

ARTICLE

Post-pandemic geographies of working from home: More of the same for spatial inequalities?

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Abstract

Rather than being an indiscriminate ‘greater leveller’, it is widely recognised that the burden of the covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath has largely mirrored long-standing cleavages of social and spatial disadvantage. This paper considers how the nature and effects of the mass covid-induced shift to remote and hybrid working can inform theorisations of contemporary regional inequalities. Through a loosening of the relationship between the geography of home and employment, in theory, these novel working practices and associated changing residential preferences hold potential for easing spatial disparities. Drawing predominantly on interviews and workshops across 15 UK case study areas, this analysis however contends that stark social and spatial divides in the prevalence of remote/hybrid working mean that the propagation of working from home (WFH) may well in fact entrench rather than alleviate geographical inequalities, as working practices have improved for the mainly higher socio-economic employees who can WFH (overrepresented in prosperous areas) but remain largely unchanged for the majority of the workforce elsewhere who cannot WFH. In this sense, the resilience of core–periphery economic geographies is just as compelling as the significant shift in working practices and residential preferences that the pandemic created. Consequently, caution is needed to avoid a fetishisation of ostensibly transformed post-pandemic geographies of work–home relations and their potential as a panacea for spatial inequalities.

KEYWORDS

place attractiveness, regional inequality, residential preferences, working from home, working practices

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1 | THE COVID-19 CRISIS: THE GREAT LEVELLER OR A CASE OF *PLUS ÇA CHANGE?*

The onset of the global covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 saw understandable public concern with, and policy responses to, the rapid spread of a highly transferable deadly disease. A prominent discourse that initially accompanied this alarm was the notion that viruses, by definition, do not respect societal or national boundaries. Note, for example, the following declarations made by prominent public figures at the onset of the pandemic.

This virus is the great equaliser.

Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York

The fact that both the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary have contracted the virus is a reminder that the virus does not discriminate.

Michael Gove, UK Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

While the passage of time has inevitably and conclusively dismissed as a fanciful myth the notion of the pandemic as a great leveller, there remains hope that, longer term, previously disadvantaged groups may benefit from the changes in working practices that it engendered. The official mandates for those who could do so to work from home (WFH) during the covid-19 crisis saw a sudden increase in remote (fully WFH) and hybrid (partially WFH) working, much of which has persisted post-pandemic (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023). While this 'new normal' of working practices is still emerging (Burlinson et al., 2023), there is evidence that it has benefitted some conventionally disadvantaged workers, such as those with disabilities (Tang, 2021) or caring responsibilities (Allen & Orifici, 2022), but that the propensity to WFH is highly stratified by socio-economic status (McCullum, 2023). What remains less clear is the geography of changing working practices and associated residential preferences and what this in turn means for how the nature, causes and consequences of regional inequalities are conceptualised. The aim of this analysis is to try and better understand how, and in what ways, the increased propensity of WFH relates to spatial inequalities and what their immediate and post-pandemic and longer-term implications might be. It seeks to achieve this by drawing on interviews and workshops with key stakeholders in some of the places most and least impacted by these changing working practices and associated residential preferences. In general terms, spatial inequality can be defined as the unequal distribution of income, wealth, power and resources between peoples in different locations (Stillwell et al., 2010). In the context of this paper, regional inequalities are broadly considered as differences in affluence between different regions of the UK, as typified by the dominance of the global city of London and its hinterland and the associated longstanding North–South divide within the country (Fransham et al., 2023).

Regional inequality has increased across higher income countries over the past 50 years and is a malignant force in terms of economic progress, social cohesion and political stability (Iammarino et al., 2019). Yet the UK stands out as being one of the most regionally unequal higher income economies in terms of GDP per capita, productivity and disposable income (Stansbury et al., 2023). The entrenched concentration of well remunerated jobs in specific core-regions, exacerbated by the selective migration of skilled labour towards them, is a fundamental cause of regional inequalities (Bathelt et al., 2024). Azpitarte (2023) contends that the spatially uneven distribution of human capital is the main cause of regional inequalities and that the ability of regions and cities to attract high skilled individuals is therefore central to their productivity and standards of living. However, he has also demonstrated that the geographical skills gap in England and Wales actually widened in the period prior to the pandemic (2012–19). London's per capita income is around two-fifths higher than the UK national average (Bathelt et al., 2024) and for decades its human capital per head has been over a third higher than the national average (ONS, 2020). Whether explicitly place-based policies are necessary or desirable in light of these considerable regional inequalities is a topic of ongoing debate (Bathelt et al., 2024) and is an issue that this research hopes to contribute to.

The rise of WFH, in effectively decoupling the geography of home and work, in theory presents opportunities for addressing regional inequalities. In the UK case, this would involve the redistribution of human capital and economic activity from overheating property markets, primarily in London and the South East of England, to other relatively affordable parts of the country, thus producing a more equitable distribution of human capital and productive economic activity (Farmer & Zanetti, 2021). The rapid growth in WFH promoted much speculation regarding the residential preferences of so-called digital nomads and the associated benefits that this can bring to economically and demographically challenged

peripheral regions (Hooper & Benton, 2022; Leducq & Demaziere, 2023). Concurrently, popular media stories abounded of skilled white-collar workers abandoning large cities for less expensive and more aesthetically appealing coastal and rural locales during the pandemic (CNN, 2020; Guardian, 2020).

While it is plausible that a reformed geography of the relationship between home and work could have a positive effect on spatial inequalities, to date, there has been little empirical research that explicitly assesses the nexus between WFH and regional inequalities, especially in a post-pandemic context of the abolition of official restrictions on mobility. The next section reviews the modest evidence base thus far on WFH and regional inequality. It also draws on feminist economic geography scholarship to caution against overly optimistic interpretations of the ability of changing home–work relations to transform longstanding positional hierarchies of sociospatial inequalities. The empirical section of the paper considers how specific types of places have been impacted by these changing employment practices and associated residential preferences. Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on the wider implications of these findings for framings of regional inequalities.

2 | WORKING FROM HOME AND SPATIAL INEQUALITIES: EXISTING EVIDENCE BASE

The research discussed in this paper deploys a multi-site in-depth case study approach to try and enrich the nascent literature on WFH and spatial inequalities that is reviewed below. The issue of what the WFH revolution means for regional inequalities sits at the heart of longstanding scholarly interest in the deeply uneven spatial patterning of opportunities within the UK, but also their more recent politicisation (Beveridge & Featherstone, 2021; MacKinnon et al., 2024). The Leave vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2019 General Election landslide victory for the Conservative Party were the genesis of the much-touted Levelling Up agenda (Leyshon, 2021). The stated aim of this ambitious policy programme was to rebalance economic opportunities more evenly across the UK by 2030 (see Fransham et al., 2023 for description and critique). Its scale is evidenced by some 12 stated ‘missions’, such as investment in transport and digital infrastructure, the relocation of public sector employment and efforts to make places ‘nicer to live in’ by encouraging ‘pride in place’. In July 2024, the newly elected Labour Government formally jettisoned the Levelling Up term.

In theory, the growth of WFH offers optimism in relation to policy aspirations aimed at reducing spatial inequalities. As skilled workers may no longer need to reside within or in close proximity to the buoyant labour markets that offer the most attractive jobs, this could result in more economically peripheral areas retaining human capital, and attracting it from elsewhere on account of more modest living costs. This, should it transpire, would closely correspond with the aspiration of ‘supporting people to realise their career aspirations without having to leave their communities’ (Levelling Up the UK, 2022, p. 193). Another issue of policy relevance to this analysis is the issue of population sustainability in the context of Scotland’s demographic challenges. Scotland’s population is ageing, and the country faces population decline in many rural areas. Furthermore, Scotland is fully reliant on inward migration from other parts of the UK and overseas for demographic stability and growth. In response, the Scottish Government has developed a place-based model and policy goal of population sustainability, which includes the aim of a ‘balanced and distributed’ population across the country (McCollum et al., 2021). As with the regional inequality agenda, WFH could conceivably serve to aid population sustainability, if it enables those who can work remotely to either remain in, or relocate to, places facing demographic challenges.

The potential of WFH to contribute to place-based policy agendas is thus significant but has been the subject of scant analytical scrutiny. The covid-19 induced shift to remote and hybrid working patterns has spawned numerous studies into how the reconfigured geography of home and work is (re)shaping gendered and other inequalities at the microscale of the home (Chauhan, 2022; Ewers & Kangmennaang, 2023). Concurrently, a set of literature is emerging that seeks to elucidate the implications of these changes for business organisation and performance (Anakpo et al., 2023; Caraiani et al., 2023). However, this research aims to assess the wider ramifications of the increased propensity of WFH specifically for regional inequalities. This endeavour sits within a fledging cannon of scholarship on the spatial effects of this transition. This emerging body of evidence has predominantly relied on analysis of retrospective secondary quantitative data to assess geographies of work and home during the pandemic and to use these as the basis for theses about their longer-term patterning and effects. The present study differs from, and contributes to, these understandings by drawing on qualitative data from key stakeholders, collected post-pandemic, in many of the places most and least affected by the WFH revolution. As such, it offers nuanced original insights into the localised nature and effects of WFH and also their broader implications for regional inequalities.

As intimated, the existing evidence base relating to the spatial effects of covid-19 induced changing employment practices and associated residential preferences can be characterised as predominantly quantitative and speculative in nature. In the US context, Brueckner et al. (2023) employ statistical modelling to postulate that the ability to work remotely whilst retaining the same occupation will lead to a lower price premium on areas with favourable job access and therefore a lessening of regional disparities in property prices. However, the authors concede that these theorisations were made based on hypothesised potential effects rather than observed population movements and relatively 'early in the game' of the pandemic and its corresponding effects on the geography of the work-home nexus. In a similar vein, Gokan et al. (2022) produced a thorough but speculative analysis of how population movements in two hypothetical cities responded to the growth of WFH, concluding that the rise in residential options presented to remote workers risks a de-gentrification of urban centres. Relatedly, De Fraja et al. (2021) estimated the extent of 'zoomshock' (geographical shifts in economic activity) at the local authority level in Great Britain and highlighted a clear WFH induced shift in productive activity away from city centres into residential areas. However, as the authors note, this assessment is based on trends during the pandemic and the spatial effects ultimately depend largely on the longer-term extent and geography of WFH. Bond-Smith and McCann (2022) and Luca et al. (2024) take a different stance to the core city decline narrative, arguing that more prosperous and larger cities will in fact benefit from the growth in WFH. This logic is based on the astute premise that hybrid working is, and will continue to be, much more prevalent than fully remote work. As such, despite the mushrooming of WFH, most workers nevertheless must still reside a commutable distance from their (non-home) place of work. However hybrid workers are tolerant of longer commutes as their journeys to work are less frequent, creating so-called donut effects, whereby the hinterlands around large cities become increasingly attractive as residential locations and correspondingly more expensive (Ramani & Bloom, 2021). One possible outcome of these trends (increased use of technology inside of the home for work purposes and longer commutes) could be a further decline in already falling rates of internal migration in higher-income countries (Champion et al., 2018): if more workers WFH then fewer will have to change their place of residence to accommodate job changes.

Another well informed but still speculative perspective of how the pandemic might influence the economic geography of the UK is provided by Farmer and Zanetti (2021). They emphasise the theoretical potential of WFH for a spatial rebalancing of the economy in terms of employment opportunities and housing affordability. Four scenarios, based on the prevalence of WFH and whether firms or employees mostly derive the benefits from it, are considered. Sadly, in each case, there is little expected flow of the wealth or opportunity that is needed to revive the fortunes of 'left behind places'. This is due to the middle-class knowledge workers who are deemed critical to regional economic prosperity either remaining in central London, moving to its prosperous suburbs or relocating to affluent towns and smaller cities elsewhere in the country. A similarly muted outlook is presented by Brewer et al. (2022) in their extensive investigation of the potential long-term impacts of covid-19 on spatial inequalities across the UK. They highlight intriguing emerging spatial variations in factors such as house prices, local consumer spending, employment and unemployment claimant count figures, but ultimately conclude that: 'those areas that are expected to do relatively well out of this transition—i.e. they have relatively many workers who can WFH but fairly few empty workplaces—tend to be relatively advantaged... changes to the UK since early 2020 have had a minimal impact on spatial inequalities' (Brewer et al., 2022, pp. 5–6). According to their analysis, the areas benefitting most from the WFH transition are relatively affluent locales, especially commuter-belt areas, that have experienced a net gain in human capital through more people now WFH in them than they have lost through the decrease in commuters no longer travelling to workplaces in them. The demographic and sectorial structure of local and regional economies in terms of the extent to which they host workers and occupations that are amenable to working remotely (compositional effects) is thus central to the geography of WFH (Luca et al., 2024). A final pertinent observation is that the WFH-driven 'race for space' has seen a surge in demand for residential properties in relatively geographically remote small towns and villages. House prices in these types of areas have risen accordingly, reducing spatial inequalities in house prices at the aggregate national scale, but increasing the risk of housing affordability challenges in the relatively low wage regions where property values have grown most dramatically (Brewer et al., 2022).

In light of the evidence reviewed above, this research aims to elucidate the impacts of the growth of WFH on specific types of places and in doing so contribute to understandings of how changing geographies of home-work relations may reconfigure the relationship between human capital and regional inequalities. The analysis is informed by a feminist economic geography perspective, which is sceptical of 'bright outlook' rhetoric in the context of apparent transformative changes within society. Such a stance implores analysts to focus on the 'uneven land of opportunity', which means that the ability of even epochal shifts to disrupt persistent spatial inequalities is typically undermined by the structural disadvantages experienced by particular groups and places (Cooke, 2019). Reflecting on the link between social change and the spatial structuring of urban environments, the geographer Elvin Wyly (1999) introduced the term 'dynamic stability'

to characterise the tendency of positive assumptions to underplay the social and geographical forms of difference that consistently undermine what appears to be transformative change. Three decades later, writing prophetically just before the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic on the issue of feminist geography and the future of work, Emily Reid-Musson and colleagues warned that 'looking to past inequalities and unevennesses and how they reproduce themselves over time and space will be just as, if not more, important in understanding that future than examining novelty and technological change' (Reid-Musson et al., 2020, p. 1464). Likewise Orman et al., in drawing together feminist economic geography and geographies of home literature, call for greater recognition that the time-spaces of WFH have not 'materialised out of nowhere' (Orman et al., 2024, p. 41). This chimes with Cockayne's (2021) contention that the ability to WFH is structurally dependent upon numerous, often unacknowledged, economic conditions, and that the various forms of social difference that are embedded within them contribute to the reproduction of the inequalities that continue to structure work in contemporary society. These pertinent observations have helped to underpin the analysis of the empirical material presented in this paper, and the issue of the role of structural disadvantage in stifling what are ostensibly transformative changes within society is returned to in the final section of this paper.

3 | METHODOLOGY

The stakeholder orientated qualitative approach employed in this study was informed by the analysis of quantitative datasets. The UK Household Longitudinal Study was exploited to identify the significant social and spatial inequalities in the prevalence in WFH that occurred during the pandemic (see McCollum, 2023). As is discussed below, the 2021 Census was used to identify WFH 'hot' and 'cold' spot case study areas in England and Wales. The delay of the Scottish Census precluded this approach in Scotland. Instead National Records of Scotland (NRS) mid-year population estimates formed the basis of case study selection in Scotland.

The prevalence of WFH in England and Wales, as estimated by the 'method of travel to workplace' Census question is displayed in Figure 1. These calculations are based on the proportion of usual residents aged 16 or over in employment (including self-employment) who worked mainly at, or from, home in the week preceding the Census date (21 March 2021). According to these estimates, 31.5% of workers in England and 25.6% of workers in Wales WFH at this time. This equates to 8.7 million people, a significant minority of the workforce and a considerable increase from the one in 10 who WFH at the 2011 Census. The timing of the 2021 Census broadly coincided with the lifting of national restrictions on mobility and the start of the mass covid vaccination programme (BMA, 2022). As such, these figures only tentatively relate to 'post-pandemic' geographies of WFH. Chiming with longstanding scepticism regarding bright outlook narratives on the part of feminist economic geographers and others (Cooke, 2019; Reid-Musson et al., 2020), they do however offer little scope for optimism in terms of the pandemic evening out regional inequalities. While over two-fifths of workers in London (42.1%) WFH at the time of the Census, the equivalent figure in the North east of England was only one-quarter (24.8%). The top local authorities for WFH were concentrated in and around London (more than half of the workforce in many boroughs) whereas it was least prevalent in eastern coastal areas between the Humber estuary and the Wash (less than a fifth of workforce). WFH was most prevalent in the City of London (67.3%) and least common in Boston, Lincolnshire (10.6%). Only two areas north of the classic North-South divide sat within the top 50 areas for WFH (Rushcliffe, Nottinghamshire and Trafford, Greater Manchester). Statistical analysis at the local authority scale indicates that the geography of WFH propensity is highly statistically associated with share of workforce in professional and managerial jobs, the qualification levels of residents, property values, pay rates and deprivation levels (McCollum, 2023).

Thus, despite significant shifts in working patterns and associated residential preferences in recent years, the spatial patterning of WFH thus appears to closely mirror longstanding spatial inequalities, a tale of dynamic stability (Wyly, 1999). This could be because the professional white-collar jobs overrepresented in London and the Southeast are most amenable to remote working. Among the hyperbole surrounding the 'new normal', the fact that most people did not and do not WFH (and that this has a clear geography) can be overlooked. Even at the peak of the pandemic in early 2021, most of the workforce (51%) never actually WFH (McCollum, 2023). Statistically, an individual was more than twice as likely to never WFH if they did not have a university degree, did not work in a managerial or professional role, lived in the top quintile of most deprived areas and if they voted for Brexit (McCollum, 2023). Another important point is that hybrid work is more commonplace than fully remote working, meaning that even most workers who do WFH still have to live within a reasonable distance of their main place of employment. Thus, WFH is still concentrated within, or in relative proximity to, those economically buoyant locales which have the greatest concentrations of jobs that can be done at least partly remotely (Farmer & Zanetti, 2021).

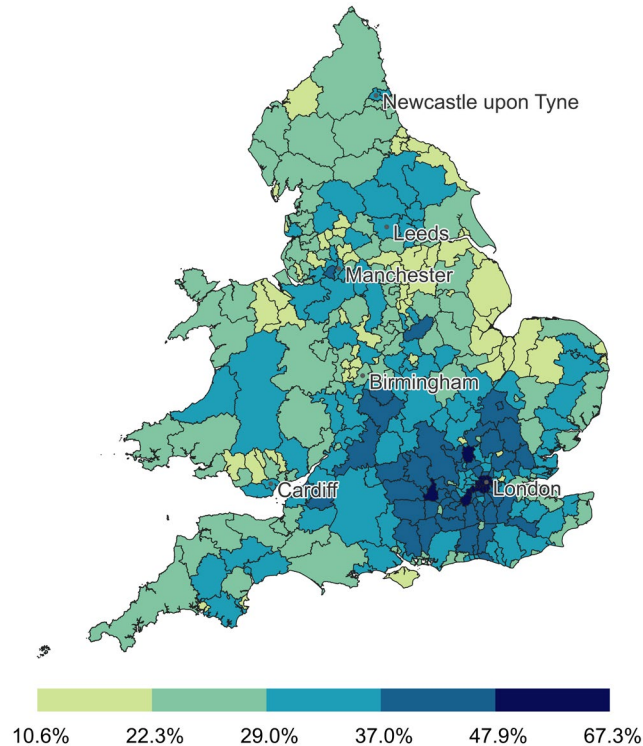


FIGURE 1 Proportion of working usual residents aged 16+ who mostly or always WFH by local authority area. *Source:* ONS 2021 England and Wales Census data. Thanks to Charlotte van der Lijn for generating this map. The ONS Census website notes that ‘we provided extra guidance to respondents affected by the pandemic on how to respond to travel to work questions, but it is not clear how this guidance was followed’. However subsequent analysis has suggested that the Census has provided reliable data on the geography of WFH in March 2021 (Gibbs et al., 2024).

The statistical analysis briefly described above hints at significant regional inequalities in the prevalence of WFH and some of the factors that sit behind them. This current investigation utilises engagement with stakeholders at the national and local scales to try and better understand how, and in what ways, WFH relates to spatial inequalities and what their immediate post-pandemic and longer-term implications might be. A total of 38 semi-structured interviews (mostly online) and four in-person workshops (two each in England and Scotland) were carried out with a range of stakeholders across 15 case study areas in Great Britain (Table 1). Eight of the interviews were with national level stakeholders and 30 were focused on local level stakeholders. Stakeholders were mainly identified through online searches and were broadly defined as those having a professional and/or lived experience interest in the research. The stakeholder approach was designed to include those with both professional and personal insights into how and why working practices and associated residential preferences had changed and their local, regional and national scale implications.

The workshops lasted 2 h and involved a presentation of the statistical data summarised above and a wide-ranging conversation relating to the geographical determinants and implications of remote/hybrid working. They were orientated towards and attended by local residents (established and incomers) and professional stakeholders. The interviews involved the mutual sharing of information regarding the geography of WFH (from the researcher) and its effects (from the interviewee) and mainly involved professional stakeholders. The data collection took place between November 2022 and June 2023. The case study areas and types of stakeholders included in the research are listed in Table 1. In the empirical section of the paper, pseudonyms are used and locations generalised to protect participant confidentiality.

The case study locations in England and Wales were selected according to local authority areas that had particularly high or low rates of WFH as identified by the 2021 Census data (Figure 1). Areas beyond London and its hinterland and closer to the traditional north–south divide were selected, given the analytical interest in the relationship between WFH and regional inequalities. In the absence of Census data for Scotland, mid-year population estimates 2010–20 were compared with 2020–21 (most recently available at time of analysis). The focus was on three specific regions of West and Southwest Scotland that have faced significant demographic challenges in recent decades (Dumfries and Galloway, Argyll and Bute, and Ayrshire). This approach involved identifying local areas within these regions that had experienced population decline during 2010–20 but population growth in 2020–21; the reasoning being that people may have moved

TABLE 1 Case study areas and stakeholders included in the research.

Case study areas		Stakeholders
Hotspots	Coldspots	Agencies responsible for regional economic development
Bath	Blaenau Gwent, South East Wales	Business and HR teams in Borough, County, District and City Councils
Bristol	Boston and wider Lincolnshire	Businesses letting out flexible workspaces
Rushcliffe, Nottinghamshire	Hull and wider Humberside	Business representative organisations
Warwickshire	Stoke-on-Trent and wider Staffordshire	Chambers of Commerce
Scottish case study areas^a		Commercial property businesses
Annan, Dumfries and Galloway (D&G)		Community organisations, e.g., Community Councils and Development Trusts
Arran, Ayrshire		Local Councillors
Isle of Coll, Argyll and Bute (A&B)		Local Enterprise Partnerships
Isle of Tiree, A&B		Local residents (new and established)
Kirkcudbright, D&G		Organisations and think-tanks promoting better working practices
Mull of Kintyre, A&B		Organisations that promote flexible working practices
Newton Stewart, D&G		Remote/hybrid workers (recent and long term) Trade unions

^aNot classified as hot or coldspots owing to absence of relevant Census data.

to these types of areas as a consequence of a newfound ability to work remotely. All four workshops and 36 of the 38 interviews were recorded and transcribed (one interviewee declined to be recorded and the other interview experienced technical issues). The transcripts were analysed using NVivo software according to a coding frame that was developed to identify key thematic areas in relation to WFH and regional inequalities.

4 | DIFFERENTIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF WFH: ADVANTAGES, CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

The existence of a clear divide in the socio-economic and spatial patterning of WFH during the pandemic has been well documented (McCollum, 2023). Drawing on interviews and workshops involving national and local stakeholders, this paper seeks to consider the longer-term geographical implications of these processes. The findings are presented according to three broad themes. The final section considers the meanings of these findings for understandings of regional inequalities.

1. The advantages to places of having a high prevalence of WFH.
2. The challenge to places of having a high prevalence of WFH.
3. The implications for places bypassed by the growth in WFH.

4.1 | Advantages for WFH hotspots

The analysis of the qualitative material identifies three, non-mutually exclusive, types of places which have benefited from the expansion of WFH. Firstly, areas whose occupational profile is amenable to it. Many residents of these places switched to WFH during the pandemic and have continued to do so on an at least a partial basis since. This transition does not involve residential relocations, but existing residents spending more of their time (and money) locally and commuting elsewhere less frequently. These places are characterised by a comparatively large share of the workforce being employed in higher socio-economic status jobs. Secondly, places which have attracted hybrid workers away from London and other large cities. New residents are attracted to these locations for quality of life and lower housing cost reasons,

they commute longer distances but on a less frequent basis owing to a hybrid working pattern. These places are regarded as being desirable places to live, especially for educated professionals with families, and have the transport infrastructure needed to underpin longer distance commuting to a large city. Thirdly, remoter places which do not necessarily have a preponderance of higher status occupations, but which are aesthetically appealing and which mainly attract remote rather than hybrid workers. These places are desirable to those working in sectors that allow for fully remote working and/or at a mature enough stage of their career where they can elect to work remotely. The localised implications of WFH vary according to each of the three scenarios listed above. However, a common theme across all WFH hotspots was that remote and hybrid workers place a premium on spacious accommodation in areas which are considered socially and/or aesthetically attractive, and that they often have the financial means to meet their desire to reside in these environments.

X seems to be a place where there is a lot of working from home. It is very professional in terms of the jobs people do and there are big Victorian houses that have spare rooms for people to work in. It has that slightly bohemian liberal-green vibe to it. It is expensive but people move here because you have a nice area, nice people, nice kids, nice schools and it then becomes self-perpetuating doesn't it.

Laura, long-term remote worker and resident of WFH hotspot

As hinted at in the quotation from Laura, the reputation and 'vibe' that places have was a common theme in rationalising their attractiveness to those in the higher-ranking occupations who are now more footloose as a consequence of the pandemic induced growth of flexible working arrangements. As Mike describes, cosmopolitan places have been able to attract professionals from large cities for these reasons.

We have a very high percentage of professional services jobs, which is obviously more amenable to remote working. X has benefited from a bit of a flight from London, especially amongst those kind of cool professionals. In terms of quality of life, and Londoners are already under quite a lot of price pressures there, that is leaving people to choose a comparable urban area that feels like London and has the same cultural offer. I think X would view itself in cultural terms as having something competitive within that offer. The scene in X is really strong and attracts people and that deepens the labour market.

Mike, Director of Policy, business group in WFH hotspot

In addition to areas with positive reputations that are within reasonable commuting distances to large cities attracting those who can WFH, geographically remote, sparsely populated scenic locales have also seen an influx of new residents since the pandemic, many of whom work either fully or mostly remotely. As the quotation from Paul typifies, those moving to these sorts of places to WFH tend to be at relatively advanced stages of their careers.

If you are here working remotely full time then it's fine, but when you are only here fifty per cent of the time like I am and you have got the shuttle backwards and forwards then it starts becoming a very expensive proposition. So it's not the most ideal for working in London. But as a consultant I am not directly employed by anybody so I can get away with it. I'm also of the age, I suppose, where I can get away with. I've worked for the same people for 20 years, so I've got a lot of leeway.

Paul, part-time resident of remote area in Argyll and Bute

Despite the personal inconveniences presented by issues such as long-distance commutes and inadequate transport infrastructure, the rise in WFH that has been engendered by the pandemic was regarded as offering a boost to population sustainability in remote areas.

The problem with rural regeneration is providing two jobs, which is why remote working is such a key part of that. It actually allows the key worker and their partner to come and to both continue working ... to regenerate you have to get the young families, you need to have two jobs per family and one is very likely to be remote working.

Jack, Secretary of Community Council, remote area in Argyll and Bute

The analysis presented thus far generally contends that places that are economically prosperous are benefitting from retaining and attracting those relatively well paid workers who can WFH. There are obvious advantages to these types of

places in terms of human capital and associated spending power. Remoter places, often facing demographic challenges, have been able to attract new residents who mostly or always WFH. These trends raise the question of what, if any, positive impact might the covid-19 induced rise in WFH have for those places with much more modest rates of hybrid or remote working. As is discussed in the following section, it is also important to be sensitive to the challenges that being attractive to hybrid and remote workers can pose for places. Both of these issues are neatly addressed in the quotation from Rosie, who claims that WFH coldspots miss out on the benefits associated with attracting hybrid and remote workers while some hotspots face growing housing affordability issues.

What we have been seeing is that you have specific little places that are incredibly attractive. And so they're lovely, they're beautiful. They're well maintained. People love to then come there. So it's fine if they have to commute into work for about 3 hours once every two weeks. But it still means that the places who were always left behind continue to be left behind. Nobody is moving with a great remote salary to these really left behind places. So it kind of deepens these regional inequalities. And [in the attractive places] it drives up the housing prices for people that are basically working local jobs.

Rosie, Policy Advisor, National think-tank

Having elucidated the factors that result in some types of locales being well disposed to having and attracting those who can WFH, the following section considers the drawbacks that this can present for these places.

4.2 | Challenges for WFH hotspots

As discussed above, the attractive 'donut' areas (Ramani & Bloom, 2021) that are within reasonable commuting distance of large cities have residents whose jobs are amenable to WFH and have also attracted new residents who work in a hybrid fashion. The growth of WFH was thus regarded as a positive development in these, already quite prosperous, areas: existing residents were spending more time and money locally, there was greater participation in community groups and events, and new residents were seen positively in light of their socio-economic status. Most of the challenges associated with the reconfigured geography of home and work identified in this study were in more remote, lower wage areas, where the pandemic induced influx of typically older and wealthier remote workers was perceived as exacerbating existing housing supply and affordability issues. The quotation from Daniella below typifies the sentiment from most of the interviews and workshops in the remote Scottish case study areas.

It is a pretty little town but it has got its own challenges. It's seasonal work, it's farm work, transport links are really bad. There is increased demand for food banks. Someone described it as "poverty with the view" ... but we have had a big influx of people and house prices have gone up big time. But it is a certain age and a certain social class kind of thing. So lawyers and semi-retired architects and journalists and things like that. So people who can work remotely and yeah a certain age, kind of aged 55 upwards so not a great influx of younger people with families and nearly all are of a certain class structure.

Daniella, Community Development Officer, remote area in Dumfries and Galloway

Residential preferences pivoted towards scenic rural areas during the pandemic, facilitated by the newfound ability to relocate to them whilst still working in well-paying occupations. These developments can be regarded positively in the sense that they have increased the quantity of people residing in places which previously were declining in population. However, these trends might also be viewed more pessimistically in terms of population sustainability: incomers tend to be at least of middle age and usually do not have dependent children living with them. Their age profile means that they require public services, especially healthcare, and their spending power means that they out-price younger people who wish to remain in, or move to, these places. A further challenge, as reflected in the quotation from Elizabeth below, relates to community relations between new and established residents in rural areas, and potentially unrealistic expectations on the part of the former with respect to working remotely in a remote location. Tensions between incomers and longer-term residents in rural areas are not novel, but have been exacerbated by the pandemic and WFH.

I hear people saying “it’s a slow pace of life here and that’s why it attracts some people” but it is not a slow pace of life. Everybody is busy ... sometimes they move here and they think it’s going to be something that it’s not. So there’s a lot more to consider than just “it’s sunny and I can work remotely.” I think as well with people moving when they’re older, from what I’ve observed, they don’t seem quite as interested in integrating themselves into the community. They just want a quiet life and to keep to themselves.

Elizabeth, Community Support Officer, remote area in Argyll and Bute

The analysis thus far has sought to shed light on the determinants and effects of being attractive to those who can WFH. Attention now turns to the prospects for those places that have not seen a growth in WFH.

4.3 | Places bypassed by WFH

As discussed thus far, changing employment practices and residential preferences have been largely beneficial to the places associated with an increased propensity of WFH, although they have posed housing affordability and social cohesion challenges in remoter locales. However, in general, this research offers few grounds for optimism in terms of the potential for WFH to address regional inequalities. The Census data indicated that, during the pandemic, WFH was concentrated in relatively prosperous areas in and around London’s hinterland. The qualitative data imply that, post-pandemic, hybrid and remote workers are slightly more geographically dispersed but that they remain concentrated in prosperous and desirable areas. Resultingly, the parts of the country often portrayed as ‘left behind’ by socio-economic change appear to have similarly been largely bypassed by the transition to WFH. This analysis finds two potential explanations for this pattern: the occupational structure of the labour market in these regions is not conducive to roles that can be undertaken remotely and, despite lower housing and living costs, such areas have struggled to attract those who have the ability to WFH. These themes are discussed in turn below.

As Kathy intimates, a primary and logical driver of modest levels of WFH in many areas is an overrepresentation of jobs that cannot be done remotely.

As a community, in our area, there are still very high deprivation levels. So that’s a factor. There’s still a lot of industry in the area, like manufacturing. So in terms, and I hate using the term, but in terms of blue collar industry and working, that’s still quite prevalent in the area. So that doesn’t lend itself then to remote work either, does it?

Kathy, Senior HR Business Partner, Council, coldspot

As has been documented in this paper and elsewhere, the pandemic has led to significant changes in employment practices. However, what is often overlooked is that these transformations have been in the mostly higher status jobs which can be undertaken at least partially remotely. As Dorothy emphasises, comparatively little has changed in the majority of jobs that cannot be done remotely. In some ways then, regional inequalities may well have been exacerbated by the rise in WFH, as working practices have improved for the mainly higher socio-economic employees who can do it (overrepresented in prosperous areas) but remain largely unchanged for the majority of the workforce elsewhere who cannot.

In those industries where you can do your job from home, the pandemic was an absolute game changer. However, I don’t see much positive change in those jobs where you can’t work from home and fair enough, you can’t do your job from home, but there remains very, very little flexibility in those jobs where you have to be on site.

Dorothy, Policy Analyst, national think-tank

One possibility, which was the focus of much conjecture during the pandemic, was that those able to WFH would relocate to less economically buoyant regions on account of their lower costs of living, thus redistributing human capital across the country. The evidence from this analysis suggests that the increased flexibility around residential location for many workers that was engendered by the pandemic has indeed motivated significant residential relocations, but largely to areas that were already considered desirable. In this sense, broader place attractiveness seems to encapsulate much more than simply housing costs, at least for those hybrid and remote workers relocating further away from big cities with sufficient financial resources.

I think the big benefit for us is cost of living, housing affordability. So that's why we're attracting some people from outside of our area to come and live here. However I am not surprised to see Bath and Bristol rank more highly [for WFH] on your map, because the vitality of those kind of places, their pulse is a lot more than we've got in these industrial heartlands.

Steven, Senior Investment Manager, inward investment organisation, coldspot

Hence, despite offering the benefit of much lower housing costs, stakeholders in WFH coldspots widely reported significant challenges in encouraging hybrid or remote workers to relocate to their areas. This was regarded as being due to their peripherality, in a geographical sense for hybrid workers relying on transport connections to large cities, but also a belief that they were not sufficiently cosmopolitan to attract the types of residents who are able to WFH.

I don't think we're seeing that dispersal of people coming to move to these locations yet on the back of "oh I can go and live in X and my house will cost a fifth of what it will cost in London and I'll be able to just step out my front door and be in open countryside." We haven't seen that biting. People are probably not looking at X as a place to relocate to if you're from London because the service levels are not up to scratch locally. We are an hour and a half from those connection points so there's that kind of isolation point, the peripheral nature is a factor. It's not a disaster, but it does exacerbate existing place inequalities.

Joseph, Policy and Research Executive Manager, business led partnership, coldspot

These findings are a reminder of the necessity of positioning the longstanding structural (dis)advantages experienced by particular types of places at the centre of considerations of apparent transformational shifts and spatial inequalities (Cooke, 2019). The geography of winners and losers from the covid-19 crisis echoes that of the 'credit crunch' less than 15 years earlier, where the occupational structure of peripheral regional labour markets hindered their adaptability to rapid economic change (Dawley et al., 2012). Furthermore, while the relative significance of financial and amenity-related factors in attracting highly qualified workers remains unresolved (Buch et al., 2017), the findings of this analysis chime with emerging research that points to an emphasis on community and living environment over job opportunity and other pecuniary factors in the relocation decisions of skilled professionals (de Villiers Scheepers et al., 2024).

On a more positive note, the ability to work remotely has made it less challenging for some businesses in lower wage regions to recruit and retain higher skilled staff. As Christopher reports, organisations in these regions can now employ staff without these individuals actually having to physically relocate to the area.

Our core business sectors are the food production, manufacturing, processing—where you need people physically there ... but there is an advantage for some of our other businesses looking to recruit more skilled staff that, pre-covid, didn't really want to come over to X per se. That's enabled businesses to recruit from further afield.

Christopher, Head of Investment and Growth, Council, coldspot

The findings from this research have presented the rapid growth in WFH as significant and generally beneficial for those places where it is prevalent and detrimental for the regions where it is not. However, in the research, some stakeholders in coldspot areas actively contested this premise. Ronald, for example, argued that WFH should not be fetishised and that as such analysts should avoid over extrapolating from the geography of it.

The fact that we don't have the highest level of working from home isn't necessarily a reflection of anything. So the fact that we have a so-called underrepresentation amongst homeworkers doesn't necessarily infer anything as far as I can make out, good or bad. It's just the prominence of certain industries ... okay the highest working from home is in the affluent areas of the country, but here and within a number of other northern industrial centres we have got plenty of good jobs, it's just that they cannot be done from home.

Ronald, Inwards Investment Manager, Council, coldspot

Likewise, the conversation involving Caroline and Ethan below reflects a sense among many of the stakeholders in the WFH coldspots that some of the hyperbole surrounding the new normal risked further perpetuating pejorative stereotypes of 'left behind' places and their residents.

Caroline: "We do get feedback from business that finding a good candidate is hard but trying to convince them and their family to move here is very challenging. So the place maybe does have a reputation, regardless of the facts on the ground."

Ethan: "But it works both ways. There seems to be an assumption immediately that in the North we're struggling and South have just got this plethora of people wandering around in streets paved with gold and that working from home will spread these quality people around the country."

(Caroline and Ethan, Business and Employability Managers, Council, coldspot)

This section has considered the reasons for and implications of not hosting or attracting a significant volume of remote or hybrid workers. The final sections aim to reflect on the wider repercussions of the rise in WFH for regional inequalities.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The rapid and significant transition towards remote and hybrid working that was precipitated by the covid-19 crisis and which has partially persisted post-pandemic raises fundamental questions about the longstanding geography of home-work relations and spatial inequalities. Rather than the bright outlook rhetoric (Cooke, 2019) of the pandemic being a transformative 'great leveller', the crisis has by and large reinforced preexisting social and spatial inequalities, while presenting some opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged workers (e.g., carers and those with disabilities). Reflecting the recurrence of 'dynamic stability' (Wyly, 1999) in periods of dramatic change, a significant minority, although importantly not most (McCollum, 2023), of the workforce now has greater autonomy over where they perform their work and therefore where they reside. Crucially, this considerably enhanced autonomy over work related, and thus residential, mobility is highly stratified by socio-economic status, resulting in structurally differentiated outcomes in terms of the wellbeing of individuals and places. *Plus ça change*: the covid crisis was a universally seminal event, yet the places and population sub-groups that were doing relatively well before it coped comparatively well during it and have continued to prosper after it. So what might the shifting geographies of work and home relations documented in this article ultimately mean for understandings of human capital and spatial inequalities? Two interrelated key insights can be identified in this regard.

1. The majority of the workforce did not WFH, even at the peak of the pandemic, and the proportion doing so has decreased since. Hence there is a risk of an over fetishisation of 'transformed' geographies of work-home relations and associated inequalities.
2. Hybrid is and is likely to remain much more prevalent than fully remote working, meaning resilience of the core-periphery economic geography model but growing importance of place attractiveness in attracting and retaining human capital.

5.1 | Fetishisation of 'transformed' geographies of work-home relations

Despite its significant implications for the three types of places discussed in this paper, it is important to emphasise that there is a risk of overexaggerating the scale and spatial implications of the 'new' geography of home and work. Census data illustrate that, even in the depths of the pandemic, fewer than a third of the workforce worked mainly or always at home. In only 13 of the 331 local authorities in England and Wales did this figure exceed half of the workforce (all in and around London). Post-pandemic, fewer people now WFH. The latest figures available at the time of writing, covering the last quarter of 2022, indicate that most (56%) of the workforce never WFH at all over that three-month period and that this majority was consistent across all regions of the UK (ONS, 2023). The aggregate geographical implications of the growth of WFH may thus ultimately be surprisingly muted, with corresponding ramifications for its hoped-for

transformative effects on spatial inequalities and associated policy interventions. While this conclusion sits at odds with earlier optimism regarding the pandemic acting as a great leveller within society, it aligns with longer-standing sobriety on the part of feminist economic and other geographers, who have professed scepticism towards bright outlook narratives (Cooke, 2019; Reid-Musson et al., 2020). As with the relationship between previous epochal changes and spatial structures, the pandemic induced dramatic transformations that occurred in the early 2020s can be considered a story of dynamic stability for social and spatial inequalities (Wyly, 1999).

5.2 | Hybrid working, core–periphery regional economic geography and place attractiveness

As has been emphasised, most workers in most places are not engaged in WFH. Among the minority of workers who do WFH at least sometimes, hybrid working is almost twice as commonplace as fully remote working, with only about a sixth of the workforce belonging in the latter category (ONS, 2023). The geographical relationship between place of work and place of residence therefore remains intact for most people due to needing to live within a commutable distance to a (non-domestic) workplace. This finding contradicts some of the optimism during the pandemic that WFH would suppress the predominance of core cities and thus spatial inequalities (Brueckner et al., 2023; Gokan et al., 2022). Instead, this analysis, in line with the prophecies of regional economists such as Bond-Smith and McCann (2022), regards the greater prevalence of hybrid over remote working as being of fundamental importance to consideration of the relationship between WFH and spatial inequalities. As was the case pre-pandemic, most skilled human capital must still congregate in and around the core cities which provide the most favourable career outcomes. In the midst of the crisis, Brewer et al. (2022, p. 6) declared that ‘changes in the UK since early 2020 have had a minimal impact on spatial inequalities’. Post-pandemic, the dominance of employment practices that involve still travelling to work on at least fairly a regular basis mean that this claim still largely stands.

Perhaps the most significant change in working practices and associated residential preferences engendered by the crisis, highlighted in this and other studies (Ramani & Bloom, 2021), is the emergence of ‘donut’ effects. Hybrid workers, while still having to live within a commutable distance to their non-domestic place of work, are more accepting of longer travel times as a consequence of having to commute on a less frequent basis. Theoretically, this presents opportunities for places that previously struggled to attract and retain human capital to now do so, particularly owing to their lower housing and living costs. The findings from this analysis suggest that skilled human capital has indeed moved out of large cities on account of being able to work in a hybrid fashion, but that non-pecuniary facets of place attractiveness have played a more significant role in relocations than straightforward cost-saving considerations. Numerous research participants alluded to the importance of the ‘vibe’, ‘cultural offer’ and ‘scene’ in WFH hotspots as being central to their attractiveness to the relatively high socio-economic status workers who now have increased mobility related autonomy. Relatedly, stakeholders in WFH coldspots lamented their inability to attract new higher socio-economic status residents to their areas, despite the considerable cost advantages that they offer. These findings provide further evidence for assertions that peripheral regions face structural challenges in adapting to economic change; both in terms of occupational profile (Dawley et al., 2012) and attractiveness to higher skilled human capital (Buch et al., 2017; de Villiers Scheepers et al., 2024).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical and policy debates concerning the imperativeness of attracting, and thus the utility of seeking to entice, particular forms of human capital as a catalyst for economic growth are longstanding (Florida, 2003; Lee, 2014; Peck, 2005). However, the increased residential choices now available to this cohort due to hybrid working has rendered these debates even more timely. The stakeholder approach employed in this analysis has been able to hint at the complex effects of recent changes in employment practices and associated residential preferences for specific types of places, including those deemed attractive to skilled human capital. Post-pandemic, it will be important for scholars to develop a research agenda that can better understand place attractiveness for relatively footloose workers and what local, regional or national level policy actors can and should do to attract them. An important knowledge gap in this respect relates to a lack of firm detail regarding post-pandemic geographies of work and home relations. The Census provides detailed and robust insights into where people live and work, but was undertaken during the pandemic. Likewise, until recently, most of the main survey

based social science datasets in the UK only held information relating to the pandemic rather than post-pandemic period. Another significant unresolved but often overlooked issue relates to the tangible effects that attracting remote or hybrid workers brings to places. It is often assumed that, on account of their relatively high socio-economic status, this group are universally positive agents of change. However, the qualitative material presented in this paper indicates that the effects of being attractive to those who can WFH are nuanced. As such, there is scope for research that increases understanding of the relationship between remote-hybrid working in an area and socio-economic indicators such as productivity and wage and employment growth. A final pertinent question relates to the longer-term trajectory of the geography of employment and home relations and their associated consequences for post-pandemic worlds of work (Yeung, 2023). Might employers increasingly mandate that employees 'return to the office' (The Observer, 2024; Centre for Cities, 2024)? Will migrating to core 'escalator regions' remain an important catalyst for career development for younger workers in particular sectors? Will the ongoing rise of longer-distance commuting result in more spatially elongated work-to-work areas? In these regards, Michael's observation is a timely and apposite reminder that the continually evolving nexus between the geographies of home and work relations will continue to occupy the attention of geographers for some time yet.

It's like the famous quote where the Chinese politician was asked in the 1970s about whether the French Revolution was a good or bad thing and he replied "too early to say" ... so many of our assumptions about demographic structures and settlement patterns are based upon preexisting pre-covid assumptions.

Michael, Director of Policy, business group, WFH hotspot

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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