

# Written evidence – Dr Jane Parry, Dr Zoe Young, Prof Stephan Bevan (PTC0032)

## Introduction

Work After Lockdown is a major research project funded by UKRI/ESRC, which over the course of 18 months is studying how lockdown-driven working from home is changing how people want to work in the future, and organisations' responses and learning around this. Using mixed methods research, the research so far has collected data from legal firms and local authorities, looking at white-collar jobs that were performed from home during lockdowns, but which were more often office-based prior to that. The project consequently offers broader learning potential for a wide cross-section of formerly office-based jobs. Quantitative surveys focus on worker well-being, while qualitative interview in four case study organisations have looked at leaders, managers, and employees' without managerial responsibilities' experiences in adapting to home-based working experience. Our inquiry response here draws upon evidence from 1,085 survey responses and 38 qualitative interviews.

This submission has been prepared by the Principal Investigator of the Work After Lockdown project. Dr Jane Parry is a lecturer at Southampton Business School and Director of the Centre for Research on Work and Organisations. Her research focuses on the changing world of work, and inequalities within that; she recently sat on the BEIS Future of Work working group, conducting rapid evidence review on the ARI on flexible work.

Further details on our findings so far in this longitudinal research can be found in our first report, on our [website](#):

Parry, J., Young, Z., Bevan, S., Veliziotis, M., Baruch, Y., Beigi, M., Bajorek, Z., Salter, E. and Tochia, C. (2021) *Working from Home under COVID-19 lockdown: Transitions and tensions*, Work after Lockdown.

## Submission:

Reflecting Work After Lockdown's research focus on changing working patterns for formerly office based jobs, in this submission, we will be responding to the questions raised by the Committee around the changing nature of employment:

### **1. How will the pandemic change the nature of employment? And what will be the long-term impact of this change on towns and cities?**

The pandemic is already changing how many forms of work are organised. Having seen formerly office-based jobs relocate to people's homes for over a year amid multiple lockdowns, organisations have amassed considerable evidence of how a wide range of work roles can be organised differently. The findings of our qualitative research that indicate that the agenda has shifted

considerably over the past year “*culturally, we have really moved that conversation on.*” In all of our case study organisations, **employers were currently engaged in extended conversations about how hybrid and flexible working could be utilised to fit their business models**, as well as how employees could be supported to work more effectively and satisfyingly across a more diverse range of spaces and timeframes.

Some employers are now engaging with **whether and how different kinds of office space will suit their different working needs, as well as how energy efficiency might be better factored into workspace in the future**. With significant levels of staff continuing to express anxiety about transport (21% in our survey), some organisations have been reflecting on whether they will remain in city centre locations, as well as whether third spaces of work might play a greater part in their future workspace strategies, since there is particular enthusiasm for this amongst younger employees. There will be some environmental gains around reduced traffic flows where organisations with larger travel-to-work areas successfully implement hybrid working.

With the emphasis in hybrid working upon utilising office time more effectively around collaborative working, and where employees are able to organise their time better in this knowledge, it may be that ‘office days’ become more intentionally sociable than they previously were. Handled well, this could have positive impacts upon the local economies of towns and cities, where colleagues have effectively been given permission to seek out sociable lunchtimes and coffee breaks, work sociability being one of the key deficits during lockdown, and increasingly now recognised as a valuable aspect of business operation.

## **2. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities within towns and cities?**

One of the ways in which enforced working from home has exacerbated geographical inequalities is in terms of **differential access to suitable home workspaces**, an issue which has emerged in our Working from Home research as associated with both age and income. Younger people were more likely to live in cramped accommodation, either alone or shared, and to lack bespoke working space. Shared accommodation too brought issues around a lack of privacy, and where people were unable to contribute in meetings because of this issue, this could have longer-term impacts upon their careers. So too, for many professional jobs, such as in the law firms we studied, young people had moved to London to start jobs, and lacked social support during lockdown. In terms of economic differences, lockdown-enforced working from home exacerbated differences in people’s access to distinctive home workspaces, with for example, those in smaller properties and/or living in extended households finding it more challenging to separate their work and home spaces. Exacerbating unequal workspaces are **digital inequalities**: an estimated 11% of the population in the UK have no internet access (Ofcom, 2021); and our survey found that one in four had experienced connectivity problems whilst working from home.

Geographical connectivity differences exacerbate socio-economic differences, and require a coordinated national strategy.

By contrast our research has uncovered evidence that working from home has equalities benefits around **enabling those with limiting long-term conditions and disabilities to work in more sustainable ways**. So too, **well-managed hybrid and flexible working will enable parents and older workers to develop more effective working patterns**. So too it will be vital that the gains made disrupting organisational norms around presenteeism are not lost, and that future career structures and measures are productivity are more equitable and inclusive. Indeed **flexible working will be a key tool in addressing some of the new equalities that our research uncovered developing during lockdown around time, space and health, and enable people to work in ways that reflect their different circumstances**.

### **3. How might this increase, or decrease, inequalities between towns and cities?**

**Sectoral geographical considerations** will be an area that planners will want to consider in modelling how the pandemic might affect towns and cities differently. For example, industries like finance and law have tended to be concentrated in capital cities, while local authorities will be broadly distributed across the UK, private sector firms concentrated in the south of England, etc. Consequently, analysis of occupational data will be valuable in identifying where co-working hubs are needed to address inequalities that have emerged around home working environments, particularly in relation to young people.

### **4. What action is needed from the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others to mitigate the risk of any change in the nature of employment?**

Given likely shifts in the labour market, and to ensure that young people in particular do not experience employment scarring following reduced opportunities for training and development during the pandemic, the Government can invest in **training and apprenticeship programmes**.

With more local authorities committing to achieving carbon neutrality, we found evidence that the pandemic was enabling renewed engagement with discussions around sustainability. As organisations increasingly evaluate the energy efficiency of their estates and reassess the logic of daily commutes, which have broader social implications around health and environment, **incentivisation around movements towards net zero** will be valuable in accelerating this journey.

### **5. How could the UK Government, town and cities leaders, and others use their response to the pandemic to reduce inequalities in employment?**

It will be vital that the gains around flexibility are not lost as organisations move towards hybrid working. Going beyond the right to request flexible working, which is more accessible to employees with greater workplace leverage (Parry, 2017), and **extending the right to flexible work to all employees from the start to their contracts, will do much to support those with caring responsibilities and to reduce the disability employment gap**. Building on the Queen's Speech of December 2019 that put forward consultation on flexible working by default, put on hold by the pandemic, the widespread evidence around lockdown working patterns can now be well utilised in refining definitions around flexible working and intelligent job design to better reflect diverse workforce needs. Given the organisational learning going on in this new area of work, **Government can also play a key role in modelling and disseminating information** around its own workforce good practice, and **local leaders can facilitate sectoral benchmarking groups** to develop which can usefully share experiences, both successes and failures.

Given the importance of connectivity in the new world of work, the Government can impactfully focus on reducing digital inequalities, making **investments in the national wi-fi infrastructure**. This will both help to address the exclusion issue and will support businesses in being able to function more effectively. Action taken to address digital inequalities will be in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goal of providing universal and sustainable internet access.

Reflecting the inequalities in home environments that have been exposed by working from home experiences during the pandemic, **Government subsidisation of third spaces of work** will be invaluable in providing good quality workspace to people who may struggle to access them on a regular basis given the likely spatial restrictions of hybrid working. This will have particular benefits in supporting public sector organisations and SMEs who might otherwise struggle to ensure adequate provision for staff, particularly the younger ones who have fewer spatial resources. For example, the Welsh government is currently running a Working Wales initiative setting up public sector remote hubs. A valuable by-product of such an approach could be that some of the social deficits of working from home will be addressed by the social connections of community hubs, which may too in turn reduce the heightened anxieties and mental health issues observed during the pandemic, and reflected in the low score of our survey respondents on the WHO5 of 47.3/100.

*6 July 2021*