

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ar Anabledd a Chyflogaeth

This response was submitted to the Equality and Social Justice Committee consultation on Disability and Employment

DE06

Ymateb gan: Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study | Response from: Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study



The Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study's response to the Welsh Parliament's Equality and Social Justice Committee Call for Evidence on the disability employment and payment gap

Introduction

1. This is a submission to the Committee from the research team of the Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study, comprising of Dr Paula Holland and Dr Calum Carson of Lancaster University, Alice Martin and Rebecca Florisson of the Work Foundation, Dr Alison Collins of Manchester Metropolitan University and Jacqueline Winstanley, Founder and CEO of Universal Inclusion & The Inclusive Entrepreneur.
2. The Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study is the largest UK research project studying disabled workers' experiences of remote and hybrid working, specifically in how to make remote and hybrid working (working both at home and from the office) more inclusive to promote disabled workers' recruitment, job retention and progression. It is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and led by Dr Paula Holland from the Faculty of Health and Medicine, Lancaster University. It is funded by the Nuffield Foundation. More information on the project can be found [here](#).
3. The evidence presented below is drawn from the experiences of workers with disabilities across the UK collected and analysed by the Study's research team. This comprises an online survey with 1,300 responses, and 45 in-depth interviews. Both the survey and the interviews focused on individual's experiences of remote and/or hybrid working to date, as well as their thoughts and recommendations on how to make these models of work more inclusive to better meet the needs of people with disabilities and long-term health conditions. Data collection efforts took place from June 2023 to February 2024.

Q1. What progress has been made to deliver the recommendations set out in the 'Locked Out' report and to reduce and remove barriers faced by disabled people who want to access Wales's labour market.

4. Our research as part of this study builds on the evidence published in the Locked Out report which highlighted the benefits for disabled people in being able to work remotely during the peak of the pandemic, providing more evidence for the continued benefits for people with disabilities and long-term health conditions in the years since 2020/21.
5. Interviewees highlighted a number of key benefits of remote working for both their professional and personal lives, as well as enabling them to better manage their condition(s) and balance them with their day-to-day working responsibilities.
6. Below are a selection of quotes from interviewees about these benefits:

"I have a fair few sensory requirements that simply can't be accommodated in a shared office. I can set up my home working environment to accommodate all of them and this has huge benefits for my wellbeing but also my productivity and the quality of my work. Even one day in the office means that I will have a migraine that then affects the next working day."

“Not needing to commute has a huge impact on some many aspects - fatigue levels, income (long, expensive commute), work-life balance, environmental concerns etc.”

“It means that I can manage flare ups in privacy, rest and then come back to my desk when I'm able and still be productive, say for the afternoon, without adding a commute.”

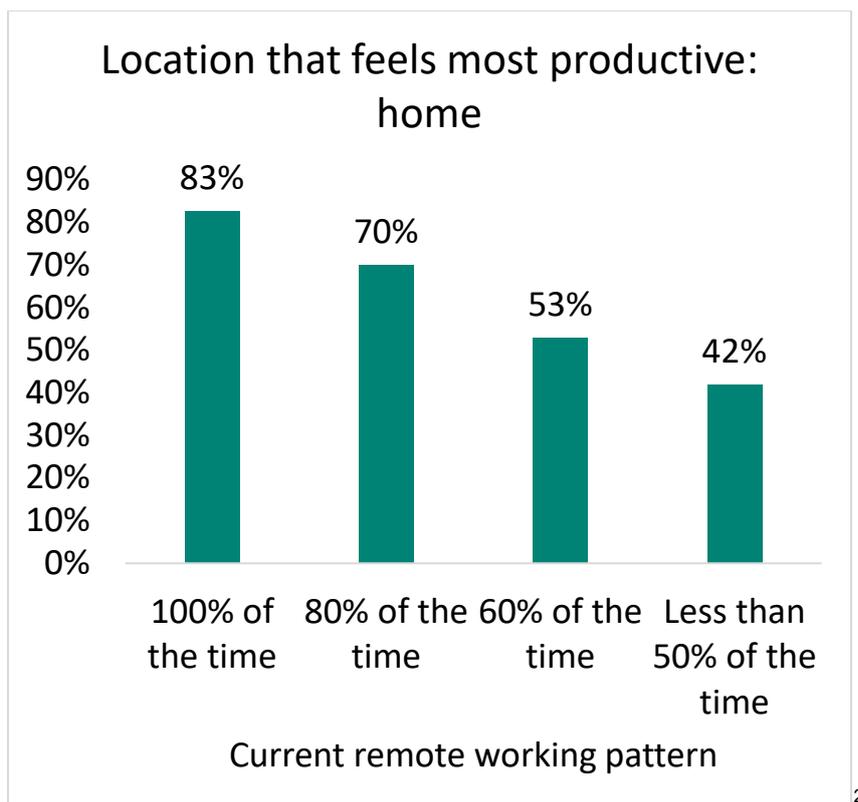
7. Analysis of disabled workers who participated in our survey also highlighted that working from home is particularly useful for managing one's conditions for those workers who consider themselves to be affected by their condition(s) *“a lot.”*



1

8. Working from home was also the location people with disabilities found that they were most productive. Survey respondents with chronic pain and fatigue conditions, as well as neurodiverse respondents and those with Long Covid or sensory processing disorders, were also more likely than others to say that they felt most productive working from home.

¹ Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study. More information at: <https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/inclusive-working/>



9. These findings highlight the benefits that remote working models can provide in creating an environment which can lead to disabled workers being better able to balance their working lives with management of their condition(s), and reinforce the declaration put forward by the Locked Out report that *“arguably, the ‘business case’ for homeworking has been won.”*³

10. Research participants working under a hybrid working model also highlighted clearly in both survey responses and interviews for the Study that they have experienced similar benefits to those discussed above for fully remote workers. For example:

“80% hybrid working allows me to manage my symptoms effectively and to choose my own work style based on my wellbeing that day, rather than “push through” in the office.”

“I am better able to manage my conditions when I have flexibility with my role to work remotely versus working in the office. I value the hybrid aspect of this as I enjoy coming into the office to see colleagues in person, but am able to continue my work at home as should I need to if my health is struggling.”

“The flexible, hybrid working arrangement at my workplace also means that I don’t stand out, I don’t need reasonable adjustments in this regard, which is nice.”

² Inclusive Remote and Hybrid Working Study. More information at: <https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/inclusive-working/>

³ “Locked out: liberating disabled people’s lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19,” Welsh Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/locked-out-liberating-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights-wales-beyond-covid-19-html>

11. These findings, and our ongoing research in this area, highlight **the critical importance of flexible working models being available to disabled people to support both their entry into employment and the continuation of their working lives**. This is particularly vital for those with fluctuating long-term chronic conditions that can strengthen and lessen in intensity at unexpected intervals, as well as those that find the office workplace especially challenging because of their disabilities and/or health conditions (for example blind and visually impaired people).
12. In order to enable further progress with supporting disability employment, employers should (where appropriate) ensure that the option to work fully remotely or within a hybrid model is available to disabled people at the point of recruitment, and that their right to this model is guaranteed throughout their time in that role.
13. The importance for disabled people of having access to remote or hybrid working roles to enter (and remain) within the labour market has been strongly underlined through this research: for example, **more than three in four (78%) individuals who are either blind or visually impaired indicated in our survey that they would not apply for a job where remote working was not available**.
14. Employers should also take efforts to ensure **that any required specialist equipment for disabled workers (for example screen readers) should be made available to them at the earliest possible opportunity**, and that this equipment should be provided in both the home and the office locations for those working within a hybrid model.
15. Employers should also ensure that the **reasonable adjustments required for disabled workers within their organisations are implemented quickly and in full**, and that their internal organisational culture enabled individuals to feel confident in requesting these adjustments.
16. **Clear and fixed organisational policies should be put in place setting out the employer's remote and hybrid working policies**, and these policies should be developed in consultation with internal and external disability groups where possible.
17. **Line managers should be sufficiently trained in how to manage any disabled workers effectively and compassionately** within their team(s), with extra training developed and undertaken where needed to understand how best to manage those individuals working remotely or within a hybrid role.
18. Our ongoing research has also highlighted issues with isolation and presenteeism for some disabled people working remotely or under a hybrid model, issues that employers can address by **putting in place measures that ensure disabled people working under these models feel suitably part of their team and wider organisation**.
19. By putting in place these measures and placing an emphasis on improving the daily working lives of disabled people, employers will also be taking action that helps to support them to remain within the labour market.

Q2. What barriers continue to exist throughout society that impact on access to work?

20. **Organisational barriers to employing disabled are largely due to employers' assumptions about disabled people and perceived difficulties in implementing reasonable adjustments.** Most organisations are likely to already employ disabled people, even if they are not aware they do: organisational culture can prevent employees from informing their employer they are disabled and can reduce the willingness of senior disabled staff from being 'open' role models.
21. **Employers should be made aware of the business case for employing disabled people:** workplaces and work practices that are designed in an inclusive way i) promote disabled people's employment, ii) prevent the need for disabled people to request reasonable adjustments, iii) promote the employment of carers, parents, older workers and other people who need flexible working.
22. **Mandating large employers to report their disability pay gap data, as they do for their gender pay gap data, would encourage more employers to employ disabled people.** In addition, they should be told to report: the number of disabled employees within the organisation (including as a proportion of their total workforce); the number of disabled and non-disabled employees who have left the organisation; and the number of disabled and non-disabled employees employed at senior levels within the organisation. This data would help identify organisations that are not supporting disabled workers with job retention and progression.
23. While there are specific schemes in place to support disabled workers, such as Access to Work, they do not achieve their aims due to a lack of funding and resources.
24. Low awareness of schemes like Access to Work (AtW), for instance, is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work. However, awareness of the scheme is low and there are long wait times before AtW funding applications are processed. Moreover, long wait times before AtW funding applications make it more difficult for disabled people to stay in work or to start a new role.
25. In order to improve the uptake of AtW, we **recommend the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to intensify its outreach efforts to make sure employers and disabled people are aware of the scheme**, ensure that the scheme is properly resourced to reduce the current waitlist and expand the trials of the Access to Work Adjustment Passport to disabled people who are looking for work.
26. The DWP should **add a Level 4 accreditation that obliges employers to report on the disability pay gap within their firm** and administer an employee survey on the impact of work on the health outcomes of disabled employees.