

Opinion

The Guardian view on working from home: a new social divide

Editorial

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As Britain warily exits lockdown, the post-pandemic challenges that the country faces are looming large. On Tuesday, a [study](#) by the Resolution Foundation thinktank outlined some of them, including reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and managing the transition to automation in parts of the economy. The report also highlighted a new social divide, one that emerged in the context of Covid and is likely, in some form, to remain when the pandemic is behind us. In 2019, only 5% of employees worked mainly from home, but that number grew to almost 50% during the first and third

lockdowns. Remote working has become particularly prevalent among the higher-paid and higher-educated, as a substantial part of the knowledge economy successfully migrates to affluent suburbs in London and elsewhere. Figures [released](#) by the Office for National Statistics this week reveal that 70% of all staff in Richmond upon Thames worked from home at some point during the pandemic. The equivalent figure in Burnley was less than 14%.

The implications of this shift, and its social composition, need to be thought through. For millions of mostly better-off citizens able to work from home, a hybrid working week - part-home, part-office - seems likely in the future. This will have a sizeable impact on the country's economic geography. The Nationwide building society and Santander UK, for example, have already [announced](#) the closure of swathes of urban office space. Nationwide has advised 13,000 staff that they are free to work at home from anywhere in the country. HSBC intends to cut office space, but require its staff to come in for part of the week. As other businesses follow suit, and the shift to online shopping continues, the decline of high streets and urban centres may accelerate. Providers of local goods and services, stranded in the physical economy, may struggle and may be forced to relocate. Places and individuals that could be losers in this process must be properly supported and provided with meaningful options and assistance.

For businesses, the main advantage of staying wholly or partly on Zoom is obvious: in one recent [survey](#), 88% of organisations said that they made real-estate savings in 2020 through remote working; 92% expected further cost reductions in the next two to three years. For employees, the picture is more complicated. The loss of a stressful daily commute has certainly not been mourned. But as a short-term novelty has turned into the new normal, there has been [evidence](#) of a sense of social disconnection, burnout and falling morale. Matthew Taylor, the author of a 2017 government [review](#) on work, [warned](#) this month that a high level of working from home risked creating “highly atomised workforces”, lacking the kind of solidarity and mutual support that should be part of a good working experience. Andy Haldane, the Bank of England's [outgoing](#) chief economist, has suggested that an online working world can become a long-term drain on creativity and collaboration. For young people starting out in their careers, the physical workplace provides crucial opportunities to bond with colleagues and get the feel of an organisation.

In some form, working from home is set to remain part of millions of people's lives. But there must be careful thinking on how to mitigate its downsides, both for those in the virtual working world and those trying to make a living outside it.
