

# Civil Service “well positioned” to formalise flexible options after move to remote working

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**The large-scale shift to remote working suggests that the civil service is “well positioned to develop and implement formalised flexible remote working arrangements in the future”, according to the largest workplace survey conducted here, involving 26,822 respondents.**

A new survey across the civil service finds that 88% of respondents “feel they are as effective when working remotely as they are during normal working arrangements”.

This was one of the stand out findings of the ‘Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey 2020 COVID-19 Remote Working Report’ launched by the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform, Michael McGrath, just before Christmas.

This report was devised specifically to capture the experiences of staff who transitioned to remote working as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. It had a 65% response rate.

The survey finds that 75% of all respondents were working remotely at the time of the survey and the make-up of the 25% not working at home were in the grades of PO (26%), Director, ASG and above (32%) and CO (36%).

Close to a third would like to work from home exclusively in the future.

A majority of female civil servants (73%) reported being able to work as effectively at home, a higher rate than their male colleagues on 65%.

But a substantial minority – one quarter of all respondents – reported that they don’t want to work remotely in the future, a finding strongest among the principal officer grade.

## TO INFORM POLICY

In a statement, DPER said the report provides a rich body of data, which will inform the development of future policies and initiatives with respect to remote working, employee wellbeing and workplace supports.

The department says the results compare favourably with the results of similarly-focused consultations held both nationally and internationally.

It is the third of a series of similar employee engagement surveys. Given the unprecedented situation that the country found itself in, a new module was introduced this year to capture the experiences of staff who transitioned to remote working.

Minister McGrath said was “heartened by the finding that 88% of staff believe they are as effective working remotely as they are in their normal place of work” while also noting that some staff feel they have not been adequately supported in terms of wellbeing “and I acknowledge that this must be addressed”.

## **‘POSITIVE’ FINDINGS**

The key ‘positive’ findings of the survey report are as follows:

### **1. There has been an extraordinary shift to remote working in the Civil Service.**

Civil Servants have embraced the move to remote working since the COVID-19 pandemic crisis began. 75% of respondents reported that they were working remotely at the time of the survey.

However, 25% of staff were not working remotely at that time, most notably the grades of PO (26%), Director, ASG and above (32%) and CO (36%). 81% of respondents had never worked remotely before.

This successful large-scale shift in the working model suggests that the Civil Service is well positioned to develop and implement formalised flexible remote working arrangements in the future.

### **2. Overall, Civil Servants feel that they are as effective when working remotely.**

The majority of staff (88%) indicated that they feel as effective when working remotely as they are during normal working arrangements.

### **3. Civil Servants strongly favour a blended approach to remote working in the future.**

Three-quarters of staff indicated that they would like to continue to access remote working in the future if given the choice. Of these, 62% indicated a preference for a blended approach to working remotely (a mix of home and office).

A significant number of staff (30%) expressed a preference to work from home exclusively in the future. This was strongest in the grades of EO (30%) and CO (33%).

### **4. The Civil Service is maintaining an active connection with staff who are working remotely.**

Nearly three-quarters of staff (72%) reported receiving regular contact from their organisation while working remotely. The result mirrors the strong ‘Social Support’ score of 72% in the 2017 Civil Service Engagement Survey, which may suggest that the proactive management culture of the Civil Service has remained strong in the face of the challenges presented by COVID 19.

### **5. Females in the Civil Service are more positive about remote working than their European counterparts.**

A Eurofound report found that females in Europe experienced greater difficulties maintaining a healthy work-life balance compared to men, while working remotely.

While not directly comparable, the Irish survey has found that the majority of female civil servants in Ireland (73%) reported feeling as effective while working remotely during normal working arrangements, compared to their male counterparts (65%).

In addition, 78% of female civil servants in Ireland would like to continue to access working remotely in the future, compared to 72% of males.

## **‘CHALLENGING’ FINDINGS**

What are described as ‘challenging’ findings: were as follows:

### **1. The level of wellbeing supports civil servants received from their organisations while working remotely varied:**

54% of respondents reported receiving regular well-being supports from their organisation while 15% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The remaining respondents (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this question.

### **2. There are regional differences in the number of civil servants working remotely:**

Staff in Ulster, Connacht and those outside of Ireland reported the least number of staff working remotely. This may reflect the nature of services provided in these regions.

### **3. Some grades within the Civil Service were less positive about remote working.**

25% of total respondents reported that they did not want to work remotely after normal working arrangements had resumed. This was most evident in responses from Principal Officers and above and the lower grades. The same cohort also reported the most difficulty with feeling effective while working remotely.

### **4. Civil servants at lower grades felt less connected with their organisation while working remotely:**

Staff at CO and equivalent grades reported the lowest levels of regular communication from their organisations. The current hierarchical structure of the Civil Service may pose challenges for effective communication across all grades.

## **COMPARATORS**

Elsewhere, the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) national survey found that 48% of respondents in April-May reported that it was “easy or somewhat easy” to work effectively remotely, while 37% indicated some level of difficulty.

The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation’s ‘Remote Work in Ireland: Future Jobs 2019’ report noted that despite staff highlighting greater flexibility as a primary motivator for access to remote working, “remote work is also associated with longer working hours, work intensification and interference with personal life: 47% of respondents to the Future Jobs survey identified “switching off/avoiding overwork” as the most common remote working challenge.

Surveys from unions (eg Fórsa and AHCPs) “reinforce the findings that staff have reported their working hours/patterns have been largely unaffected while working remotely”.

Meanwhile, findings from amongst the “nine organisations” analysed show that most employees feel trusted to do their work remotely. Findings from one organisation showed that 61% of staff responded that working from home was increasing their productivity, while findings from another revealed that 81% of respondents agreed.

While not directly comparable, Eurofound’s respondents reported working more often during their free time while working from home, the report said. Eurofound also found that respondents working from home reported that their working hours had increased compared to those who worked in their place of employment during the pandemic.

In addition, a reported increase in working hours was common for Irish respondents to the Eurofound survey. This report found that an unintended consequence of governmental actions to control the spread of the disease has been to “increase considerably women’s share of unpaid work”, and that while some of the gender-unequal impacts of remote working may be temporary, others may have lasting consequences.

“In this survey, women have reported greater struggles with work-life balance than men, particularly those with children under 12. Significant gender differences in the time spent completing caring duties or housework were also found,” the report said.

The full report is available on gov.ie at <https://bit.ly/38eP1wY>