

Summer Skills Bulletin 2021

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Working from Home in 2020



1. Introduction

With the onset of COVID-19, the number of people working from home in Ireland expanded rapidly in 2020. For many, this was not an option that they had previously considered. Over a year of restrictions has passed, and the working environment has shifted. The extent to which people will choose to continue to work from home, or in other remote capacities, is as yet unclear. A recent survey¹ indicates that a hybrid model is the preferred option where a person splits their time between the office and another location, be it a hub or from home. However, working from home was not an option for many in our workforce due to the nature of their job, such as those deemed to be in essential services roles. The extent to which the Irish workforce availed of working from home as a result of COVID-19 restrictions has not been fully explored to date. This report aims to quantify the number and type of people who were working from home in 2020 so as to inform future policies in this area as the reopening of offices moves to the next level.

Remote/tele-working and working from home are often used interchangeably. The 2002 European Framework Agreement defines teleworking as a '**form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis**'. The CSO Labour Force Survey (LFS), from which the data for this report is derived, only gathers information on those working from home, which is a subset of the total remote working population. As such, this report, for the most part, relates only to those working from home and does not provide any analysis of those working in remote work hubs or other remote working options.

The DETE Making Remote Work Strategy², published in early 2021, looks at the future of remote working beyond lockdown restrictions with the expectation that remote work will continue to play a key role in the workplace as restrictions ease. The Strategy focuses on three pillars, namely,

- create a conducive environment for the adoption of remote work,
- develop and leverage remote work infrastructure to facilitate increased remote work adoption,
- build a remote work policy and guidance framework.

As part of the third pillar, understanding both the incidence of remote working and the type of people availing of this option will be a key element. While this report does not cover the full breadth of remote working options, it provides an analysis of the type of sectors and occupations where working from home was most prevalent in 2020 and the characteristics of the persons employed in these roles. It also identifies areas where there is potential to expand working from home opportunities for certain cohorts in the workforce.

2. Who was working from home in Ireland in 2020?

The working patterns of Irish workers changed for many in 2020 when the onset of COVID-19 restrictions required many to work from home having never done so before. Prior to March 2020, approximately 200,000 persons stated that they usually worked from home. This included those employed in farming, the ICT sector and those working as teachers who performed some of their functions (such as corrections or lesson plans) from home. A further 314,000 persons stated in quarter 4 2019 that they sometimes worked from home – this number almost halved over the next two quarters as more people migrated to the 'usually' category³. By quarter 4 2020, 668,000 persons reported that they usually worked from home, representing 29% of total employment, up from 8% in quarter 4 2019.

1 <http://whitakerinstitute.ie/project/remote-working-during-covid-19-irelands-national-survey/>

2 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/51f84-making-remote-work-national-remote-work-strategy/>

3 **Usually** working from home refers to at least half of the days at home; **sometimes** working from home refers to less than half of the days but at least one hour.

Figure 1: Number of persons in employment working from home (000s), Q4 2019 – Q4 2020



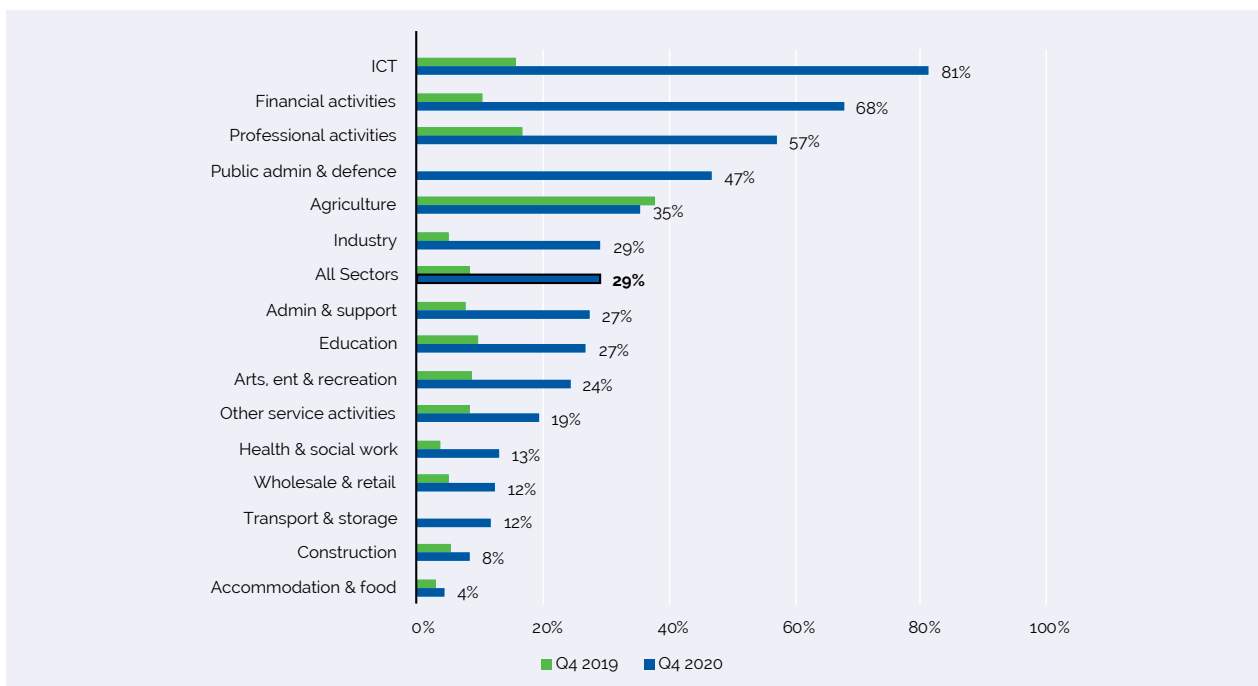
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

The analysis that follows focuses on those classified as **usually** working from home only.

2.1 Working from home by sector

Sectors vary considerably in terms of their suitability for remote working, depending on such factors as the level of physical tasks and social contact required. As a result, the number of people availing of working from home differs greatly across sectors. As Figure 2 indicates, in quarter 4 2019, prior to COVID-19, the take up of home working was highest in professional activities and ICT sectors, at 16% and 15% of employment respectively (agriculture is excluded here as despite a high share this most likely relates to people working from their family farm rather than in the home environment). With the onset of COVID-19, the share of persons who were usually working from home grew across almost all sectors (with the exception of agriculture) but the growth was particularly strong in sectors such as ICT, financial, professional and public administrative sectors. By quarter 4 2020, 81% of those employed in the ICT sector were usually working from home. This contrasts with sectors such as construction and accommodation and food where the take-up of home working remained a small share of total employment, at 8% and 4% respectively.

Figure 2: Share of persons who usually worked from home by sector, Q4 2019 and Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

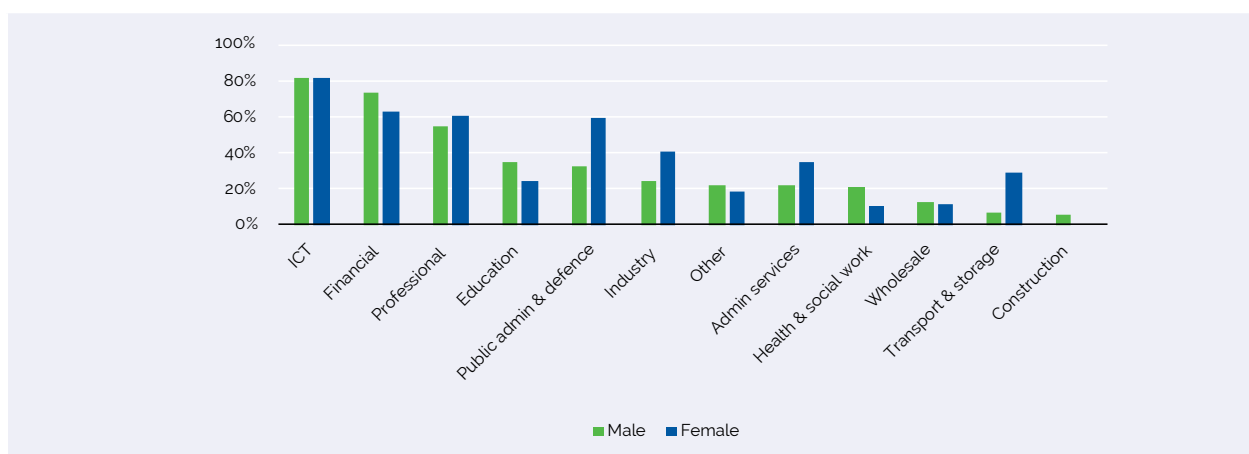
*Numbers too small to report for Public Admin and Transport sectors in Q4 2019

Employment numbers relating to the agricultural sector are excluded from all further analysis in this report as those working from home in this sector are unlikely to fit the definition of teleworking as detailed in the introduction.

2.2 Working from home by gender and sector

Overall, the share working from home in quarter 4 2020 was split equally across both genders. However, the shares by sector varied; the share of males working from home in the financial activities and education sectors were higher than the share for females working in these sectors. Conversely, the share of females working from home is higher than their male counterparts in sectors such as public administration, industry and transport. These discrepancies may relate to the occupations within the sectors; for example, males in the transport sector are more likely to be employed in roles which are not suited to homeworking, such as drivers, whereas females may account for a higher share of employment in clerical roles in these sectors.

Figure 3: Share of persons who usually worked from home by sector and gender, Q4 2020



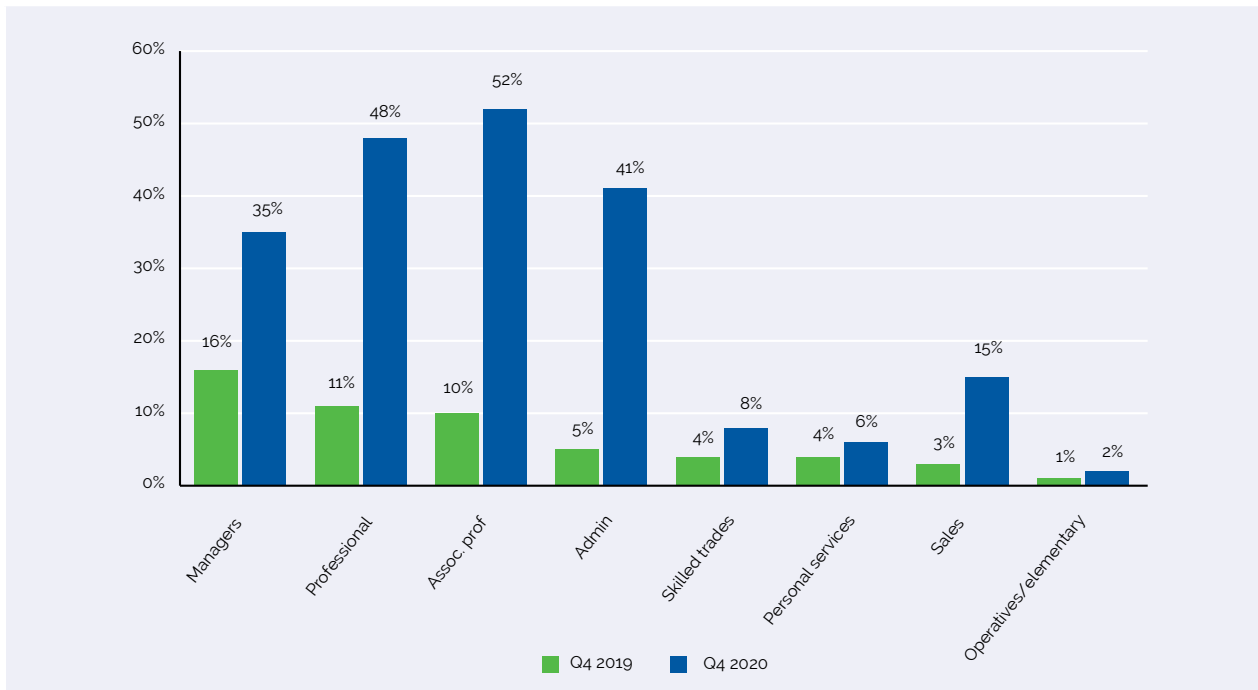
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

2.3 Working from home by occupation

Between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2020, **those employed in high skilled occupations saw a significant increase in the number of persons usually working from home.** Indeed, professionals and associate professionals combined accounted for 62% (or 390,600 persons) of those working from home in quarter 4 2020; operatives and elementary occupations combined accounted for 1% of all those working from home.

While only 10% of those employed as associate professionals stated they usually worked from home in quarter 4 2019, this had jumped to 52% by quarter 4 2020 (Figure 4). The increase in share was less dramatic for the lower skilled roles; indeed, those employed in operative and elementary occupations experienced almost no change in the overall share of persons working from home. However, those employed in sales occupations saw a threefold increase in the share of persons working from home, albeit from a low base.

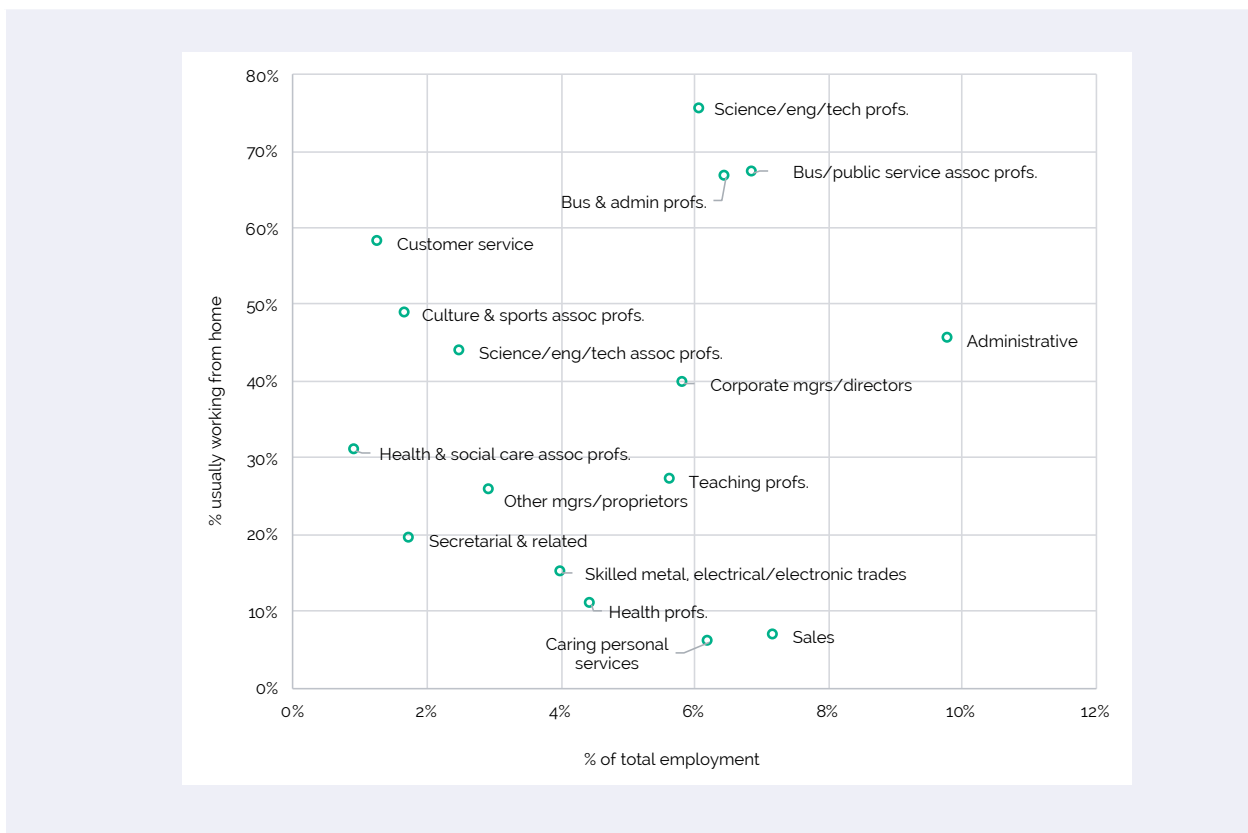
Figure 4: Share of persons who usually worked from home by occupation, q4 2019 and q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

Figure 5 indicates the prevalence of those working from home in quarter 4 2020 at a more detailed occupational level in terms of their overall share of total employment in Ireland. For example, while caring personal services and sales occupations accounted for a relatively high share of total employment, the share of persons working from home in these occupations was low. Conversely, a high share of persons working in customer service occupations were engaged in working from home but they accounted for a lower share of total employment. Those employed in science/engineering/technology and business professional occupations had both a high share working from home and each accounted for over 6% of total employment in Ireland.

Figure 5: Share of those usually working from home and share of total employment by occupation*, Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

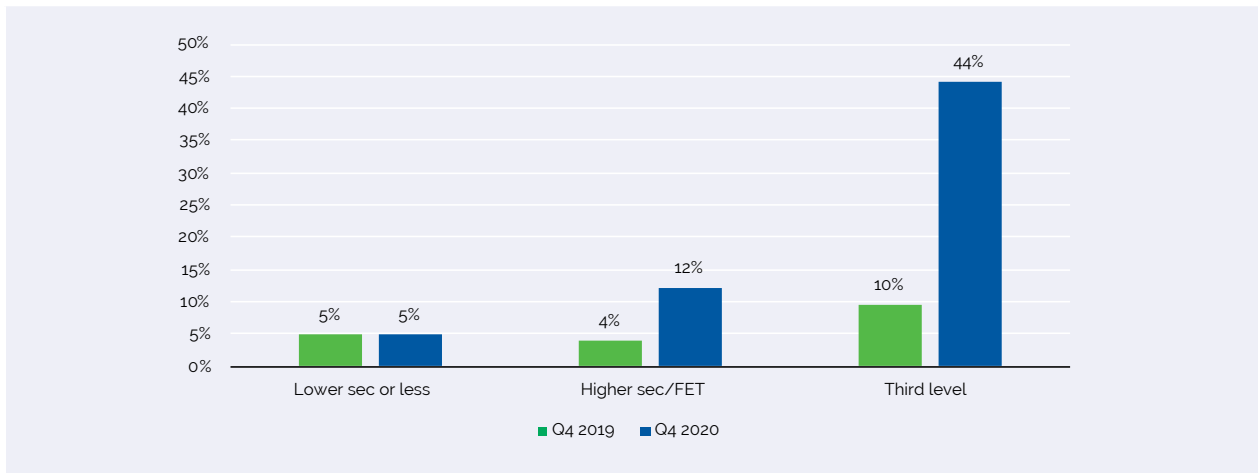
*excludes occupations where the numbers working from home were too small to report

2.4 Working from home by level of education

The growth in the number of persons availing of homeworking between quarter 4 2019 and quarter 4 2020 was almost entirely related to those who held third level qualifications. Of the 630,000 persons who were usually working from home in quarter 4 2020 (excluding those employed in agriculture), 81%, or 509,600 persons, held third level qualifications.

The share of persons in employment with third level qualifications who were usually working from home grew from 10% in quarter 4 2019 to 44% in quarter 4 2020 (Figure 6). In contrast, 12% of those in employment with higher secondary/FET qualifications were working from home in quarter 4 2020, compared to 4% in quarter 4 2019. The share working from home with lower secondary education or less remained at 5% over the two time periods. The differences across education level relate somewhat to the sectors of employment. Those with third level qualifications are more likely to be employed in sectors such as ICT, financial and professional activities which have a higher share of persons working from home; those with qualifications below third level are more likely to be employed in services sectors such as accommodation and food, wholesale and retail and construction where the share working from home was lower.

Figure 6: Share of persons who usually worked at home by level of education, Q4 2019 and Q4 2020

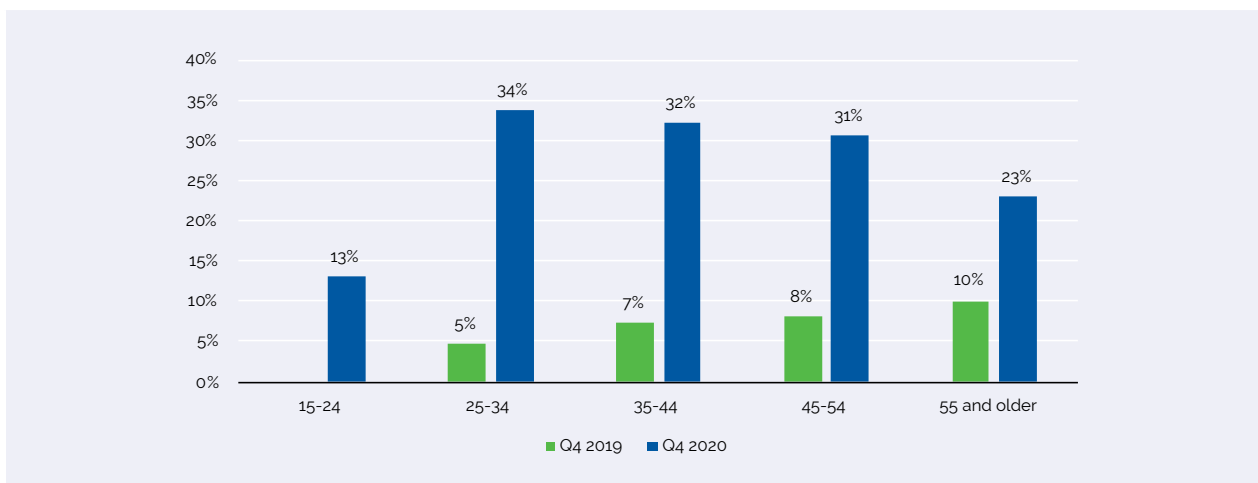


Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data
Excludes where level of education was not stated

2.5 Working from home by age

In quarter 4 2019, the share of persons working from home grew with age, with those aged 55 years and older accounting for the highest share at 10%. With the onset of COVID-19 and the increase in the number of people availing of home working, the shares working from home grew more strongly for the younger age cohorts. Those employed aged 25-34 years had the highest share who were usually working from home in quarter 4 2020, at 34%. The lowest shares were for those employed aged 15-24 years (at 13%) and those aged 55 years and over (23%).

Figure 7: Share of persons who usually worked from home by age, Q4 2019 and Q4 2020



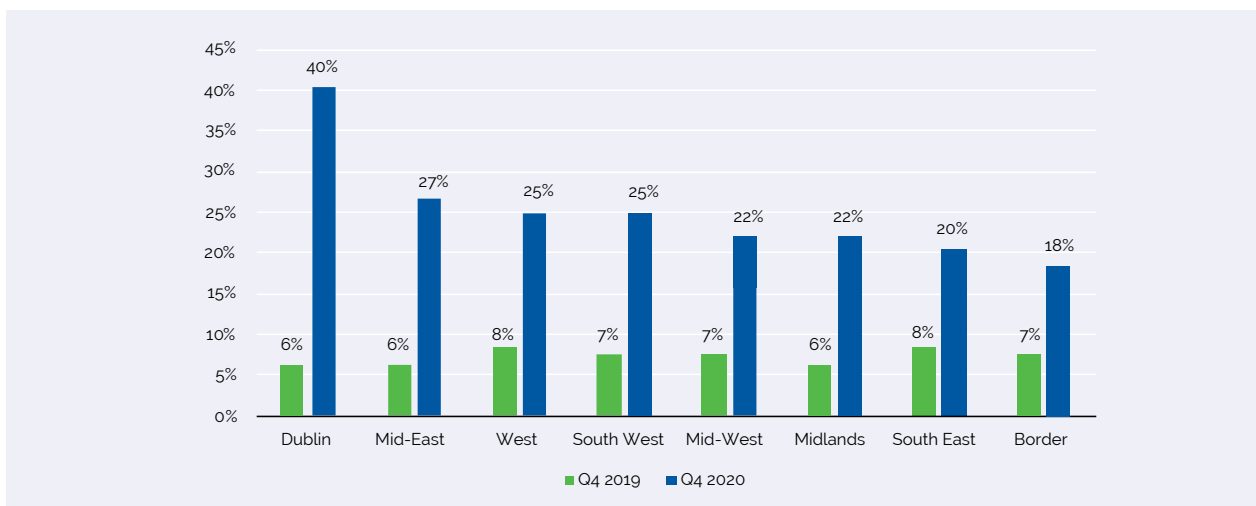
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data
*Numbers too small to report the share of 15-24 year olds in Q4 2019

2.6 Working from home by region

In quarter 4 2019, approximately 6-8% of those employed stated that they usually worked from home, with very little variance across the regions. By quarter 4 2020, the shares in employment availing of home working had increased considerably across all regions. Those employed persons living in Dublin saw the largest increase, with 40% of its total employment engaged in homeworking by quarter 4 2020; they were followed by those in the Mid-East region at 27%. In contrast, only 18% of those in the Border region were usually working from home in quarter 4 2020 (Figure 8).

The sectoral make-up of each region likely had an impact on the number of people availing of home working during the pandemic. The sectors where significant shares were availing of home working, including ICT, professional and financial activities, accounted for 29% of total employment in Dublin but only 8% of employment in the Border region. However, with the development of the Government's rural development policy, Our Rural Future⁴, and the rollout of the National Broadband Plan⁵, opportunities for those to work from home in regions other than where they are employed should improve.

Figure 8: Share of persons who usually worked from home by region, Q4 2019 and Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

2.7 Working from home by nationality

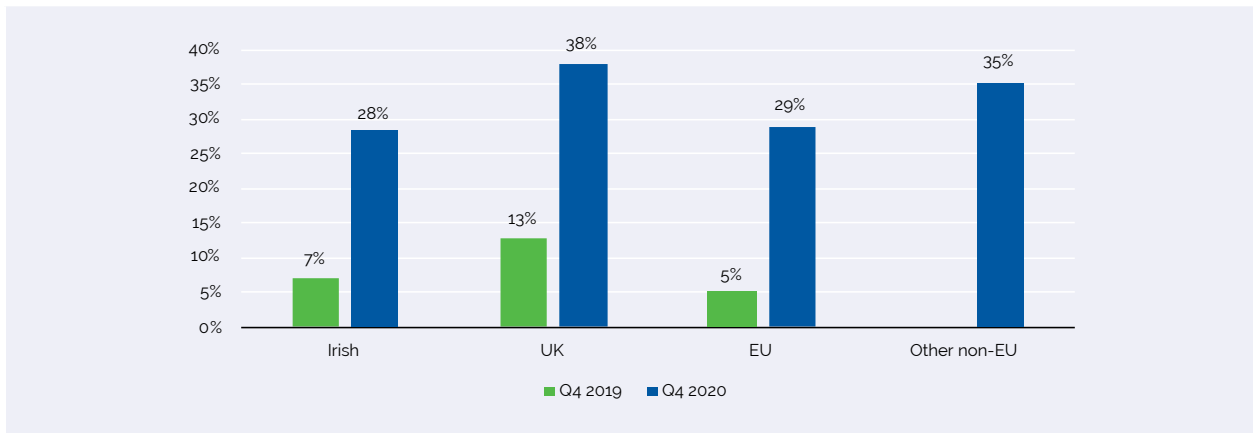
Of those who stated they usually worked from home in quarter 4 2020, 82% were Irish nationals. This is broadly in line with overall employment numbers, with Irish nationals accounting for 83% of total employed.

However, Irish nationals had the lowest share of those employed working from home, at 28%, with UK nationals having the highest share, at 38% (Figure 9). The higher shares of EU and non-EU nationals in quarter 4 2020 working from home, is most likely driven by their representation in employment in the ICT sector, where home working take-up has been particularly strong.

4 <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/01e45-our-rural-future-governments-blueprint-to-transform-rural-ireland/>

5 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c1b0c9-national-broadband-plan/>

Figure 9: Share of persons who usually worked from home by nationality, Q4 2019 and Q4 2020



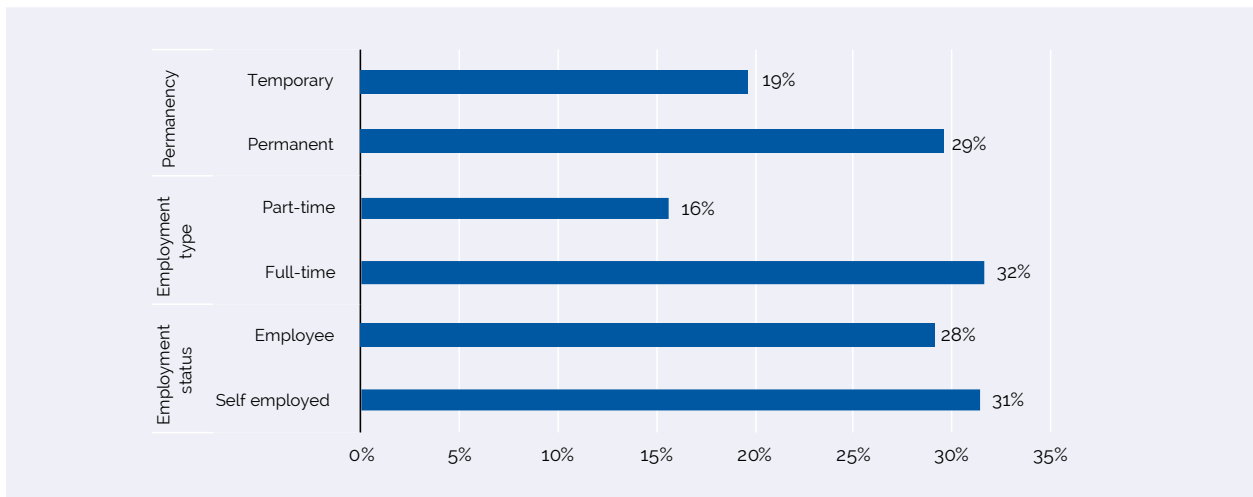
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

*Numbers too small to report the share of Other non-EU nationals in Q4 2019

2.8 Working from home by employment type

Those who were usually working from home in quarter 4 2020 were more likely to be in permanent (29%) than temporary roles (19%) and they were more likely to be in full-time rather than part-time employment (32% compared to 16%). Although employees account for a far higher share of total employment than those who are self-employed, when those usually working from home were examined, self-employed persons had a higher share working from home (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Share of persons who usually worked from home by permanency, employment type and status, Q4 2019 and Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data

3. Has Ireland reached its potential in terms of remote working?

The previous section profiled the people who were usually working from home in 2020; this section examines the proportion of those employed who could feasibly work remotely and compares it to the proportion working from home at a time where Government advice was to work from home where possible. Much research has been conducted in this area since COVID-19 began impacting our working lives. For this section, we focus on research conducted by the OECD⁶ using data from their Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC)⁷ who utilised the European Working Conditions Survey and the Italian Indagine Campionaria delle Professioni.

The OECD used respondents' assessments of what tasks were required for their job; it was determined from these responses if it was feasible for the job to be carried out remotely⁸. The estimated share of employment that could feasibly be completed remotely, for both the OECD average and for Ireland, is presented here alongside the share of persons usually working from home in quarter 4 2020.

The JRC took a similar approach to the OECD in terms of determining the tasks associated with occupations. They produced "technical teleworkability" scores for each International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) 3-digit occupation; we applied these scores to the employment numbers in the CSO's Labour Force Survey data so as to derive the number of people employed in roles considered technically teleworkable in quarter 4 2020. The data is reported here using the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2010 to be consistent with the reporting earlier in the report.

By comparing the shares who could feasibly work from home from these two sources, with the share of persons who were actually working from home in quarter 4 2020, we can provide a benchmark for the future potential of remote working in Ireland. It should be borne in mind, however, that even if an occupation can technically be done remotely, it is not always optimal, particularly in situations where a high level of social interaction is the norm e.g. teachers/lecturers. It should also be reiterated that the LFS data reported here on working from home does not capture the full extent of remote working in Ireland.

3.1 Remote working by sector

By examining OECD data, which shows the share of employment which could be done remotely, in both Ireland and the OECD average, and comparing it to those working from home in quarter 4 2020, we can gain some insights into how the situation as a result of COVID-19 may evolve in the coming years.

From Figure 11 a number of points emerge:

- the share of people working from home in Ireland in quarter 4 2020 in the ICT sector far exceeded the share who were considered able to work remotely for both Ireland and the OECD average,
- other sectors, such as agriculture, accommodation & food and other service activities, also had higher shares working from home in quarter 4 2020 than was considered feasible,
- the share of people working from home in sectors such as construction, transport, education and health was lower than the estimate for who could work remotely in Ireland.

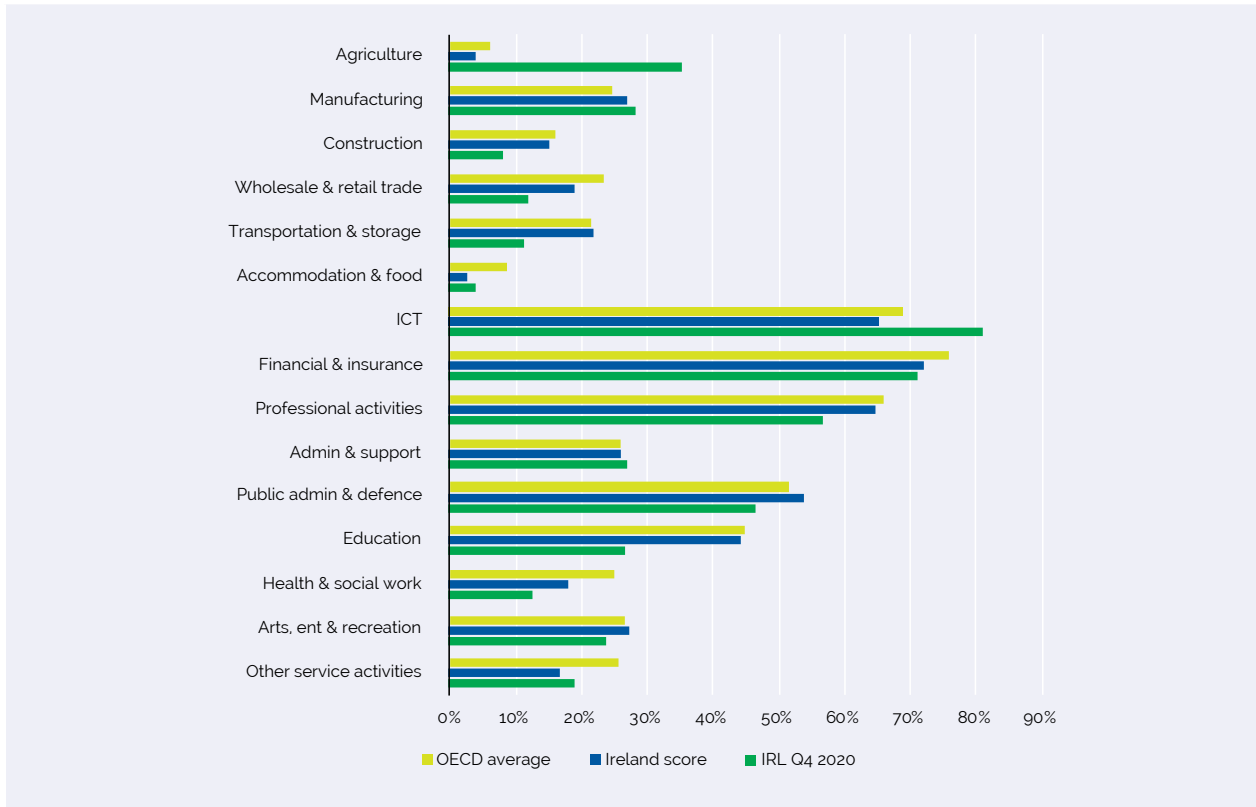
There is no doubt that the restrictions imposed as a result of COVID-19 created a situation in which people in roles not typically considered suited to remote working, found themselves working from home. Remote working is likely to continue to feature strongly for some sectors where the take-up of home working was high in 2020 and the tasks associated with these roles were already considered aligned to remote working. Conversely, sectors such as accommodation and food, where roles are not typically associated with remote working, are unlikely to see short-term gains in the share working from home.

6 Espinoza, R & Reznikova, L., *Who can log in? The importance of skills for the feasibility of teleworking arrangements across OECD countries*. OECD Centre for Skills, 2020

7 Sostero M., Milasi S., Hurley J., Fernández-Macías E., Bisello M., *Teleworkability and the COVID-19 crisis: a new digital divide?*. Seville: European Commission, 2020, JRC12119

8 As the data for Ireland was collected in 2011-2012, and there have been significant increases in technology usage since then, the estimates should be considered as the lower bound of what jobs are feasible for remote working.

Figure 11: Feasibility of remote working (OECD) compared to the share usually working from home Q4 2020 (LFS) by sector



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data and OECD (2020)

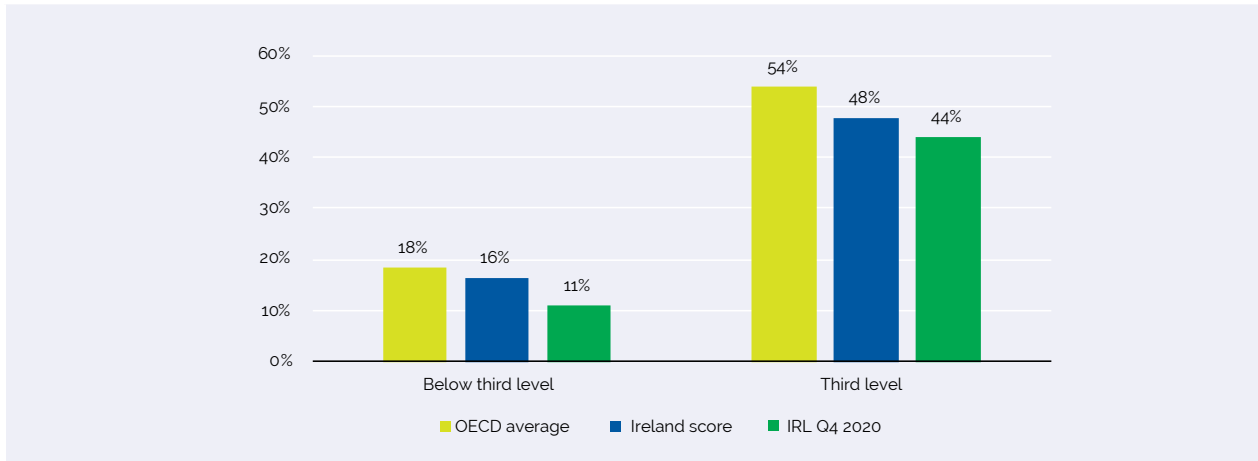
***OECD average** refers to the average share of persons by sector who could feasibly work remotely in the OECD countries; **Ireland score** refers to the share of persons by sector who could feasibly work remotely in Ireland; **IRL Q4 2020** refers to the share of persons who stated that they usually worked from home in Q4 2020

3.2 Remote working by education level

In OECD countries on average, 54% of those employed with third level qualifications could feasibly work remotely; the share falls to 48% for Ireland. This may relate to the occupational mix in Ireland but could also point to issues relating to over-qualification. In quarter 4 2020, 44% of those employed with third level qualifications were usually working from home, four percentage points below the share for Ireland whose jobs are compatible with remote working.

For those with qualifications below third level, the OECD estimates that 16% of those employed in Ireland could potentially work remotely; the share working from home in quarter 4 2020 was five percentage points below this at 11%; this suggests that despite having a lower share of persons who could feasibly work remotely, there is potential scope for more people with qualifications other than third level to avail of remote working.

Figure 12: Feasibility of remote working (OECD) compared to the share usually working from home in Q4 2020 (LFS) by education level



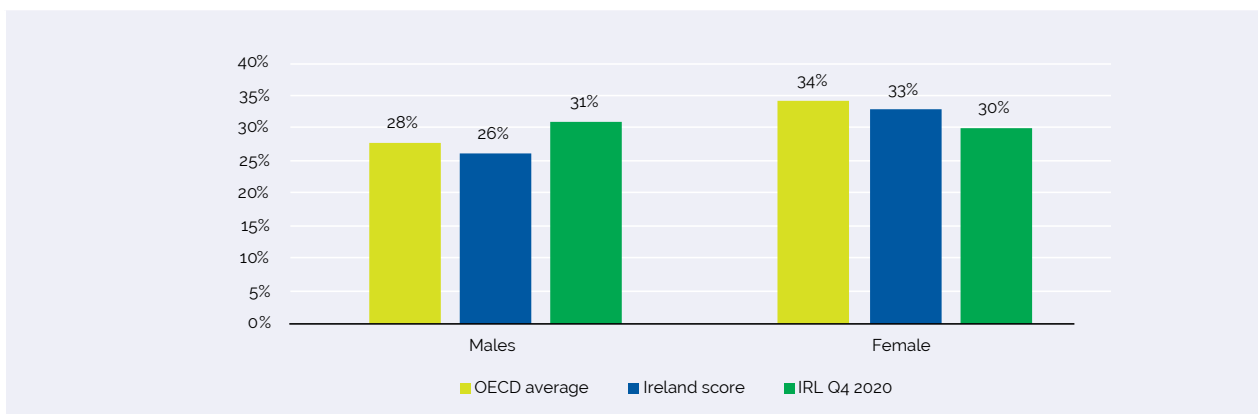
Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data and OECD (2020)

***OECD average** refers to the average share of persons by education level who could feasibly work remotely in the OECD countries; **Ireland score** refers to the share of persons by education level who could feasibly work remotely in Ireland; **IRL Q4 2020** refers to the share of persons who stated that they usually worked from home in Q4 2020

3.3 Remote working by gender

The OECD data points to a gender difference in Ireland for those in roles compatible with remote working with females having a higher share at 33%, compared to 26% for males. In quarter 4 2020, there was little discernible difference in the share of those who were usually working from home by gender. However, the take-up of home working in quarter 4 2020 for males was higher than the OECD's share of persons who could feasibly work remotely in Ireland (31% compared to 26%) but the reverse was the case for females. As the economy recovers and more people return to the office, a disparity by gender may emerge.

Figure 13: Feasibility of remote working (OECD) compared to the share usually working from home Q4 2020 (LFS) by gender



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data and OECD (2020)

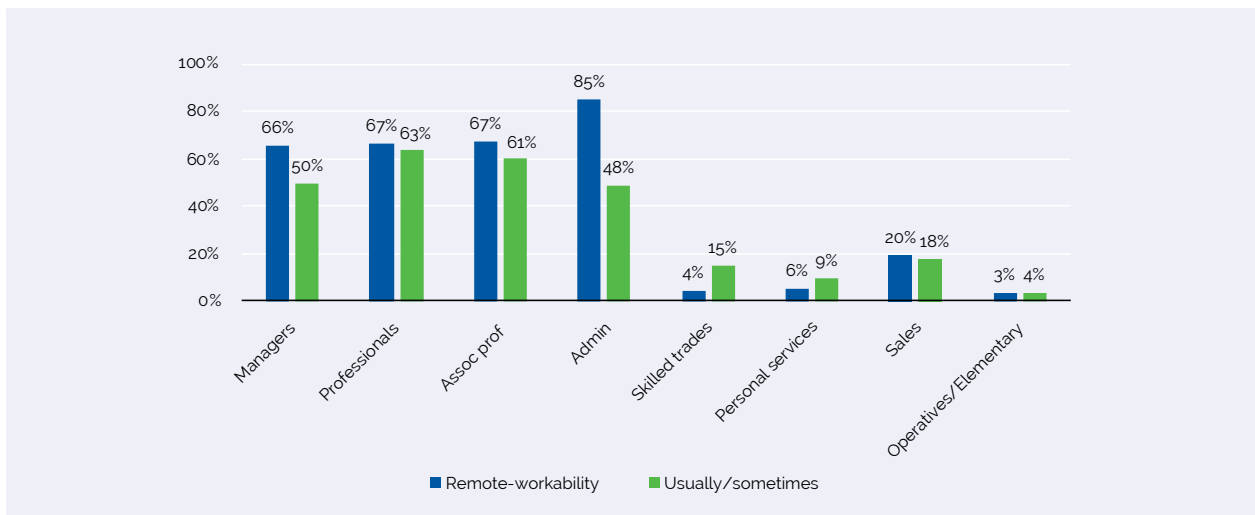
***OECD average** refers to the average share of persons by gender who could feasibly work remotely in the OECD countries; **Ireland score** refers to the share of persons by gender who could feasibly work remotely in Ireland; **IRL Q4 2020** refers to the share of persons who stated that they usually worked from home in Q4 2020

3.4 Remote working by occupation

Applying JRC methodology to LFS employment data, 43% of all persons employed in quarter 4 2020 could technically work remotely; this compares to 37% of those employed who were working from home (combining both those who usually and sometimes worked from home).

In quarter 4 2020, 85% of those employed in administrative occupations were in roles that could feasibly be done remotely; however, only 48% of persons employed in this occupation actually worked from home (either usually or sometimes) (Figure 14). For professionals and associate professionals, the gap between the share of employment that could be done remotely and those working from home was between four and six percentage points. For both skilled trades and personal services, the share working from home exceeded the share who would be expected to be able to work remotely, most likely due to a number of COVID-19 related factors. The low share of those both working from home and potentially capable of remote working for operatives and elementary occupations suggests that given the tasks currently associated with these roles, remote working is not a viable option for the majority in these occupations.

Figure 14: Potential share of remote working and those working from home by occupation, Q4 2020



Source: SLMRU analysis of CSO (LFS) data (using JRC methodology)

***Remote-workability** refers to the share in employment in roles capable of remote working; **Usually/sometimes** refers to the share of persons working usually or sometimes from home

4. Conclusions

This report provides a baseline of those working from home for future analysis as the economy recovers in the coming months and years. The findings from this report have implications for the National Remote Work Strategy and the Right to Request Remote Work framework, currently in consultation stage, in terms of who is likely to adopt remote working, given who was availing of home working in 2020, and who has the potential to choose this option.

It is clear from the data that those availing of home working in 2020 were primarily highly educated persons in high skilled roles. While many sectors are unlikely to see an increase in the number of persons availing of home working due to the nature of the work, there is potential scope in some areas to provide opportunities for employees to avail of home or remote working, such as those in administrative roles, if the infrastructure is available and education/training interventions are provided as required.

While no overall gender difference existed in the share of persons working from home in quarter 4 2020, this is an area that warrants further investigation as the economy re-opens, particularly in the case of those choosing remote work options to balance child and family care responsibilities.

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