

## **Written evidence - Scottish Futures Trust (PTC0033)**

This submission is in response to the call for evidence from the COVID-19 Committee undertaking an inquiry into the long-term impact of the pandemic on the UK's towns and cities. The response touches on a wide range of the questions listed in the call for evidence but in particular 'the changing nature of employment'.

Scottish Futures Trust (SFT), a public body of the Scottish Government, leads on improving public sector infrastructure across Scotland. Through its Development & Housing business area it plays a key role in attracting investment into Scotland's towns, cities and communities to deliver housing, improve public service delivery, secure economic benefits, and contribute to Scotland's net zero carbon target.

The impact and opportunities of a more distributed way of working brought about by COVID-19 has the potential to be an enabler for many of these improvements and benefits.

The impact of the COVID-19 work from home situation has created the biggest change opportunity for office-based work that we have experienced in recent times. Many organisations had already delivered some form of smarter working, enabling their people to work remotely, but very few had crossed the line to deliver a full distributed model.

As of 23 March 2020 many organisations moved from single office solutions to many thousands of 'workplaces' distributed across the country virtually overnight. This period of 'enforced' home working has shown us that it is possible for the majority of office-based roles to be delivered from home and this has encouraged the thinking to change around how and where work is delivered.

For some people, the experience has been very positive, allowing them to regain valuable time taken up by a long commute. They have been able to spend more time with their family and friends and in their local communities. For others it has been a challenging experience as they grapple with adapting to this 'temporary normal', finding suitable space to work, managing family commitments, dealing with mental health issues, etc. - all this while trying to gain new skills and adapt to new virtual technology.

Opportunities for the future:

- Employees are looking to capitalise on this opportunity to help manage their own work life balance and the complex mix of family and work pressures that make up their lives
- Employers are seeing opportunities arising from using 'the workplace' as a tool for supporting organisational culture via a potentially smaller, or at least different, office footprint that capitalises on using a more distributed model to support delivery of their organisation's outcomes

As we look towards a future beyond COVID-19, there is an opportunity to redefine the way we work and to re-imagine the purpose of the office. The aim would be to make it less about presence and more about a place, to deliver real connection within and across an organisation and to create places that people

'want' to come to. Even if only a proportion of the 88% of people wishing to change the time they spend in the office actually do so, we have a real opportunity to reshape the size, function and type of workspace we need for the future.

If we consider the experiences that people have had around working locally, both positive and negative, we can start to explore how we expand on this unique opportunity. Exploring a people focussed cross sector network of choice delivered in rural, sub-urban and urban locations could be the answer to creating places that support work and wellbeing in its widest sense.

Practical issues such as cost and operational models would need to be explored to ensure viability and it will be easier for some organisations than others to deliver their individual solutions.

In addition, public sector organisations will require to undertake social, economic and environmental analysis to understand the impacts at a 'place' level before proceeding with potential initiatives to avoid any unintended consequences. This potential new network could provide for near home working, social connection and the delivery of much needed help for local economies as people live and work locally.

To move in this direction, organisations have to understand the purpose of their offices and the elements that support it around leadership, behaviours, culture and working practices. If we can develop workplaces, work practices and work cultures that support people, activity-based working, autonomy and choice that would be a positive first step. If we can combine this with reduced overheads through the delivery of more effective workplace footprints and improved network opportunities, we think that this could be seen as a successful outcome.

SFT organised a working group to gain a better understanding of the opportunity through the experiences of public, private and third sector organisations. Over 100 individuals from over 65 organisations in Scotland have participated. The output is the report below 'New Frontiers for Smarter Working – Work and Workplace post COVID-19' and dated March 2021. It is also available at [SFT New Frontiers for Smarter Working](#)

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