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

The research objectives

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

Dr Anthony Soares
June 2022

- Setting out the policy context in Northern Ireland for remote working.

- Consider what actions could be taken to exploit potential opportunities from remote working in support of community and social benefit in rural Northern Ireland.

- Take the Republic of Ireland as the key comparator.

- Provide recommendations.

The proportion of homeworkers planning to work mostly from home rose 12 percentage points between April 2021 and February 2022

Future plans of workers who worked from home because of the coronavirus pandemic, Great Britain, 21 to 25 April 2021 and 3 to 13 February 2022

● 21-25 April 2021   ● 3-13 February 2022
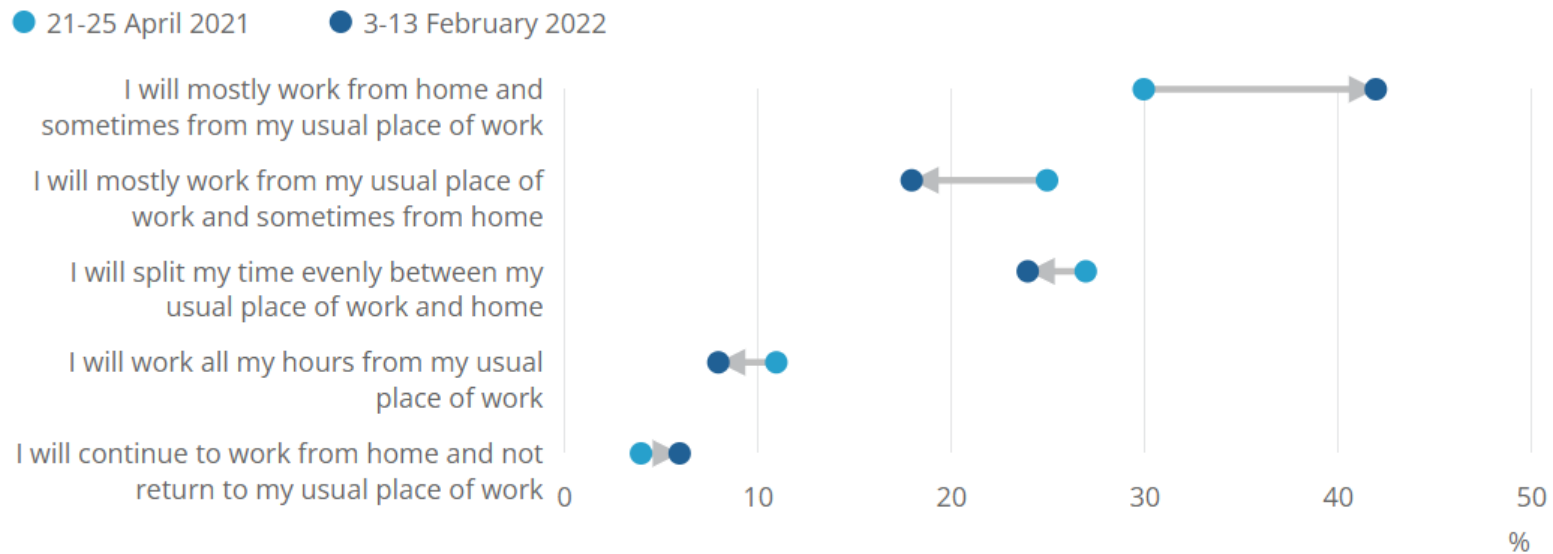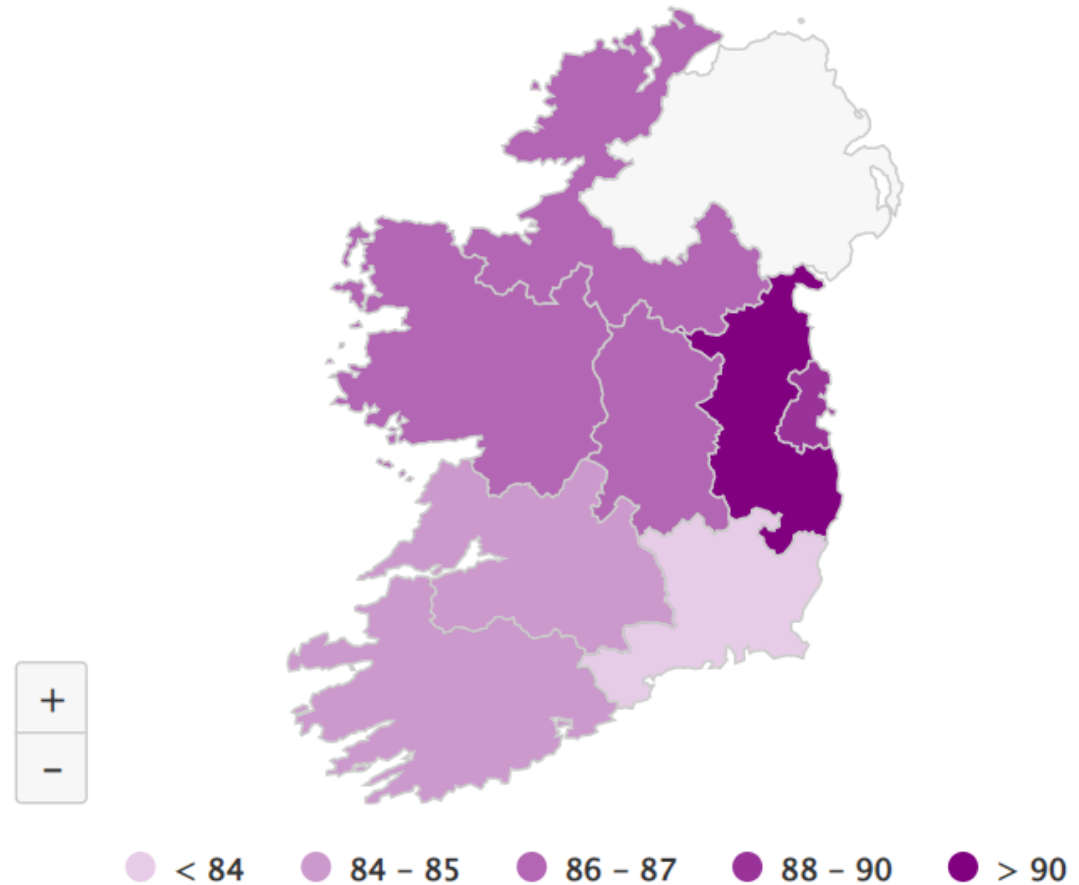

Collecting the data on remote working

ONS data on working patterns is based on GB only.

Collecting the data on remote working

CSO Pulse Survey:

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.
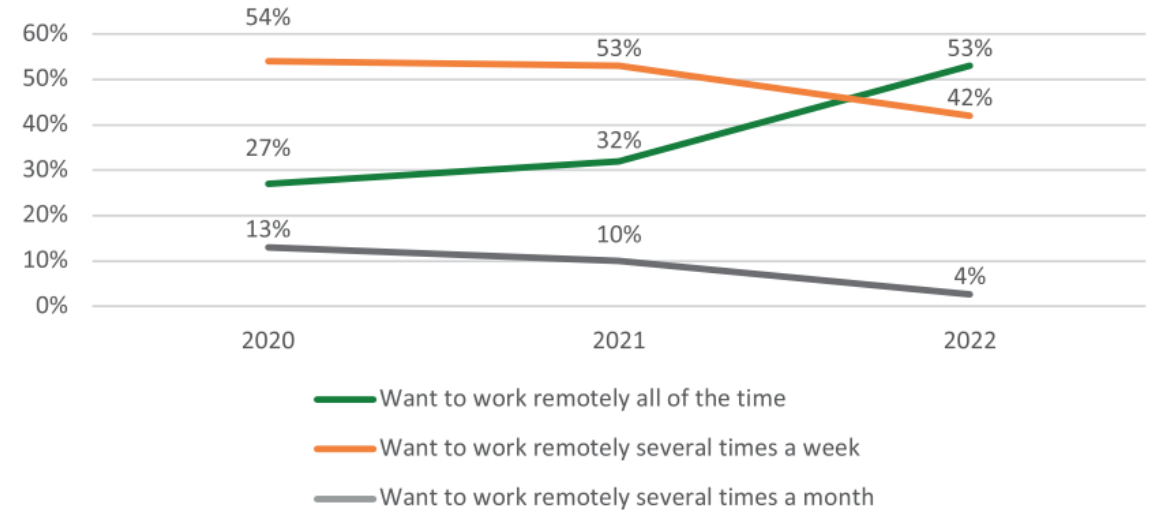
Figure 2.2 Those in employment who would like to remote work in the future by Region, November 2021

< 84   84 – 85   86 – 87   88 – 90   > 90

Collecting the data on remote working

- Ireland's national survey (2020, 2021, 2022), by the Whitaker Institute and Western Development Commission

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

	2020	2021	2022
Want to work remotely all of the time	27%	32%	53%
Want to work remotely several times a week	54%	53%	42%
Want to work remotely several times a month	13%	10%	4%

The Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland

Full Report

Dr Eoin Magennis
Anastasia Desmond
Gareth Hetherington

Ulster University Economic Policy Centre

February 2022

5. Overall, respondents overwhelmingly backed a return to the office BUT only if it was combined with home working. Women, in particular, indicated a stronger preference for hybrid working (Figure 4.4), a trend found in a recent CSO survey for Ireland.

Figure 4.4: Whether the respondent wants to return to the office by gender, NI, 2021
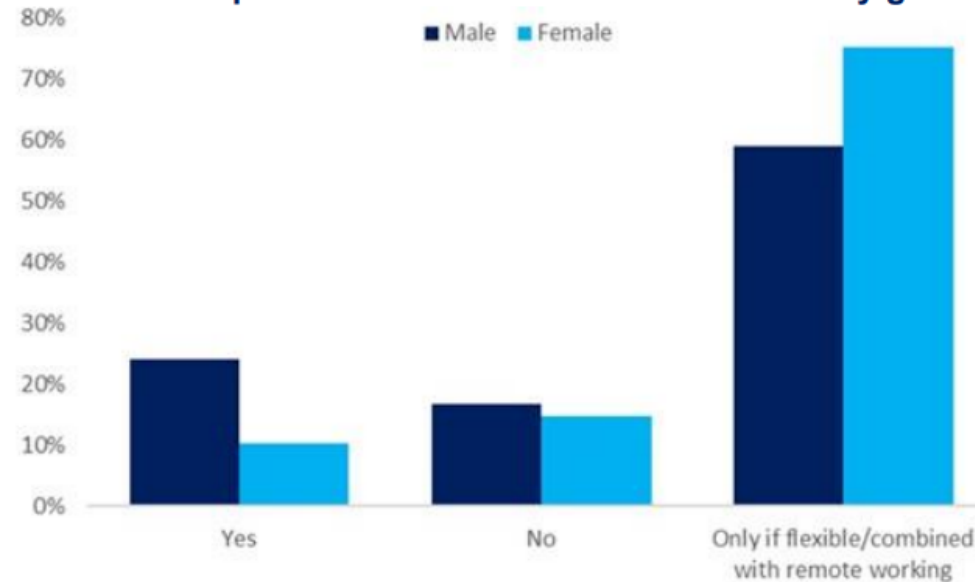
Source: UUEPC analysis

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.

Policy on remote working (and rural development) in the Republic of Ireland

Programme
for Government
Our Shared Future

Ireland's Programme for Government

- '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'.

- 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'.

National Remote Work Strategy

Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy (remote working hubs)

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.

Rural development policy

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Our Rural Future
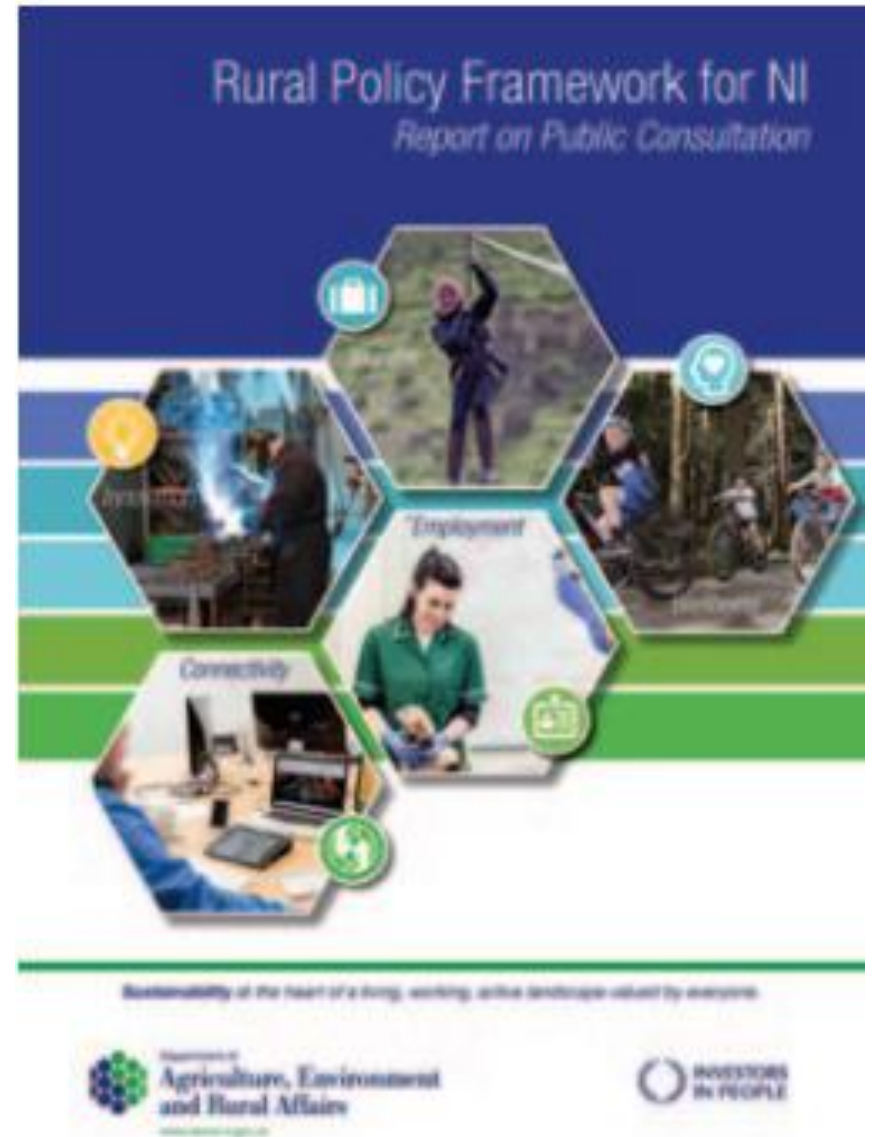Rural Development
Policy 2021-2025
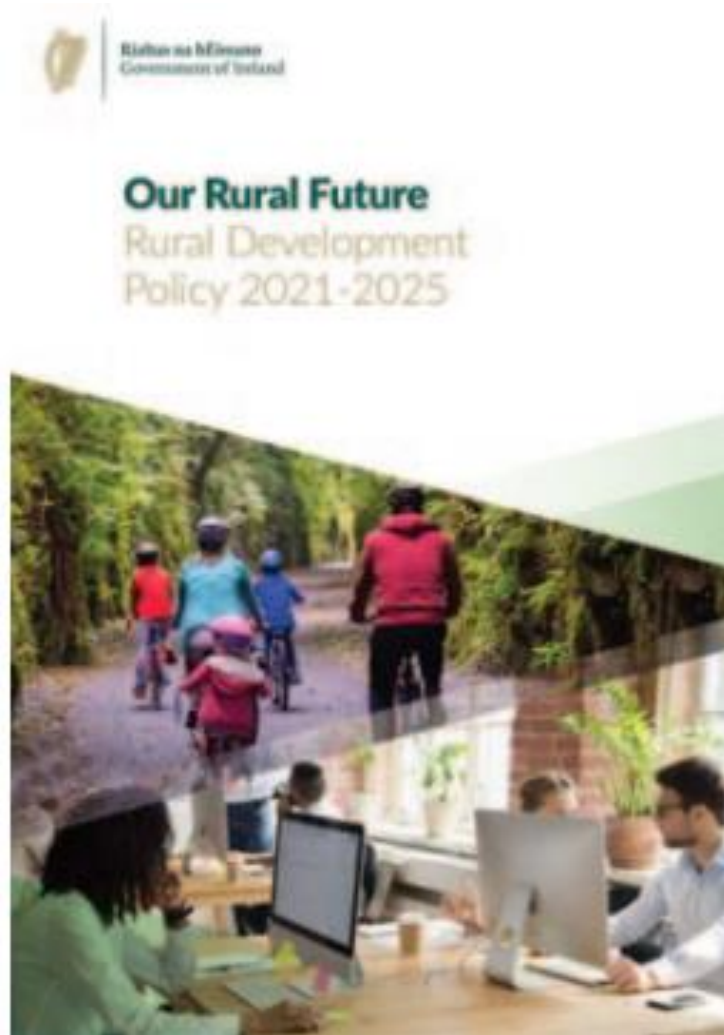
Our Rural Future

- [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.

- [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.

Policy on remote working (and rural development) in Northern Ireland

- 'To support balanced regional development by promoting better connectivity between urban and rural centres'.

- 'To support improved telecommunications structure including high speed broadband making it available to as many people as possible regardless of where they live'.

Policy on remote working (and rural development) in Northern Ireland

- 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.
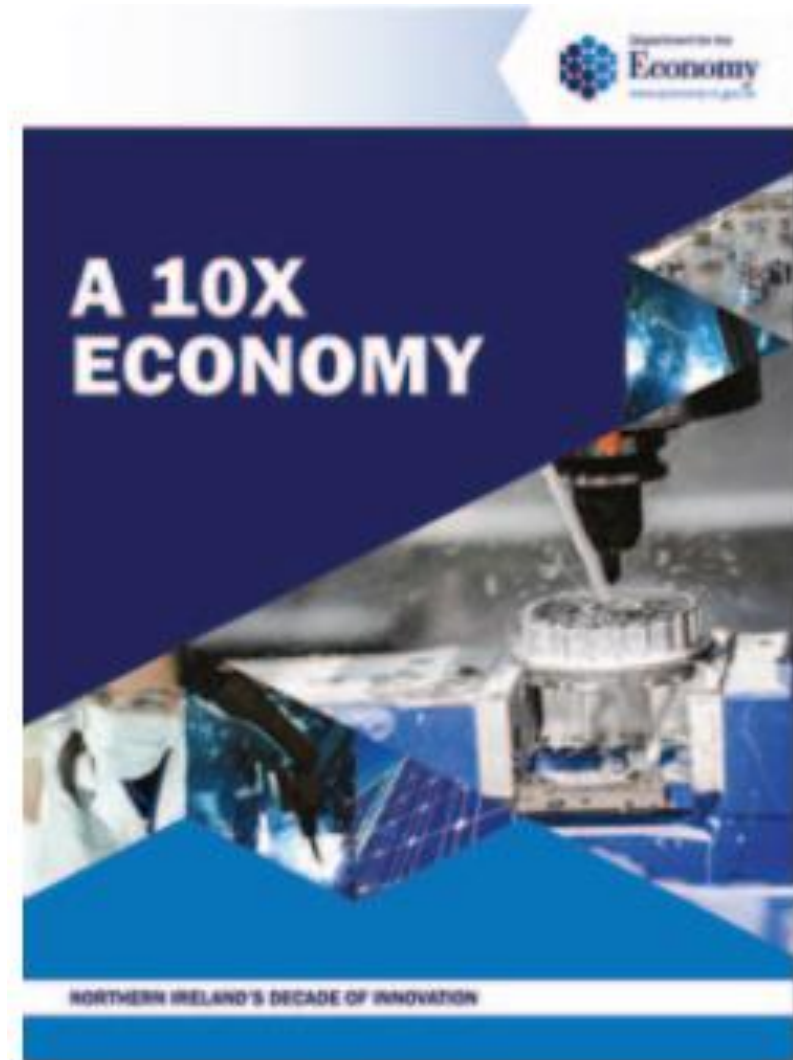
Recommendation 2

- 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:

- 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.

Cross-government approach

- 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.

Making Remote Work

National Remote Work Strategy
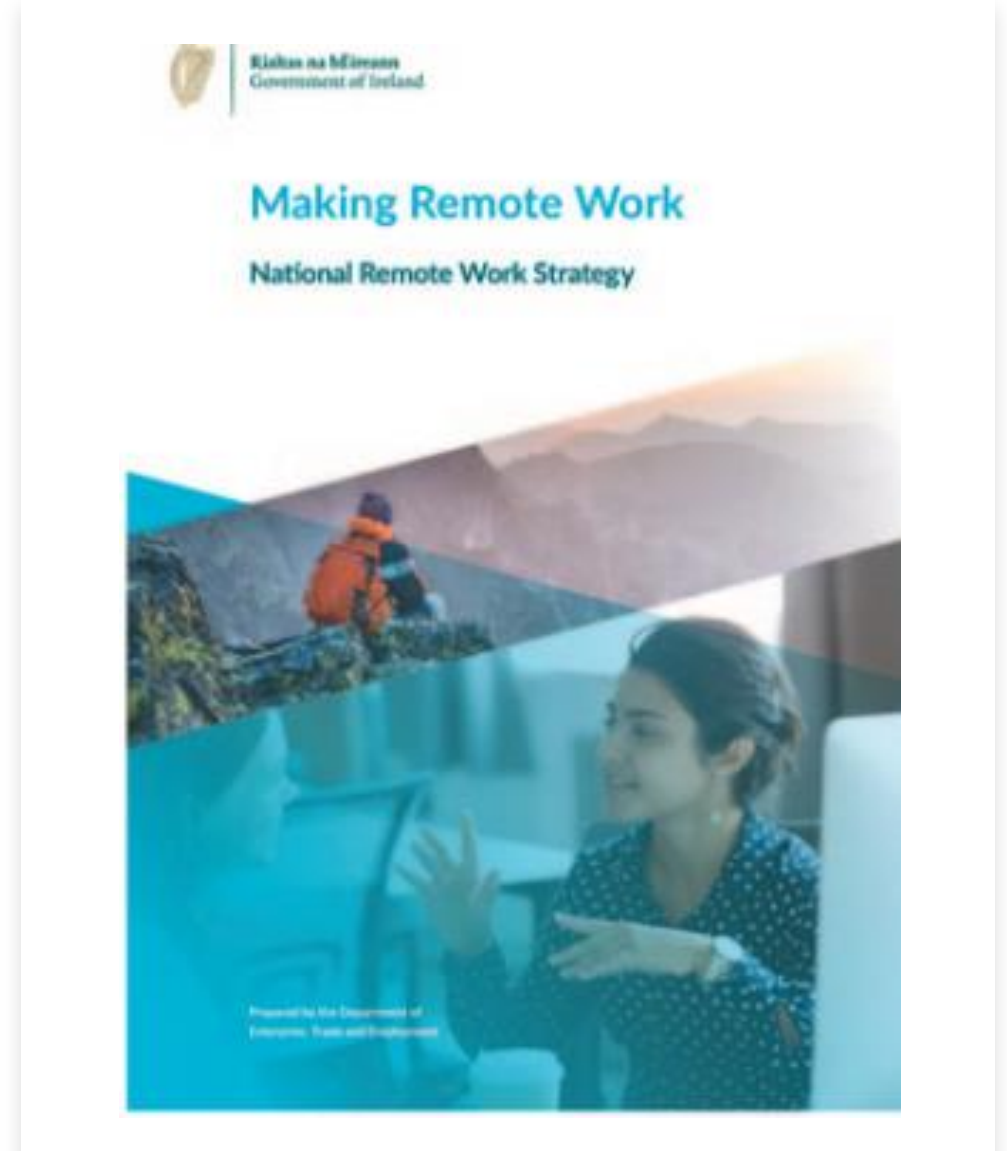
Cross-government approach

- 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'.
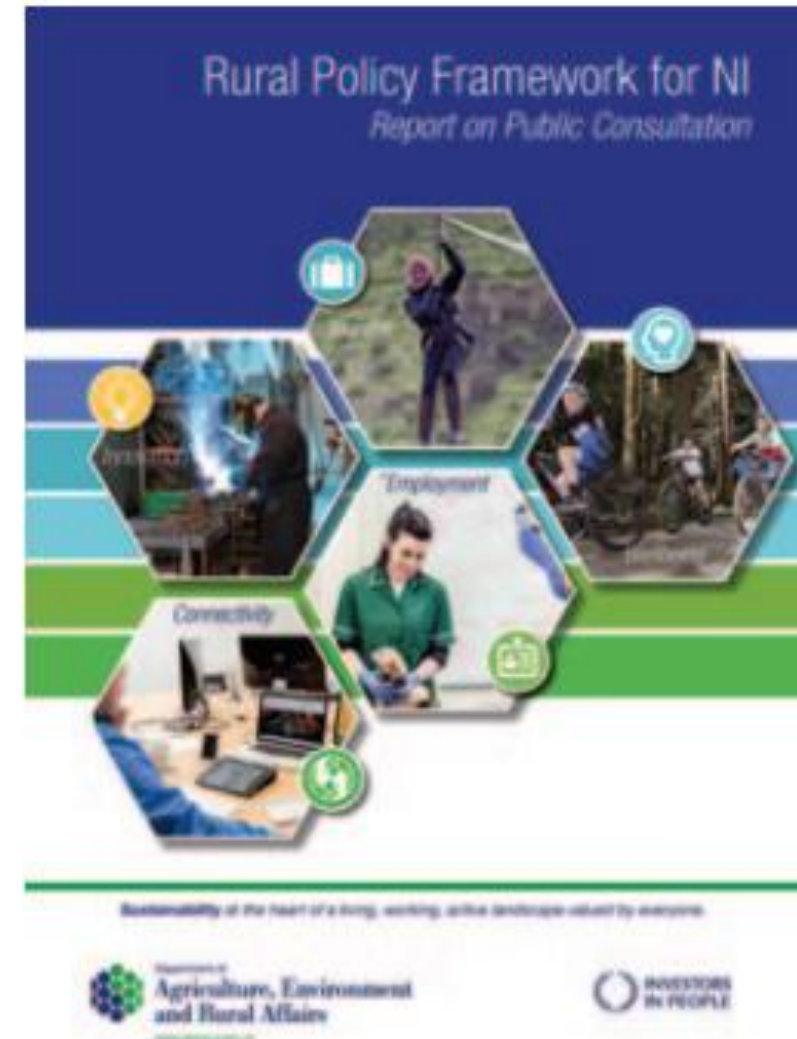
Recommendation 3

- 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.

# Remote working in the public sector

- Commitment made in Ireland's Programme for Government 'that public sector employers, colleges and other bodies move to 20 per cent home and remote working in 2021'.

Programme for Government
Our Shared Future

Remote working in the public sector

- Among the conclusions of the 2010 Bain report was that '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'.

INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF POLICY ON

Location of Public Sector Jobs
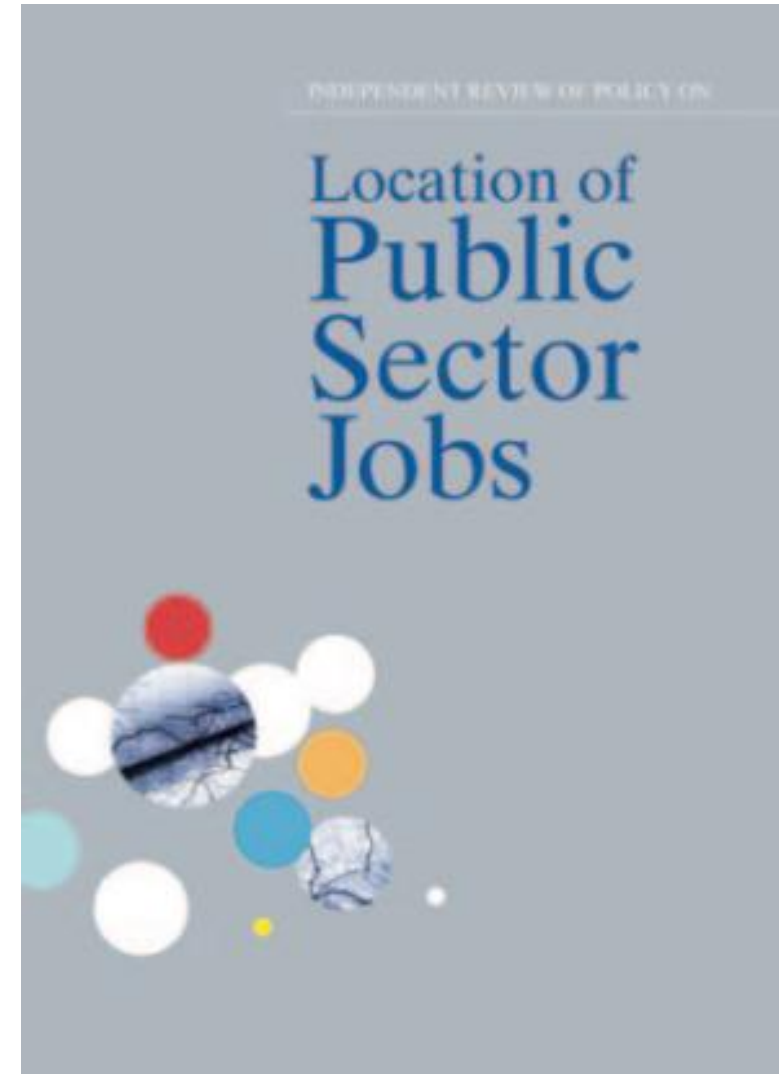
Leading by example

- Interviewees 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.
- In relation to both the public and private sector, interviewees were of the opinion that some in position of leadership required a change of mentality in relation to the adoption and management of remote working.

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.
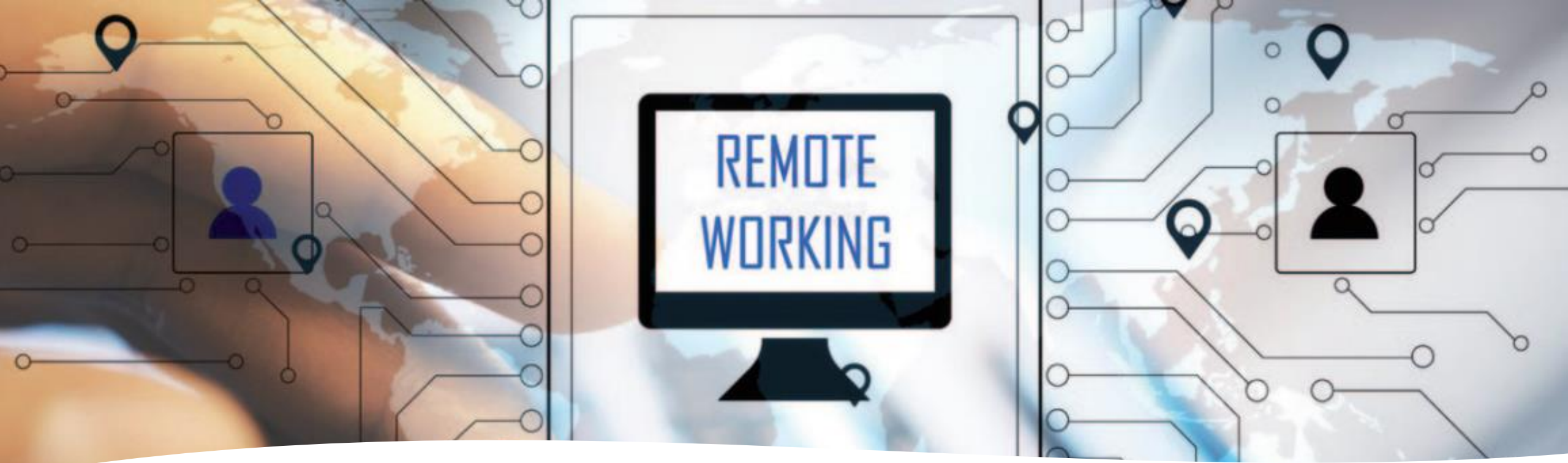
Remote working (and) hubs

- In May 2021, Ireland's 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.

Classifying hubs in the Republic of Ireland – ConnectedHubs.ie

- Enterprise hub
- Scaling hub
- R&D hub
- Co-working hub
- Community and Enterprise hub

Rural hubs in the Republic of Ireland

- While lack of awareness of rural hubs was seen as a challenge that needed to be addressed, 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.

- 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.

The view from ICBAN

- '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'.

- 'there are heightened opportunities to invest in the further development of digital innovation hubs and hot-desking facilities across the Central Border Region'.

THE FRAMEWORK OF REGIONAL PRIORITIES

for the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland, 2021–2027

Northern Ireland City and Region Deals and hubs

- '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' (Mid South West region).

- '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'.

Recommendation 5

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

- 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.

Remote working hubs in the public sector (ROI)

- 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 (p.84).

Remote Working
Opportunities, Challenges and Policy Implications

The Western Development Commission & Whitaker Institute NUI Galway
Report of the Expert Group on Remote Working

Whitaker Institute

Remote working hubs in the public sector (NI)

- Finance Minister statement in 2021: "**I am [...] establishing hubs across the region that will allow civil servants to work closer to where they live** subject of course to business requirements".

Recommendation 6

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

Sectoral hubs in Northern Ireland

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.

Recommendation 8

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

- ... connecting with best practice in rural Republic of Ireland.

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

Recognition of need for provision of childcare

Investment in digital skills

Is the tide going out on remote working and rural development?