CPGE 2023-2024

oral sessions with C. Hamard

If working from home becomes the norm, housing inequality will deepen | Susanna Rustin *The Guardian, July 2021*

It is all but certain that the number of people going to work in offices every day will be lower after the pandemic than it was before. The number of workers to whom such changes apply must not be overstated though. Official figures report only about 26% of people working from home (WFH) in 2020. Geographical and sectoral variations are huge: In Scotland, 70% of people employed in communications worked remotely, but just 7% in the accommodation and food industries, perhaps not surprisingly.

It is easy to see why working remotely is viewed as an attractive prospect. Most of us like being in our own place, surrounded by our own things. By contrast, work is widely associated with stress and difficulty, at least some of the time. The TUC[[1]](#footnote-1) strongly supports more flexibility, not only with regard to location but also hours. Cutting down on commuting, which is necessary to reduce carbon emissions, would also bring benefits to those saved from the expense and discomfort of rush hours. The rise in online activity has meant the past year has offered opportunities to disabled people that were previously off limits. For those struggling with housing costs, including younger adults in the south-east where rents are highest, the switch to remote working offers the possibility of living somewhere cheaper while keeping the same job.

However there is the risk that a hybrid model, whereby people divide their time between home and work, will turn out to penalise those who are on the video call rather than in the room when decisions are taken. Judging from pandemic trends, it appears likely that the losers in this situation would be women. There are questions too about the transmission of knowledge, and whether younger employees stand to lose out on opportunities of mentorship and learning. How important is it to organisations that their people share the same space? What about the 7.9 million people in the UK who live alone?

That there is no one-size-fits-all should be no surprise. But if the future of work in the UK seems certain to involve more WFH[[2]](#footnote-2) for some groups, it follows that inequalities in housing are as relevant to the discussion as those between jobs and earnings. The contrast between the recent experiences of those with a home office or spare room and those joining meetings from their bedrooms has been widely noted. WFH means different things to different people. There is also a danger that deeper divisions are reinforced by a shift that turns millions more flats and houses into workplaces. The bottom rungs of the so-called property ladder have already been hiked way beyond the reach of a growing number of people trapped in privately rented accommodation. A policy that further cements the importance of property ownership – because people are working in homes as well as living in them – could easily turn out to boost the interests of owner-occupiers and landlords at the expense of the UK’s estimated 13 million private renters, who are already at a disadvantage due to their lack of assets and housing security. (523 words)

1. TUC = British Trade Unions Congress [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. WFH = Working From Home [↑](#footnote-ref-2)