Senedd Cymru

Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau

Gweithio o bell: Y goblygiadau i Gymru

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Ymateb gan: Disability Wales

Welsh Parliament

Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee

Remote Working: Implications for Wales

Evidence from: Disability Wales

Disability Wales Consultation Response to Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee on Remote Working: Implications for Wales.

Key Recommendations:

- Build on existing strategies to reduce current levels of loneliness and to create preventative measures to combat future loneliness and isolation due to home working.
- Work to create resources to help workers who are struggling with working at home with potentially unfamiliar programmes and situations. E.g. guidance on Microsoft Word.
- Work collaboratively with disabled people, employers, trade unions and disabled people's organisations to create and review guidance on remote working.
- Work with disabled people, employers, trade unions and disabled people's organisations to identify examples of best practise for workplaces to use as guidance.

Introduction

Disability Wales/Anabledd Cymru (DW) is the national association of disabled people's organisations in Wales striving for the rights and equality of all disabled people, including for independent living. Our core role is to reflect the views of our members to Government with the aim of informing and influencing policy.

Disability Wales subscribes to the Social Model of Disability, by which we mean that "disability results from the interaction between persons

with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (*UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People*).

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the way in which Wales works has changed. We have all had to adapt to more and more people working from their homes and this has had multiple implications, both positive and negative.

Disability Wales welcomes the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee consulting on this issue. Throughout the pandemic, Disability Wales has been calling for the ability to work from home to be extended post-pandemic and to become part of working culture in Wales.
This consultation response is based on research done throughout the pandemic. Notably, focus groups on employment conducted during July and August, a survey on homeworking with 26 responses and a survey for our Disabled People's Manifesto with 120 responses. Overall this response draws on evidence given from approximately 180 disabled people.

Issues affecting the workforce, and skills:

The topic of homeworking/ flexible working has been popular amongst disabled people for a long time. The ability to work from home is one of the most commonly requested reasonable adjustments made by disabled employees. Unfortunately it is also very often declined for various reasons by their employers. One major benefit from the increased homeworking during the pandemic is that it has shown

employers that they can still run a successful, productive organisation and that their team can work effectively while at home.

This has allowed many disabled people to both enter the workforce and be more productive than they would have been otherwise.

"Isolating but, not having to travel to meetings and so on, has meant that I have been able to attend more activities. In short, I have been busier than ever." (Survey respondent)

We have heard that due to not having to use energy to commute to an office/ any meetings, many people have found that they have more energy for their work and in other areas of their lives, which will be expanded on later.

However, we have also heard that some disabled people feel disconnected from their colleagues and have struggled with this. Some have found it more difficult to work as a team due to issues with communication.

"Isolation - not meeting face-to-face with colleagues for moral support Inconsistent internet for emails, Teams, Zoom etc." (Survey respondent)

These issues with communication have been the result of both impairment related issues and general consequences of working from home. As with the respondent quoted, many people rely on colleagues for moral support in the workplace, having this removed can be very isolating.

We believe that the increasing awareness of the option of working from home and that it can be a beneficial way of working is a good thing. However, we believe that it is a good thing if it is coming from the employee themselves. It is vital that these decisions are made as part of

a continuing dialogue between the employer, trade unions and employee to create a suitable, productive and safe work environment for all involved.

Health (physical and mental) and wellbeing:

We have heard that working from home can be beneficial for some disabled people's wellbeing. We have been told that disabled people who previously requested home working as a reasonable adjustment have been vindicated by the widespread use of working from home and employers seeing that it is perfectly feasible for organisations to work effectively.

We have been told that this has been both helpful and harmful for work/life balance. Some disabled people have found that not having to commute means that they have reserved energy and are more able to enjoy their lives outside of work.

However some disabled people have told us that it has resulted in difficulty separating work and leisure. We have been told that many have found themselves overworking or under more pressure from work as a result of working from home.

"It became easy and a bad habit not to take a lunch break and just eat as I worked and work late/ until I'd finished what i was working on. Working in the same place as I was meant to relax in was also difficult, it never felt like you had a proper break some days" (Survey respondent)

The issue of a work/life balance demonstrates that this is an area in which we must take a person-directed approach. It is important that all decisions on this made within an individual organisation are driven by

continual and open dialogue between employees, employers and trade unions.

Yet there are concerns from some disabled people about loneliness. Some disabled people, especially those who live alone have reported that having to work from home has resulted in them becoming increasingly isolated.

"Much more difficult to develop new relationship and networks. There is no replacement for face to face meeting. Also there is a strong feeling of isolation and, sometimes, loneliness." (Survey respondent).

This is concerning as levels of loneliness and isolation are very high. According to the National Survey for Wales, in 2019-2020 levels of loneliness amongst those with a "life limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity" showed that, although the levels of "Sometimes lonely" were relatively even between the group of disabled people vs. the group of non-disabled people, cases of those who are extremely lonely are much higher amongst disabled people. They found that 18% of disabled people were classed as "Lonely" as opposed to 10% of non-disabled people, and non-disabled people were far less like to not be lonely than disabled people, 25% of non-disabled people are "Not Lonely" as opposed to 16% of disabled people. These differences become starker when you consider those with mental health related impairments. Amongst those with a mental illness, 44% of people classed themselves as "Lonely" and only 10% of people classed themselves as "Not Lonely" in comparison to 12% of those without a mental illness being defined as "Lonely" and 36% being defined as "Not

Lonely". These results are consistent with surveys done in previous years and demonstrate that there is a clear problem here.[1]

Loneliness is a key issue here in Wales, especially for disabled people and we welcome measures already taken by the Welsh Government to tackle loneliness. It is vital that work is done to try and combat existing loneliness, alongside preventative work to tackle future loneliness as a result of spending longer periods of time working from home.

Inequalities between different groups and different parts of Wales (including those areas of with poor connectivity):

Some disabled people prefer to work at home as they are able to personalize their working environment. Disabled people have told us that they are more able to adapt their work environment to their impairment-related needs.

"Quiet, no sensory overload. Very positive, much more efficient and productive. Increased time to fit in exercise, less stress overall." (Survey respondent)

This has allowed people to work more comfortably than they could in an office environment and been able to take on more tasks/ be more productive than otherwise.

This helps open up work to some disabled people who otherwise would not have access to work.

"To begin with was a shock to my system, gradually got used, in fact lockdown enabled me to stay in employment." (Survey respondent)

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[1] National Survey For Wales, 2019-2020, < https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales-results-viewer>

It also helps allow other disabled people who could work but would not have enough energy for other areas of their lives, e.g. social lives, to be able to enjoy those more fully.

"It has been good to not have to travel long distances, as where I live is very rural. Normally I would have to travel 2.5 to 3 hours a day to get to and from work, which can be extremely tiring, especially by the end of the week, now i can be more active at the weekend." (Survey respondent)

This is a particularly important point, when we talk about how to help those at work, the consideration of how their experiences at work fit into their ability to enjoy life outside of work is a key area to look at.

However, this is of course not a universal experience for all disabled people or disabled workers. We have heard many disabled people who are concerned about digital exclusion and concerns that this will leave people without access to important services, or more isolated from the world of work.

We would recommend that the Welsh Government provides specific support and services for those learning to work effectively from home and to allow people to hone and develop those skills. We acknowledge some of the great work done but Digital Communities Wales and believe it would be extremely helpful for this digital up skilling work to include systems for people to adapt to the new normal that we have found ourselves in.

Working Collaboratively

Disability Wales believes that this is the beginning of a very significant shift in workplace culture. This shift is a welcome change from an older

system from which many disabled people were excluded, but it is vital that this is done in partnership with disabled people, disabled people's organisations, trade unions and employers. We believe that having this open dialogue is vital from the small scale of ensuring that individual employees are treated with respect and allowed to work in an environment which best suits them, to a larger national scale deciding policy which impacts disabled workers.

We also believe that it is vital that the Welsh Government works in partnerships with organisations, such as disabled people's organisations, which are run by disabled people to find practical examples of good practise in a workplace.

Conclusion

To conclude, there are clear advantages to home working becoming more widely used in Wales. From the perspective of Disability Wales, homeworking is neither an inherently good nor bad idea, but is a useful tool that disabled employees can use to create a better work environment for them.

The most important outcome of this, is the need for an ongoing conversation between employees, employers, trade unions, politicians and disabled people's organisations. To ensure that individual employees are supported in their workplace and that the Government has adequate support systems and policies in place to protect them.