaps somewhat belatedly, and prompted by the pandemic, the Finance Minister's written statement goes on to announce the forthcoming implementation of an initiative aimed at reshaping the approach to where civil servants can work from:

Enabling people to work closer to home [...] promotes regional economic balance, reduces carbon emissions, and promotes the work-life balance and health and wellbeing of our staff. I am therefore establishing hubs across the region that will allow civil servants to work closer to where they live subject of course to business requirements.[124]

Having noted how 'For many if you wanted a job in the Civil Service you had to commute to Belfast', and that 'There is an appetite among staff and departments for a blended approach to remote working',[125] the Finance Minister's statement announces the establishment of Connect2 hubs.[126] Intended to provide 'strategically located work and collaboration spaces for civil service staff',[127] the first of a total of eleven hubs were expected to open in Ballykelly and Downpatrick. Further details of the implementation of the Connect2 programme and of its progress were revealed at an official launch in March 2022:

Hubs in Ballykelly, Downpatrick, Ballymena and Craigavon are complete and hubs in Bangor and Omagh are scheduled for completion over the next two months. Planning has also started for additional hubs in the Antrim/Newtownabbey, Derry, Mid Ulster, Enniskillen and Newry areas, all of which are expected to open over the next two years.[128]

With the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Jayne Brady, expressing her hope that the Connect2 hubs 'will also make jobs in the civil service more accessible to those living further away from Belfast who have until now been put off applying to join due to prospect of lengthy commutes five days a week',[129] this programme could be seen as offering an economic stimulus to regions outside Belfast, and in particular to rural towns and communities.

In summary, then, core policies and initiatives in Northern Ireland demonstrate an awareness of the increased importance of rural digital connectivity due to advances in communications

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[123] Department of Finance, Independent Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs (1 April 2010), p.19.

[124] Written Ministerial Statement – Connect2 Regional Hubs, p.1.

[125] Written Ministerial Statement – Connect2 Regional Hubs, p.2.

[126] It is interesting to note the reaction of the Co-Chair of the Cross-Border Workers Coalition to this announcement: 'The Cross Border Workers Coalition (CBWC) welcomes the announcement of the "Connect2" project. The creation of these regional hubs will give civil service staff more flexible working arrangements and illustrates a growing trend towards remote work, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. For those living outside Belfast, the opportunity of "blended" working arrangements, where you can work from home one day and go to a co-working space on another, will be very attractive. However, due to restrictive personal tax liability rules in the Republic of Ireland, cross-border workers who live in the Republic and work in NI will be left behind and unable to gain the significant benefits of "blended" working arrangements'; Cross-Border Workers Coalition, "Finance Minister announces 'Connect2' project" (18 February 2021).

[127] Written Ministerial Statement – Connect2 Regional Hubs, p.2.

[128] Department of Finance, "Murphy launches transformational Civil Service regional hubs" (23 March 2022).

[129] "Murphy launches transformational Civil Service regional hubs".

technology, which not only raise the possibility of the trend for various forms of remote working accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic to continue, but also for existing rural businesses and services to implement new ways of operating and for new businesses and services to emerge.

However, policies in Northern Ireland also recognise that the opportunities for rural communities presented by digital connectivity can only be properly realised with the provision of the highest quality broadband and mobile coverage, which means ensuring the rollout of local initiatives and exploiting relevant UK Government programmes and associated funding. There is also recognition of the importance of rural communities and businesses having the necessary digital skills, both to have access to high-quality jobs and to services. Finally, the Connect2 hubs programme could be seen as evidence of the more regionally-balanced dispersal of working, with rural residents potentially having greater opportunities to work from home, or closer to home, rather than having to commute daily to their regular places of work. This also speaks to the carbon reduction agenda.

5. POLICY CROSS-OVERS:
Points of Learning and Recommendations

There are overarching commonalities between policies in Ireland and Northern Ireland relevant to remote working in general, and how it may impact on rural communities and businesses. However, what follows is a critical analysis of where these overarching commonalities lie, what their implications may be for Northern Ireland, and what actions could be undertaken for the benefit of rural Northern Ireland. It is informed by the perspectives generously offered by a number of key policy-makers and stakeholders from both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland in interviews that formed part of the research for this report.

Although there are general commonalities between policies in Ireland and Northern Ireland, there is greater policy and public funding investment in remote working and in the establishment of remote working hubs by the Irish Government. Therefore, what follows also reflects on how this process has impacted on rural development, and what the potential lessons may be for policymakers in Northern Ireland.

It is worth emphasising in this regard the acknowledgement within the core policies for rural development in both jurisdictions of the value of North-South and wider cooperation. For its part, the *Rural Policy Framework for NI* states that it 'will recognise opportunities for partnership working on a North/South, East/West or transnational basis'.[130] Similarly, the Republic of Ireland's *Our Rural Future* states:

> As committed to in the framework of the North-South Ministerial Council, the Department of Rural and Community Development will deepen bilateral collaboration and the sharing of information and ideas in relation to rural policy with its counterpart Department in Northern Ireland and will identify areas for further co-operation.[131]

By looking at how policies and practices related to remote working's role in rural development have been implemented in the Republic of Ireland, and how comparable initiatives in Northern Ireland can reflect on these, would be a valuable means of enacting the stated desire for North-South learning and cooperation contained in the core rural development policies of both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.

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[130] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.17.
[131] Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, p.96.

5.1 The appetite for remote working

The general view of policymakers in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland is that the acceleration of moves to remote working brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is here to stay. The official statistics in Ireland that could inform this view, provided by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), were drawn from a survey that took place before the general easing of the pandemic, and show that in November 2021:

Of those in employment who can remote work, 88% would like to continue to do so when all pandemic restrictions are removed. Of these, nearly three in 10 (28%) said they would like to do so all the time. Six in 10 (60%) said they would like to work remotely some of the time. The remainder (12%) said they would not like to work remotely in the future.[132]

The UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) asked workers in February 2022 about their future plans, with more than 8 in 10 who had to work from home during the pandemic saying they intended to undertake hybrid work in future. The ONS goes on to state:

Since then, the proportion of hybrid working has risen from 13% in early February 2022 to 24% in May 2022. The percentage working exclusively from home has fallen from 22% to 14% in the same period.[133]

Crucially, however, these statistics are taken from the Opinions and Lifestyles Survey, which only covers Great Britain. Therefore, in the absence of equivalent official data for Northern Ireland, while these ONS statistics may be indicative of general trends, policymakers in Northern Ireland will be reliant on other sources of relevant information.

Based on the research undertaken for this report, and on interviewees' emphasis on the crucial need for relevant data to inform planning in relation to remote working trends and how these could contribute to rural development, the following recommendation is made:

RECOMMENDATION 1:
In order for policymakers in Northern Ireland to be able to develop appropriate policy and make investment decisions where the evolution of patterns of remote working are of relevance, consideration should be given to either the Office for National Statistics extending its coverage to Northern Ireland in relation to workers' future plans, or to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collecting this data. If these are not considered to be viable options, then support should be given to a suitable organisation that may have already engaged in gathering such data.

In terms of UK business attitudes, which includes Northern Ireland, the ONS concludes that 'the proportion of businesses reporting using or intending to include homeworking as a permanent business model increased slightly from 16% in autumn 2020 to 23% in early April 2022'. However, 'More than half (54%) of businesses in the information and communication industry said they were using, or intended to use, increased homeworking as part of a permanent business model in early April 2022'.[134]

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[132] CSO, "Pulse Survey – Our Lives Online – Remote Work November 2021: Working Remotely" (18 January 2022).

[133] ONS, "Is hybrid working here to stay?" (23 May 2022).

[134] "Is hybrid working here to stay?"

Beyond the CSO, annual surveys undertaken in the Republic of Ireland by the Whitaker Institute and the Western Development Commission,[135] show an increasing appetite among respondents for remote working post-Covid, with a rise in the percentage of those who would like to do so on a daily basis.

Preferences for post-Covid remote working in the Republic of Ireland

- ——— Want to work remotely all of the time
- ——— Want to work remotely several times a week
- ——— Want to work remotely several times a month
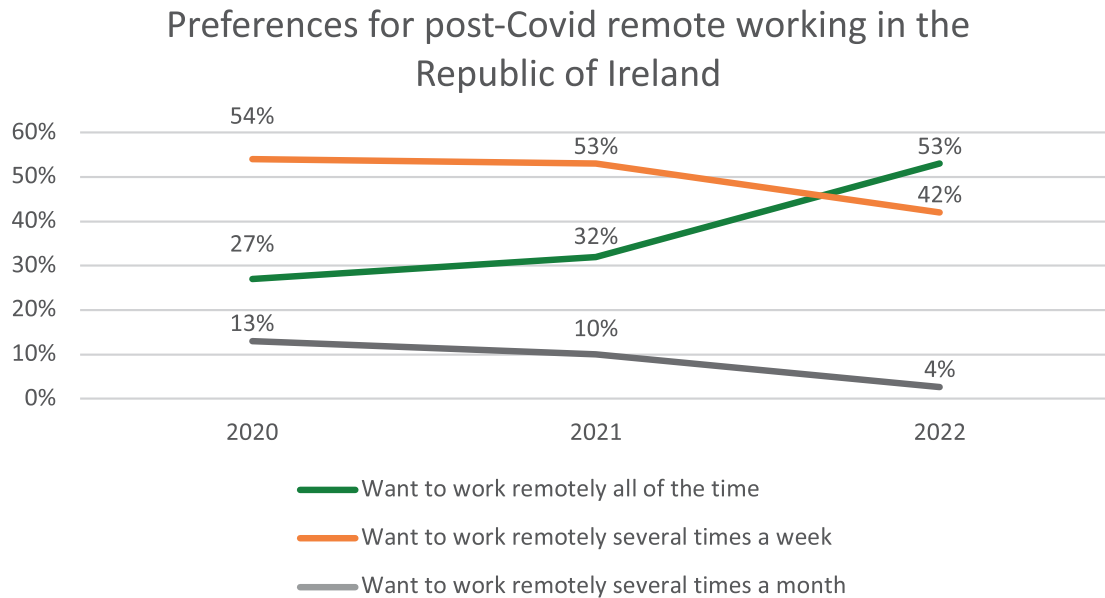
Looking forward, respondents to the 2022 national survey in Ireland whose employers had confirmed how they would work in future indicated that 61% would adopt a hybrid form of working, 30% that they would work completely remotely, while 9% would work fully onsite.[136]

In Northern Ireland, Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) undertook similar work, having 'conducted an on-line survey of approximately 1,600 people in 2021 to ascertain views on their commuting and remote working experiences during the pandemic',[137] which included insights on future intentions. Having estimated that 'between 40% and 61% of employee jobs in NI could be undertaken remotely',[138] the UUEPC report concludes from the results of its survey that 'Overall, respondents overwhelmingly backed a return to the office BUT [emphasis in the original] only if it was combined with home working',[139] with women in particular showing a stronger preference for hybrid working. According to the survey, similar trends in responses from both the public and private sectors suggested 'strong support for a return to the office 1-3 days per week and reasonable support for a return 4 to 5 days per week'.[140] However, while these results appear to suggest comparatively lower levels of interest in hybrid forms of working more weighted towards work away from the office than those registered in the Republic of Ireland, it is important to consider that the UUEPC survey took place in 2021. It would be important to know whether these

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[135] Alma McCarthy et al, Remote Working in Ireland: 2022 National Survey Findings (May 2022), p.9; Alma McCarthy et al, Remote Working: Ireland's National Survey – Phase III Report (May 2021), p.9; Alma McCarthy et al, Remote working during Covid-19: Ireland's National Survey – Phase II Report (October 2020), p7.

[136] Remote Working in Ireland: 2022 National Survey Findings, p.11.

[137] Eoin Magennis, Anastasia Desmond and Gareth Hetherington, The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland (February 2022), p.13.

[138] The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.12.

[139] The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.14.

[140] The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.16.

results would be repeated now, and whether attitudes have changed following the lifting of public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, given that the *Rural Framework for NI* refers, for example, to how the 'Innovations and entrepreneurial accomplishments of rural women are imperative to the future progress and viability of rural areas',[141] the adoption of hybrid working along with the provision of childcare could facilitate this.

5.2 Promotion of remote working

Although perhaps with differing emphases, core rural development policies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland identify the potential increased remote working practices present for rural development. The enforced move to remote working for many due to the COVID-19 pandemic provoked significant interest in how this could be maintained once the public health crisis was over, with relatively high numbers of employees expressing a desire for hybrid forms of working going forward. Many employers are also considering the extent to which varying elements of remote working can be incorporated into their post-pandemic operations, which is also being prompted by the need to retain existing employees and to recruit new ones in what is currently a tight labour market with high levels of employment and low unemployment. In this situation employers may feel pressured to offer remote working options in the fear that they may otherwise lose out in the labour market to competitors offering remote working to employees. Results from the recent national survey undertaken by the Whitaker Institute and the Western Development Commission are indicative of this, with 30% of respondents saying they would change jobs even if it meant a pay cut if their remote working preferences were not facilitated by their current employer.[142] On the other hand, rather than an enforced necessity, for employers remote working can extend their reach within the labour market, which 'can be particularly relevant in more rural regions, broadening labour markets and supporting those residents which may otherwise have more limited employment opportunities'.[143]

However, if the opportunities arising from remote working for rural communities are to be seized, they need to be promoted. Without such promotion, as the permanence of the lifting of public health restrictions is assured, and in the event that the labour market becomes looser, there is a risk that the prevalence in the interest for remote working caused by the pandemic diminishes. Indeed, the Western Development Commission's Policy Analyst, Deirdre Frost, has noted the correlation between levels of employment and remote working in Ireland. Prior to the financial crash in 2008-9, as part of its efforts to reduce travel demand and traffic congestion, Ireland's Department of Transport was proposing to set targets to encourage remote working (or e-Working) in the public sector and to develop remote working centres. However, Frost goes on to reveal that 'the financial crash ensured that e-Working as a policy objective was relegated and the ensuing higher unemployment, lower employment levels and associated lower congestion levels removed some of the impetus for e-Working'.[144] She also makes clear how in the past unemployment levels have impacted on the rates of remote working in Ireland:

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[141] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.49.

[142] Remote Working in Ireland: 2022 National Survey Findings, p.14. These results prompted significant media coverage, such as RTE's article by its Work & Technology Correspondent, Brian O'Donovan, "30% would take lower-paid job to guarantee remote work – survey" (30 May 2022).

[143] The Western Development Commission and Whitaker Institute NUI Galway, Remote Working: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications – Report of the Expert Group on Remote Working (December 2020), p.72.

[144] Deirdre Frost, "Working from Home – 'The New Normal'?" (23 April 2020).

In 2012, the unemployment rate was 16% and the working from home rate was 13.8%. As the unemployment rate declined the percentage engaged in working from home increased. When unemployment was at its lowest, in 2019 at 5%, the percentage working from home was at its highest, 20%.[145]

Without actions to promote remote working practices, therefore, the "new normal" may not keep its momentum, returning us to the "old normal" and depriving rural communities of its potential benefits.

As seen earlier in this report, and stemming from the Programme for Government, Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy has the promotion and awareness raising of remote work as one of its underpinning conditions. Among the bodies identified in the strategy as having a role to play in promoting and raising awareness of remote working among indigenous businesses and foreign investors are Enterprise Ireland and the IDA. The promotion of remote working is also a key priority within Ireland's Rural Development Policy, *Our Rural Future*.

In Northern Ireland, as noted before, the *Rural Policy Framework for NI* has the promotion of remote working as one of the key elements forming part of its priority intervention on access. The potential benefits of remote working for rural communities are also referenced in Northern Ireland's Economic Strategy, *A 10X Economy*, as well as in local authority strategies, while the need for regionally-balanced economic development is recognised across core Northern Ireland policies, including the draft Programme for Government. However, currently Northern Ireland has no equivalent to Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy, although the UUEPC suggests 'There was interest in a similar proposal being developed for Northern Ireland'.[146] Given that uncertainties remain as to what the post-pandemic future of remote working may be, and the extent to which employers and employees may wish to facilitate or request modes of remote working, the understandable temptation for policymakers in Northern Ireland may be to do nothing more than is already being done in this area, and to instead wait to see what emerges. This was certainly a view put forward during interviews with key stakeholders in Northern Ireland as part of the research for this report, although simultaneously acknowledging the risk this posed in the context of continual advances in digital communication technologies and the uptake of remote working practices and relevant digital skills in other regions and countries.

A further argument as to why there may be comparatively more public policy and financial investment in remote working in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland is the difference in geographical scales. Although the official statistics do not provide a direct comparison for commuting to work, 'More than one in ten of those employed in Ireland in 2019 (11.2%) reported an average one-way commuting time of 60 minutes or more compared to 8.1% of those in the EU27';[147] in Northern Ireland, 'In terms of miles travelled, 31% of the total distance travelled was for commuting and business' over the period 2017-2019,[148] with the longest journeys made in the same period being for commuting and business purposes (10.5 miles).[149] On average, longer commuting times and distances are experienced more widely in the Republic of Ireland (with those

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[145] "Working from Home – 'The New Normal'?"

[146] The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.22.

[147] CSO, "Labour Force Survey Bulletin: Main Place of Work and Commuting Time in 2019" (15 October 2020).

[148] Department for Infrastructure, Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-Depth Report 2017-2019 (8 July 2021), p.36.

[149] Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-Depth Report 2017-2019, p.38.

in the Mid-East region the most likely to have a one-way commuting time of one hour or more) than is the case in Northern Ireland. For this reason, it may be thought that there is more urgency in the Republic of Ireland to promote the post-pandemic adoption or continuation of remote working practices, and that there is less need to do so in Northern Ireland. However, while the nature of commuting may be different in Northern Ireland, its reduction through remote working practices will nevertheless contribute to carbon emissions reductions, and the promotion of remote working will help to prepare Northern Ireland for further advances in digital communication technologies, while also giving residents in rural Northern Ireland greater opportunities to access higher-paid employment.[150]

Considering that the absence in Northern Ireland of a core strategy for remote working may diminish the incentive to actively promote the adoption or continuation of remote working practices, but also bearing in mind the current lack of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, the following recommendation is made:

RECOMMENDATION 2:
The Northern Ireland Civil Service to undertake an immediate audit of existing core government strategies and policies to identify elements relevant to remote working, to be gathered and developed into a single coherent policy document on remote working in Northern Ireland.

Based on the existing policy drivers, this single policy document should outline key promotion activities to be undertaken and/or make reference to activities already underway, which should be or are being developed and implemented by Departments and relevant agencies, including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and bodies responsible for supporting indigenous businesses or attracting foreign investment. This single policy document could be further developed by a future Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to become a Remote Work Strategy for Northern Ireland.

As was highlighted earlier in this report, Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy recognised that a 'fragmented landscape' had existed as a result of the number of Government Departments and agencies developing and promoting policies and initiatives on remote working.[151] This was also the view expressed by stakeholders in Ireland interviewed for this report. As a result, an Interdepartmental Group was formed to develop the National Remote Work Strategy, and to ensure that the work arising from it was aligned across Government.

Having outlined its priority interventions in relation to connectivity, the *Rural Policy Framework for NI* points out: 'As the priority interventions related to connectivity fall within the policy remit of other Government Departments, they will require collaborative working'.[152] Similarly, we have already noted how the relevance of policies on regionally-balanced economic development, digital skills and remote working is cross-cutting. Therefore, and informed by the experience in the Republic of Ireland, the following recommendation is made:

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[150] While commuting times and distances may be greater in the Republic of Ireland, a briefing by the LGiU (Local Government Information Unit) reporting on a new research initiative led by Maynooth University's International Centre for Local and Regional Development, notes how the trend for increasing commuting times is common to both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. It states: 'commuting times are reported to have been increasing over recent decades. The economic dominance, most notably of Greater Dublin but also of Greater Belfast, the associated pressures on the regional housing market and the development of inter-urban motorways have also accelerated the trend towards long-distance commuting' (Breandán Ó Caoimh et al, "Study of commuting patterns in Ireland and Northern Ireland pre- and post-Covid-19", LGiU Briefing, 4 August 2021).

[151] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.22.

[152] Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.108.

RECOMMENDATION 3:
Establish a Digital Uplift Interdepartmental Group to include within its remit remote working, led by either the Head of the Civil Service or a designated Permanent Secretary, with consideration to be given to the establishment of Departmental Groups to feed into the Interdepartmental Group.

The monitoring and coordination of the implementation and promotion of remote working public policy in Northern Ireland, both within and outside the Northern Ireland Civil Service and public sector, should be the responsibility of a Digital Uplift Interdepartmental Group, led by either the Head of the Civil Service or a designated Permanent Secretary, and with participation of key stakeholders from among others, employers' organisations, trade unions and the community and voluntary sector. The formation of Departmental Digital Uplift Groups would feed into the Interdepartmental Group, and would, for example, allow for more specific monitoring by DAERA, along with key rural stakeholders, on the implementation of remote working policies within rural Northern Ireland.

A key issue raised by interviewees for this report, both in Ireland and Northern Ireland, was the importance of leadership. Any attempts to promote the adoption of remote working practices, which could be of benefit to rural communities, will be undermined if those in positions of leadership do not undertake an element of remote working themselves. This is true both within the public and private sectors. With the civil service in both jurisdictions being offered as examples by interviewees, it was suggested that if senior civil servants are not seen to engage in any remote work themselves, then more junior civil servants will be reluctant to do so for fear that it will impact on their careers. The same was suggested for the private sector, in areas where remote working is possible. Again in relation to both the public and private sector, interviewees were of the opinion that some in positions of leadership required a change of mentality in relation to the adoption and management of remote working, which is particularly suitable for task-based work. With this in mind, the following recommendation is made:

RECOMMENDATION 4:
To lead by example and support the promotion of remote working practices in Northern Ireland both in the public and private sectors, the most senior members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service should adopt some element of remote working themselves, and ensure that career progression is not impeded by remote working.

5.3 Remote Working (and) Hubs

There are some differences in public policy approaches to the idea of hubs in the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland significant public policy and financial investment, including through the Department of Rural and Community Development, has been made in the establishment and promotion of remote working hubs. When launching the National Connected Hubs Network and ConnectedHubs.ie in May 2021, the Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD, had set the target of having over 100 hubs connected by the end of that year, and with an overall target of connecting the over 400 remote working hubs identified and mapped by the National Hub Network Working Group led by the Department of Rural and Community Development.[153] Indeed, Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy not only referred to the mapping work being undertaken by the National Hub Networking Group, but saw the networking of Ireland's remote working hubs as cementing a national infrastructure.[154]

In terms of the potential the development of hubs offers to rural communities, the 2020 report from the Expert Group on Remote Working suggested:

Hubs offer benefits to rural and regional areas by supporting local services as economic drivers, attracting skilled employees to areas and also as potential 'second sites' for both large Irish companies and FDI/multi-national companies. The use of hubs, by both private and public sector employers, rather than dedicated regional or additional offices, will create a more sustainable and resilient network across a greater number of locations, and entice smaller enterprises, particularly SMEs to follow suit. Hubs can also provide support for students of Higher Education Institutions with poor broadband access.[155]

While the National Remote Work Strategy states that the uptake of remote working in general has facilitated workers to move to less congested urban and rural areas, which has 'resulted in an increase in interest for rural properties',[156] the report by the Expert Group on Remote Working highlights the potential benefits of remote working hubs for both employers and employees:

For employers, hubs offer office-grade accommodation closer to the employees' location. In doing so, this can offer benefits to employers in areas such as facilities, health and safety, connectivity and insurance, while going some way to meeting the needs of employees working remotely, separating home and work, avoiding isolation and improved working environment.[157]

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[153] See Department of Rural and Community Development, "Press Release: Our Rural Future: Minister Humphreys launches National Connected Hubs Network" (31 May 2021).

[154] For a visual representation of the national network of hubs, see https://www.atlanticeconomiccorridor.ie/hubs-map/.

[155] Remote Working: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications – Report of the Expert Group on —-Remote Working, p.85.

[156] Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy, p.10.

[157] Remote Working: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications – Report of the Expert Group on —-Remote Working, p.84.

There has certainly been a growth in the number of hubs across the Republic of Ireland, of a wide variety, publicly and privately funded and as community developments, in both urban and rural settings. In terms of the variety of hubs and their functions, and in response to the question of the mapping and classification of hubs raised in the National Remote Work Strategy, ConnectedHubs.ie employs the following five categories developed by the Atlantic Economic Corridor and the Western Development Commission:

- **Enterprise Hub:** 'Local enterprise driver providing space, facilities and services for start-up, [High Potential Start-Ups], remote workers. Hosting events and acting as a connector for entrepreneur networks'.

- **Scaling Hub:** 'A step up from a general enterprise hub with strong focus on post start-up clients being supported through scaling and investment strategies. High level services for acceleration and export development. Global entrepreneurship events and programmes'.

- **Research and Development Hub:** 'Specialist Hub usually attached to HEI with focus on clients in early stages of Research and Development of new products and services. Provides office or desk space and access to meeting rooms, laboratories etc. A full-time manager and other staff are employed to support business development through incubation and acceleration'.

- **Co-working Hub:** 'Provides clients with private offices or desks with access to meeting rooms and event space. Offers clients plug & play facilities but not business support. Often co-located with other facilities and shared management'.

- **Community & Enterprise Hub:** 'A centre whose primary focus is to provide community services and has office space, dedicated and/or hot desks as well as meeting rooms available to clients. The business facilities will complement the community services and provide an income for the community. These hubs can be run by full-time managers, Community Employment staff and in some cases by volunteers. Some of these hubs drive innovative projects in the areas of sustainability and digitisation in their locale'.[158]

These five categories of hubs not only show their distinct purposes, but also the differing degrees to which remote working or co-working play a role in what they have to offer. In terms of the relative importance of remote working and hubs, the results of the most recent national survey (May 2022) by the Whitaker Institute and the Western Development Commission show that of those who would like to work remotely, 8% would like to work from a mix of home and hub, 5% from a mix of home, hub and onsite, with only 0.5% indicating that they would like to work solely from a hub.[159]

Interviews with stakeholders in the Republic of Ireland as part of the research for this report also remarked on the differing experiences of urban and rural hubs with a remote and/or co-working offer, with the former characterised as generally "thriving", while the latter were seen in many instances as "surviving". While lack of awareness of rural hubs was seen as a challenge that needed

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[158] Atlantic Economic Corridor and Western Development Commission, "AEC Hubs Classification 2020-2023" (2020), p.21.

[159] Remote Working in Ireland: 2022 National Survey Findings, p.11. The results from the 2021 survey showed 9% wanting to work from a mix of home and hub, 7% from a mix of home, hub or onsite, and 1% solely from a hub (Remote Working: Ireland's National Survey – Phase III Report, p.4). In 2020 the figures were 10% working from a mix of home and hub, 25% from a mix of home, hub or onsite, and 2% solely from a hub (Remote Working during COVID-19: Ireland's National Survey – Phase II Report, p.4).

to be addressed,[160] interviewees stressed the establishment of rural hubs with remote working as a core function that were not aligned with the needs of their populations, but perhaps more importantly, a lack of the managerial and entrepreneurial skills required in leading a successful hub. Nevertheless, although these were seen as real challenges, they were contrasted with examples of very successful rural community and enterprise hubs that met the needs of their communities, and invested significant resources in continually tailoring their services to changing needs and new opportunities, and in engaging with various sectors of their communities.

Meanwhile, the significance of hubs within public policy in Northern Ireland differs somewhat from the Republic of Ireland. In the *Rural Policy Framework for NI*, for instance, there is reference to the development of broadband hubs in rural towns and villages as a means of reducing carbon emissions by reducing commuting, and to the piloting of socioeconomic hubs to provide rural communities enhanced access to services. However, a further reference makes a more direct connection between the development of hubs and remote working, noting (as seen earlier in this report) the 'Potential in broadband hub idea in small towns/villages to foster remote working and this can also complement active transport'.[161]

Remote working and the development of hubs is, of course, also the basis of the Connect2 Hubs programme, led by the Department of Finance, where the establishment of hubs across Northern Ireland is to allow civil servants to work closer to where they live rather than having to commute to Belfast. In this regard, and in light of the commitments made to adopting remote working within the public sector in the Republic of Ireland, the Expert Group on Remote Working stated:

It is welcome that remote working is to be promoted within the public sector showing it is leading policy by example. However, specific hubs for public servants only may undermine the economic sustainability of all hubs including publicly funded hubs.[162]

The establishment of hubs exclusively for civil servants was also raised as a missed opportunity to contribute to the sustainability of other hubs by those interviewed as part of the research for this report. It was suggested that these hubs should be opened up to include local enterprises and community groups, or that such hubs should be sited within existing hubs. Stakeholders from Northern Ireland were also asked whether the Connect2 hubs programme should expand in order to devote space to rural enterprises and community groups. Although they considered this as potentially a means of encouraging collaboration, innovation and embedding the principle of co-design, stakeholders in Northern Ireland suggested that issues of data and broadband security could present a challenge.

However, the notion of hubs is more generally translated by public policy in Northern Ireland into the idea of digital hubs that does not necessarily make a direct connection to remote working. Instead, hubs are seen as centres of enterprise and innovation, enabling the development of particular sectors. Thus, for example, the economic strategy for the Mid South West region states how the partner councils will:

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160 On this issue, the report by the Expert Group on Remote Working states: 'The awareness of hubs may be an issue. Research shows that hubs as the sole location of work are not a primary choice, but they do form part of the suite of solutions for some employees' (Remote Working: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications – Report of the Expert Group on —-Remote Working, p.85).

161 Rural Policy Framework for NI, p.109.

162 Remote Working: Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications – Report of the Expert Group on —-Remote Working, p.84.

put in place a network of state-of-the-art digi-hubs in MSW entailing inspiring, digitally advanced co-working spaces. These will be visible locally-based foci for the development of the digital tech sector in MSW and will provide a structure for sectoral focus, leadership and networking. [...] The collaboration that these will enable between individuals/companies working in the digital tech arena and local communities will help to stimulate small scale innovation projects.[163]

Similarly, the Derry City and Strabane District Council's City Deal and Inclusive Future Fund states:

The Derry and Strabane City region will be super-charged with cutting-edge hubs focused on Health and Life Sciences and data-driven innovation to drive our regional economy, enhance our health and futureproof our industry.[164]

Those stakeholders from Northern Ireland interviewed as part of the research for this report also approached the notion of hubs as being centres for digital innovation and for the development of enterprises in certain key sectors, which could be located in rural areas. There were some levels of concern expressed at the idea of rural hubs being developed primarily on the basis of serving remote workers, and that instead they should rely less heavily on providing services for remote workers and deliver a range of needs clearly identified within their communities, including digital skills and supports for local enterprises. Indeed, the potential to ensure the sustainability of rural hubs by becoming providers of digital skills to local communities was seen as key by stakeholders in Northern Ireland. Moreover, some of those interviewed highlighted how sectoral digital hubs, such as those in advanced manufacturing, agri-food, information and communications, and fintech, could either provide spaces within their own hubs, or engage with community hubs, to develop the skills relevant to their own industries within rural communities.

Interestingly, the cross-border network of local authorities in the central border region (the Irish Central Border Area Network, ICBAN) makes a closer correlation between remote working and the development of digital hubs. Suggesting that 'As remote working becomes more established, digital hubs will become increasingly significant for rurally isolated communities as part of our economic infrastructure and urban fabric',[165] and noting a growing network of digital innovation hubs in the region, ICBAN's framework of regional priorities goes on to conclude:

With the government programmes committing to support remote working, there are heightened opportunities to invest in the further development of digital innovation hubs and hot-desking facilities across the Central Border Region. Remote working provides workers with the opportunity to revisit their work-life balances and to relocate to areas which offer a better quality of life.[166]

However, the potential appetite for remote working hubs from workers in Northern Ireland was not seen as significant in the survey undertaken by the UUEPC in 2021. According to the reported results:

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[163] Mid South West Economic Engine, Regional Economic Strategy (2020), p.59.

[164] Derry City and Strabane District Council, *City Deal & Inclusive Future Fund: Delivering Inclusive & Sustainable Growth for the Derry~Londonderry & Strabane City Region* (February/March 2021), p.20.

[165] ICBAN, The Framework of Regional Priorities for the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland, 2021-2027 (2021), p.29.

[166] The Framework of Regional Priorities for the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland, 2021-2027, p.55.

> Overall, most respondents were not interested in working in remote hubs, and of those who expressed an interest, their preference was to work in a hub dedicated to their organisation (or their part of the organisation), which was marginally more popular than a hub in their closest town.[167]

Another challenge to the development and sustainability of remote working hubs, identified by interviewees in both jurisdictions, was the evolution of the rollout of high-speed broadband in rural areas. As more rural homes acquire access to good quality broadband, there is the increased possibility that people's preferences for remote working will be to work from home, and there will be a reduced need for people to resort to hubs as providers of broadband. In these circumstances, what interviewees emphasised was the need for hubs to offer services attractive to rural users that go beyond the provision of connection to the internet or WiFi.

There is evidence, then, of varied approaches to the concept of hubs in public policy in Northern Ireland, and of the establishment of various types of digital hubs. There is also interest and activity in this area from the community and voluntary sector in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, with the iCommunity initiative, led by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and its counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, The Wheel, standing as an example. Among the issues being explored on an all-island basis by this initiative are rural connectivity and development, and digital inclusion and remote work.[168]

In view of the above considerations, the following recommendations are made:

RECOMMENDATION 5:
A mapping exercise to be undertaken to identify existing and planned digital hubs and providers of digital skills in Northern Ireland,[169] and to classify them adopting and refining to local circumstances the classification system used by ConnectedHubs.ie.

Particular consideration should be given to the prevalence of hubs in rural Northern Ireland, and to the potential of establishing a network of hubs in Northern Ireland, with the possibility of making linkages with the Republic of Ireland's National Connected Hubs Network. In mapping existing or planned digital hubs, particularly in rural Northern Ireland, an approach should be taken that does not have a singular focus on entities that identify themselves as hubs, but rather one that is sensitive to organisations that, within their wider portfolio, offer services or skills associated with the notion of hubs.

RECOMMENDATION 6:
Investigate the feasibility of opening up regional hubs under the Connect2 programme to rural enterprises and community groups.

RECOMMENDATION 7:
Encourage sectoral hubs, especially those with public funding, such as those related to advanced manufacturing, agri-food, communications and information technology, and fintech, to provide spaces to rural enterprises and communities for the delivery of relevant digital skills, and to contribute to an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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[167] The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.17.

[168] See https://www.icommunityhub.org/about/.

[169] This also a recommendation made by the UUEPC, which in relation specifically to remote working hubs, suggests 'an initial mapping of hubs and co-working spaces and further research on demand for these facilities' (The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland, p.38).

RECOMMENDATION 8:
To support the establishment of a platform for the sharing of best practice among rural digital hubs in Northern Ireland.

6. CONCLUSION

Both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as more widely internationally, the general consensus is that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided an impetus to the adoption of forms of remote working, and that these offer significant potential to the development of rural communities. More broadly, the general view is that there will be continued advances in digital technologies, bringing about more changes to the nature of working and to the kinds of jobs available in future, with the resulting need for populations, including those in rural regions, to be equipped with the necessary skills.

While it may be considered that public policy in the Republic of Ireland has invested more in remote working and the establishment of remote working hubs, public policy in Northern Ireland, including that in relation to rural development, is also sensitive to the potentials of remote working practices.

There is already some sharing of best practice and experience between officials in the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland in relation to remote working and rural development, as is also the case between the community and voluntary sectors in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Given the progress of the implementation of Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy and the development of the National Connected Hubs Network, there is an evident need for policymakers in Northern Ireland to continue to communicate with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in order to gather evidence that will assist them in developing strategies on remote working that are attuned to the specific needs and realities of rural Northern Ireland.

A significant impetus for continuing North-South collaboration in relation to remote working and the adoption of digital communications technologies for the benefit of rural communities, not just between the Dublin and Belfast administrations, but also between local authorities, the community and voluntary sectors, and the private sector, is PEACE PLUS and its Smart Towns and Villages Programme. Aimed at delivering 'improved social and economic outcomes in target areas, particularly those of a rural nature', the actions this programme is intended to support include:

- The design and development of advanced mobile digital hubs, to ensure the widest possible opportunities for digital access for rural citizens in particular;

- The design and delivery of digital mentoring programmes to be delivered through the proposed mobile digital hubs in rural communities and businesses in particular, to increase digital skills/knowledge and thus provide opportunities for less isolation and increased social interaction;

- The development of digital clusters to increase remote working and by so doing reduce the need for rural citizens to leave their communities and commute long distances to work;

- The development of projects which will help transform existing assets within town and village centres for citizen recreational and social usage; and

- The development of social enterprise/innovation led projects designed to apply advanced ICT to create new models of social service and economic development.[170]

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[170] SEUPB, *European Territorial Co-operation 2021-2027: Preparing the EU PEACE PLUS Programme for the 2021-2027 period – Consultation Information Document* (2021), p.37.

In terms of the evolution of remote working practices and the development of digital hubs, there are doubtless differences in how this will occur in the two jurisdictions given their different geographical realities. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland has the opportunity to learn from the experience in the Republic of Ireland as policymakers shape the policies that will enable rural Northern Ireland to maximise the opportunities that these new forms of working will present. In this regard, looking at what has happened in the Republic of Ireland, policymakers in Northern Ireland will note the role played by other agencies in the promotion of remote working, as well as how the involvement of bodies such as the Labour Relations Agency and the Health and Safety Executive would be important in drawing up a code of practice in relation to requesting the right to undertake remote work and to advise on the health and safety implications of working from home. Importantly, there will also be opportunities for the two jurisdictions to cooperate in the implementation of initiatives that will be of mutual benefit to rural communities on the island of Ireland. It is vital that we take up those opportunities.

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