

Research Bulletin 24/4 | Flexible Working in Northern Ireland

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Summary

This Research Bulletin examines the prevalence of flexible working in Northern Ireland. It focuses on the scale of flexible working, the proportion of job vacancies offering flexible working, industry and demographic distribution, and comparisons with other regions.

There are significant disparities in flexible working across different industries and demographic groups, with higher-paid professional roles and office-based jobs seeing more flexibility. When considering flexibility in the context of other aspects of work quality, it shows that while job security is high, the number of employees engaged in flexible working remains a challenge despite recent increases in uptake. There is strong evidence which highlights that flexible working enhances job satisfaction and retention, particularly those with caring responsibilities, older workers, those with disabilities, and those in higher-paid professional roles. Despite these benefits, Northern Ireland lags behind other UK regions in one aspect of flexible working – remote working uptake - with significant disparities across industries and socio-economic groups.

It is envisaged that increased levels of flexible working could increase our employment rate by helping to address barriers to employment, thereby improving living standards and economic performance. The current legislation in Northern Ireland may limit flexible working uptake, suggesting a need for policy revisions to enhance flexibility from the start of employment. The Department for the Economy has recently launched an Employment Bill consultation process and this will provide useful evidence to help inform the strategic direction for flexible working policy in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

This Research Bulletin considers work quality in Northern Ireland (NI), in particular, flexible working. It examines the proportion of job vacancies across Northern Ireland that offer flexible working options and the demographic characteristics of those working in flexible jobs. It utilises a range of official statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), as well as analysis and data from the Ulster university Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) and Lightcast.ⁱ

The Minister for Economy has outlined four key objectives as part of a new Economic Mission.ⁱⁱ One of these objectives is to increase the proportion of working-age people in Good Jobs. The New Decade, New Approach Dealⁱⁱⁱ recognised that “...access to good jobs, where workers have a voice that provides a level of autonomy, a decent income, security of

tenure, satisfying work in the right quantities and decent working conditions, should be integral to public policy...". The Department has adopted the Carnegie Framework^{iv} as its definition of Good Jobs; which identifies seven dimensions of job quality:

- Terms of employment;
- Pay and benefits;
- Health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing;
- Job design and the nature of work;
- Social support and cohesion;
- Voice and representation;
- Work-life balance.

Among these dimensions, work-life balance encompasses factors such as flexible working.

Improving the quality of work and encouraging more people to stay, or come into the workforce, is a key objective for the Department for the Economy. This work includes proposals for greater permissive rights to make a statutory flexible working request, including the right to make such a request from the first day of employment and an ability to make two statutory requests within a 12 month period so that employees can better manage work alongside family and other commitments.^v These proposed changes will align the rights and entitlements in NI with Britain where the UK government has committed to make flexible working the *"default from day one for all workers"* as part of a new employment rights bill.^{vi}

What are Good Jobs and Why do they Matter?

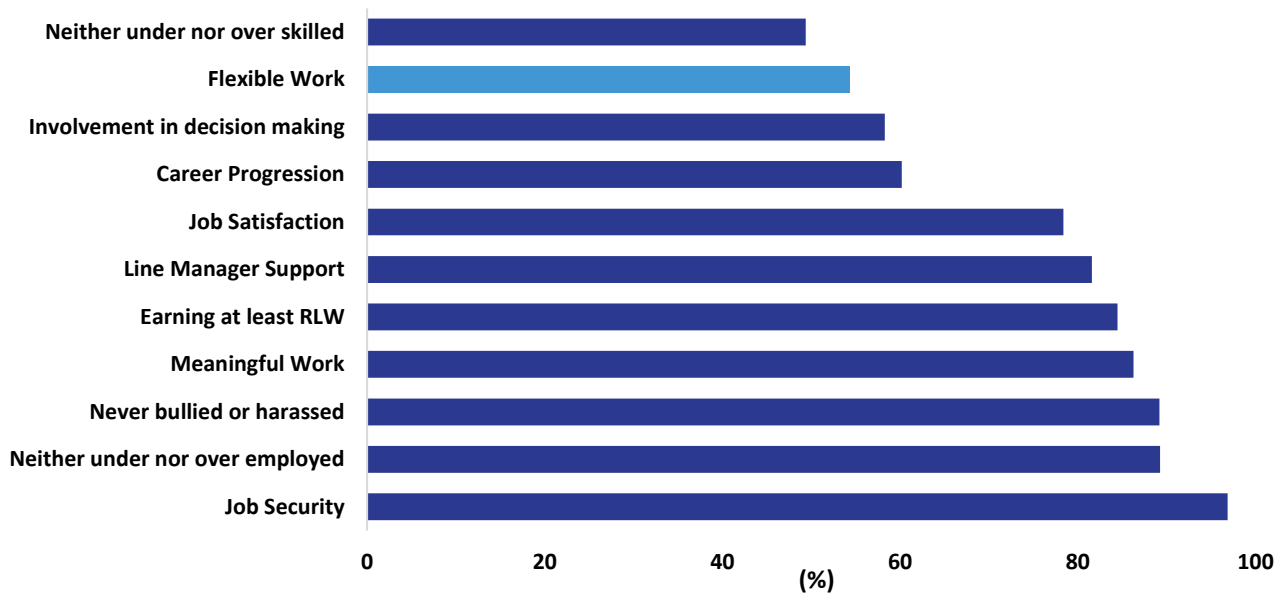
The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publish statistics sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) for eleven work quality indicators:

- Earnings;
- Secure employment;
- Under/overemployment;
- Job satisfaction;
- Meaningful work;
- Career progression;
- Employee involvement in decision-making;
- Bullying/harassment;
- Under/over skilled;
- Line manager support; and
- Flexible working.^{vii}

Over the last four years job security has consistently been the most attainable indicator for employees in Northern Ireland, with over 95% of employees indicating that they were in secure employment each year. In contrast, flexible

working was the least achievable indicator in three out of the last four years with less than 55% of NI employees indicating that they were able to avail of flexible working.^{viii}

Figure 1: Work Quality Indicators 2022-23, Employees Aged 18 and Over



Source: NISRA Work Quality in Northern Ireland 22/23.

In the current context of labour shortages in the economy, flexible working plays an important role in attracting and retaining employees. In the 2024 Open University Business Barometer survey, 44% of firms responding stated that their organisation is currently experiencing skills shortages.^{ix} Many of those unemployed would prefer to work if they could find jobs that offer the flexibility they require. For example, approximately one-fifth of those looking after the family or home report they would like to work but face a number of barriers to employment.^x Speaking at the Labour Relations Agency Flexible Futures 2024 Conference, Chief Executive Don Leeson commented that *"If managed correctly, flexibility can deliver inclusive and equitable opportunities for all, straddling gender, age, socio-economic background and those with caring responsibilities."*^{xi} A study by Indeed, the online job site, revealed that including flexible working practices within job descriptions resulted in a 30% increase in applications.^{xii} Furthermore, the rationale for greater flexibility in the workplace was supported by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) which indicated that increased flexibility boosted revenue by up to 43% and performance by 20%.^{xiii} A better supply of quality flexible jobs could therefore help boost both living standards and the wider economy.

Current Legislation and Policy Development

The current legislation in Northern Ireland entitles an employee who has been continuously employed for a period of at least 26 weeks to make a statutory flexible working request. This is via a formal request, however in practice,

many flexible working requests are granted outside of the formal statutory application process. Many people can only take up employment if they have flexible arrangements that can help them meet their personal circumstances from the first day of employment. In addition, this request can only be made once in a rolling 12 month period.^{xiv}

These restrictions may explain the lower level of uptake in home or remote working in NI which was the lowest of all UK regions in 2023 (17%) compared to the UK average (31%).^{xv} This is despite the fact that research findings from the UUEPC have estimated that 40% of NI jobs can be efficiently completed remotely.^{xvi}

On 1 July 2024, the Department launched a consultation process to examine how our employment framework supports Good Jobs.^{xvii} The consultation covers a wide range of possible enhancements to employment legislation aimed at modernising our rights framework and a key focus will be flexible working. The consultation seeks views on four aspects of a Good Job, as defined by the Carnegie Framework: terms of employment; pay and benefits; voice and representation; and promote a healthy work-life balance. The Department will use the consultation process to gather evidence from respondents, including workers and businesses (particularly smaller businesses). This information will help inform next steps and decisions about what should be included in any future Employment Rights Bill and supporting secondary legislation.

Experience from Other Economies

Beyond the consultation, the Department intends to gather insights from various models on flexible working in place elsewhere. This will allow the Department to identify best practices that could be beneficially integrated into our own policy developments.

Scotland, in particular have created a Flexible Jobs index based on analysis of over 700,000 jobs in Scotland using Lightcast data. By updating the index annually, Scotland tracks progress in flexible recruitment. It enables employers to benchmark their recruitment practice around flexible working against the averages for Scotland, by a range of variables: salary, role type, region and types of flexibility offered. This new data can then be used by Scottish labour market agencies, local authorities and business enterprise agencies, to influence employer action on flexible working and hiring.^{xviii} Two-thirds of workers in Scotland now have some form of flexible working and the majority (71%) of employers have reported that flexible working has been good for business according to the Flex for Life report.^{xix}

EU member states have seen an increase in the number of self-employed individuals in the last 10 years, this has been most pronounced in the Netherlands where around 14% (1.5 million) of the workforce are self-employed.^{xx} The Dutch labour market is the most flexible in Europe, where even pre-pandemic in 2019, over 50% of employees worked part-time and 30% of employees were doing some work at home.^{xxi}

According to the Government of the Netherlands, flexible working can contribute to increased labour productivity; improved work quality; a better work-life balance; and savings on accommodation costs.^{xxii} Overall, the emphasis on flexibility in the Netherlands aligns with broader trends in Europe, where flexible working is increasingly seen as essential for future business success.

Flexible Working Defined

"Flexible working is viewed narrowly by many as 'working from home' but it is so much more, embracing both how, when and where we work."^{xxiii} Concepts such as four-day week, reduced or compressed hours, flexible start and end times, job share, term time only and more all fall under the flexible working category.

For the purposes of work quality analysis, flexibility at work has been defined by NISRA^{xxiv} as employees with a flexible agreed working arrangement of either: flexitime (flexible working hours), annualised hours contract, term time working or job sharing; part time and not underemployed or primarily working at home. Other aspects that fall under the NISRA flexible working definition include remote working, hybrid working, homeworking, and teleworking. A definition of these is provided below:

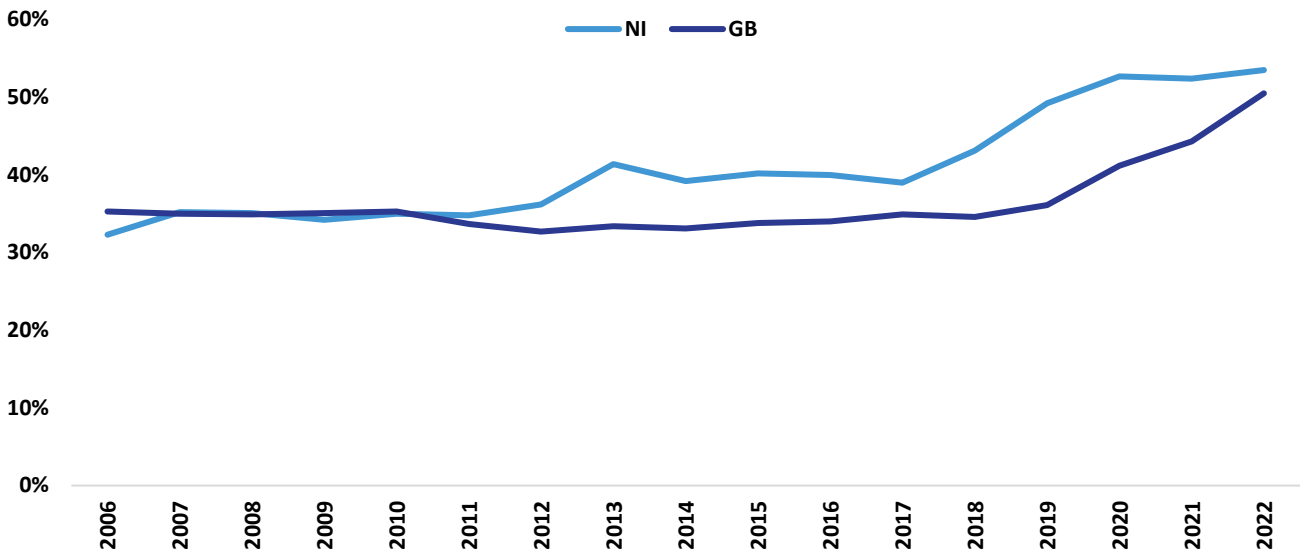
Key Term	Definition
Remote working	Working outside the conventional workplace and can include working from home or from a third space (eg: co-working spaces, cafes, etc). This can either be done on a full-time or part-time basis (see hybrid working).
Hybrid working	Has come to mean an employee working at least one day per week at home and at least one day per week in the office. It also refers to work being organised / managed by an employer to combine on-site and off-site (or remote) work.
Homeworking	Used in some statistical data to mean either 'working at home' or 'working from home as a base' (including travelling to different places to carry out work).
Teleworking	A fixed (statistical) meaning, referring to work which can be undertaken in the workplace, but is regularly undertaken elsewhere (including home) because it can be facilitated by technology.

Source: UUEPC, 2023, 'Is remote working, working?'

How does Flexible Working in NI Compare to Other Regions

LFS data (Figure 2) shows that levels of flexible working were relatively equal between NI and Great Britain (GB) until 2012, where there was an evident divergence.^{xxv} Since then, the proportion of employees in flexible work has been higher in NI than GB. The largest difference was in 2019, when 49% of employees in Northern Ireland were in flexible work compared with 36% in GB. This gap has closed in recent years with the latest data from 2022 showing a 3 percentage points (pps) difference between NI and GB levels.^{xxvi}

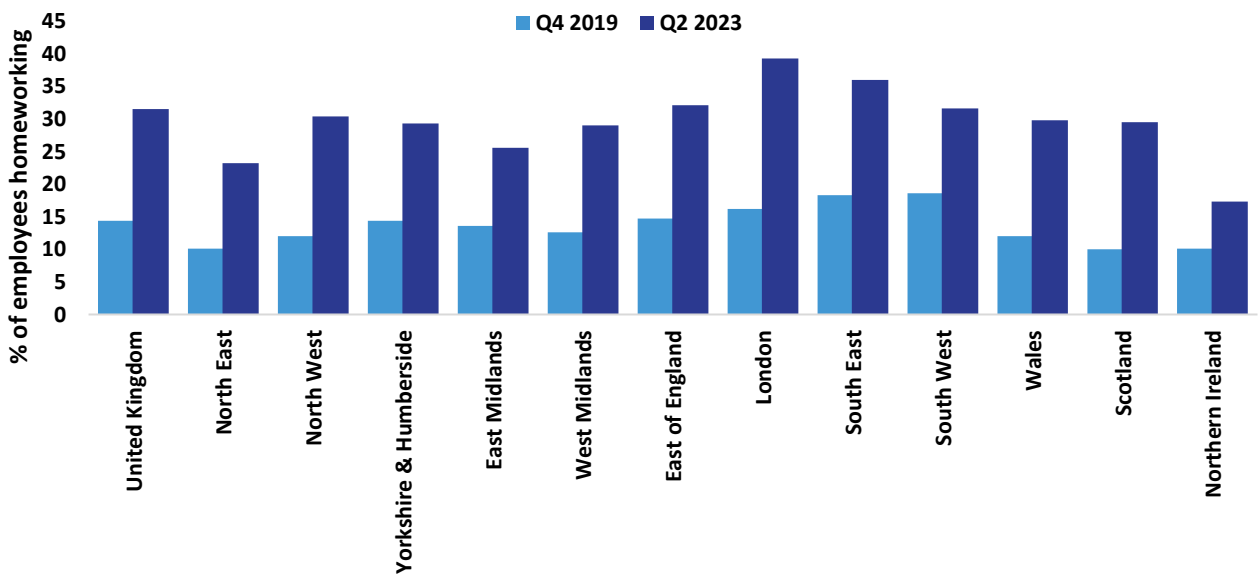
Figure 2: Employees in Flexible Work, NI and GB, Aged 18 and Over, 2006 to 2022



Source: Labour Force Survey, 2006 to 2022.

Figure 3 illustrates the pandemic effect on remote working. All UK regions saw an increase in the number of individuals working from home, with the rate on average doubling from 14.4% in Q4 2019 to 31.5% in Q2 2023. Northern Ireland had the lowest rate of remote working of any region in 2023 and saw the smallest increase (+7 pps) which was less than half the UK average increase from Q4 2019 and Q2 2023 (Figure 3).^{xxvii} When analysed by sex, female working from home rates saw a significant increase with the rate almost trebling between 2019 and 2023.^{xxviii} This data shows that although there are high levels of flexible working in Northern Ireland, there are low levels of remote working compared with the rest of the UK.

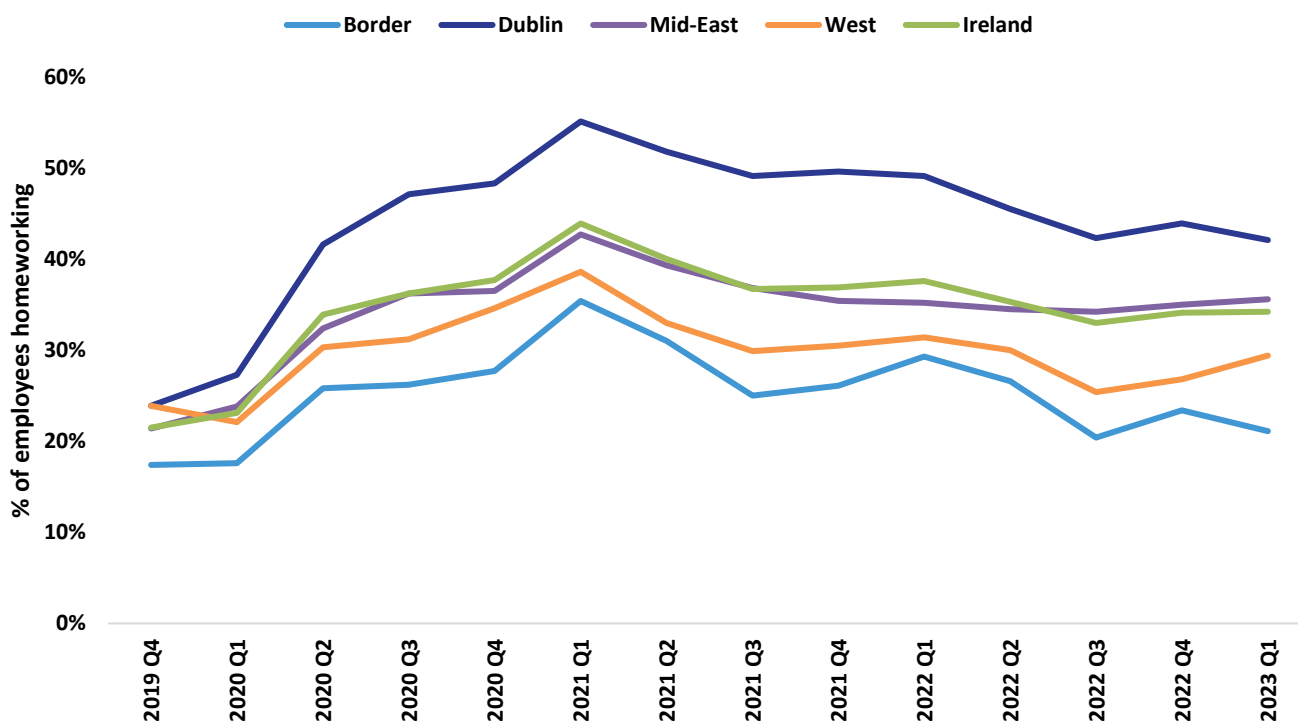
Figure 3: Remote Working in NI Compared with all UK Regions, 2023



Source: ONS, Labour Force Survey, Q4 2019 and Q1 2023.

Data from the Central Statistics Office used by the UUEPC in Figure 4 shows that a similar picture emerged for Irish regions with working from home levels surging between the end of 2019 (22%) and Q1 2021 (to 44%) before falling back to approximately one third of workers from Q3 2022 onwards. The Border and West regions have much lower levels of remote working than Dublin and Mid-East.^{xxix}

Figure 4: Variation of Remote Working across Regions in Ireland, Q4 2019 to Q1 2023



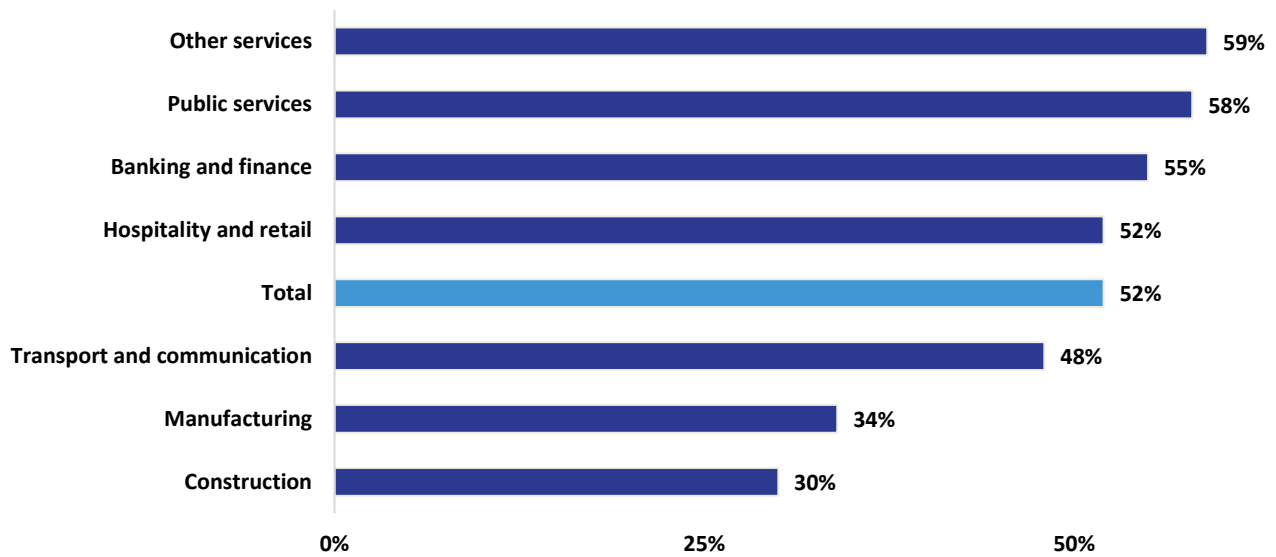
Source: CSO, LFS.

Note: The figures combine those who 'usually' and those who 'sometimes' work from home in the past four weeks.

Flexible Working by Industry

Access to flexible working varies significantly across different roles, leading to substantial inequality amongst workers. Since the pandemic and the rise of remote work, office-based roles tend to have the most job advertisements offering flexibility. These disparities may stem from operational challenges such as the need for continuous site coverage in construction or the ease of adapting office roles to hybrid work. However, underlying issues like gender bias might also contribute, with male-dominated fields facing more resistance to flexible working arrangements. Effective job design can address many of these 'institutional' barriers to flexibility.^{xxx}

Figure 5: Employees in Flexible Work, by Industry, July 2020 to June 2021



Source: NISRA Work Quality in Northern Ireland 20/21.

Evidence from NISRA’s Labour Force Survey and work quality analysis data (Figure 5) shows a large difference across industries for flexible working with a range of 29 pps. Other Services, Public Services, Banking and Finance, and Hospitality and Retail were the sectors with higher levels of flexible working in Northern Ireland. These industries covered 75% of all employees aged 18 and over in Northern Ireland in 2021. Transport and communication, manufacturing, and construction were the three sectors that had a lower-than-average level of flexible working.^{xxxii} It is noteworthy that these industries have a higher than 70% proportion of male employees.

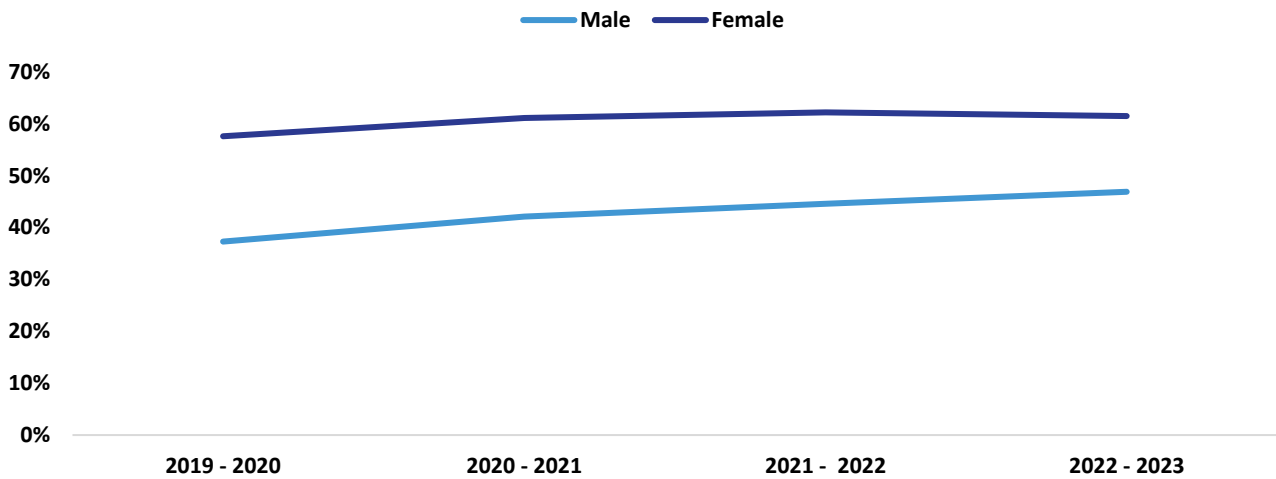
Who is Working Flexibly in Northern Ireland?

Gender

The motherhood penalty, childcare costs, the gender pay gap, and persistent diversity issues all contribute to the high number of economically inactive women.^{xxxii} In addition, nearly 60% of unpaid carers are women, and 1 in 3 women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care.^{xxxiii} These factors force many women out of the workforce and hinder their access to senior leadership positions.

One effective solution to address this issue is through the implementation of flexible working arrangements. Those already in employment with flexibilities may be happier to apply for new roles if they are able to make a flexible working request which meets their current arrangements whilst others may remain within the workforce if they are better able to balance personal and work commitments through additional flexibilities.

Figure 6: Employees in Flexible Work in Northern Ireland, Aged 18 and Over



Source: Labour Force Survey, NISRA.

Note: Data runs from July to June each year.

Across all NISRA’s work quality indicators, flexible work has shown the largest difference between males and females since 2020. Although the proportion of males reporting flexible work has seen considerable growth since 2020, increasing from 37% to 47%, it is still almost 15pps lower than the proportion of females reporting flexible work (61.5%) in 2023.^{xxxiv}

Age

In 2023, NISRA evidence showed that in Northern Ireland, more than half (52%) of employees aged 18 to 39 were working flexibly to some degree. However, there is a greater share of employees aged 40 and over that are working flexibly (57%).^{xxxv}

This is in line with working individuals in GB according to data from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN),^{xxxvi} however this data focuses on hybrid or home working specifically. Those aged 25 to 34 years, 35 to 44 years, and 45 to 54 years reported higher rates of home or hybrid working compared with the group aged 16 to 24 years.^{xxxvii} One in six (16%) working adults were ‘fully remote’ at the start of 2023 in GB with the lowest share (6%) among younger workers (aged 16-24).

An ONS publication revealed that in June and July 2020, older workers working entirely from home were more likely to say they were planning to retire later compared with those not working from home.^{xxxviii} This provides evidence that flexible working can help labour market retention.

Deprivation

There is a noticeable difference when looking at those living in the most and least deprived areas when analysing flexible working. Evidence from NISRA (July 2022 to June 2023) shows that 50.1% of those living in the more deprived

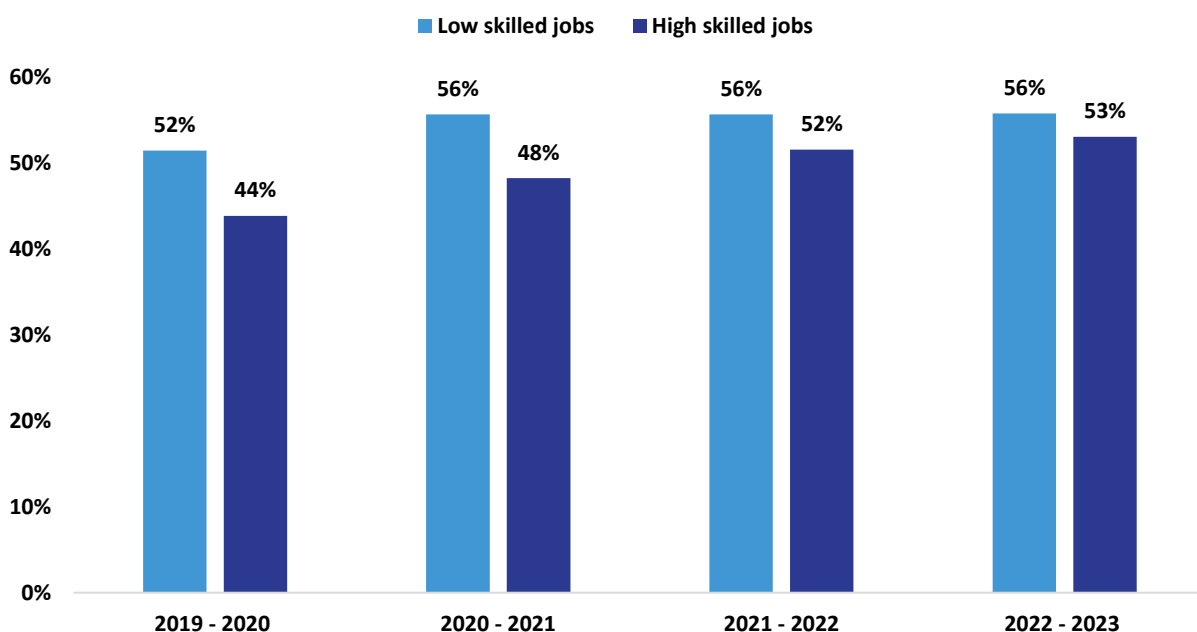
areas work flexibly compared with 60.8% of those living in the least deprived areas.^{xxix} This may be due to the fact that the recent growth of hybrid working primarily benefits office workers, particularly those in higher-paid professional roles.

High and Low Skilled jobs

Those on higher incomes and with better qualifications are more likely to work from home. Utilising ONS data for Northern Ireland, the UUEPC found there is a clear correlation between the ability to work from home and income (remote working is not an option for 72% of those earning less than £15,000 compared with only 10% of those earning over £50,000). Qualifications are an even stronger distinguishing factor (67% of graduates are working from home only or hybrid, compared with only 14% of those with no qualifications).^{xi}

A similar picture is seen in GB where those with higher incomes are more likely to be working from home. The highest levels of home or hybrid working were seen in workers in the highest income band of £50,000 or more annually. This contrasts with workers in the lowest income band of up to £10,000 annual earnings, where only 14% of workers reported home or hybrid working.^{xii}

Figure 7: Proportion of Employees with Flexible Work, by Skill Level, Aged 18 and Over, NI



Source: Labour Force Survey, July 2019 to June 2023.

Note: Data runs from July to June each year.

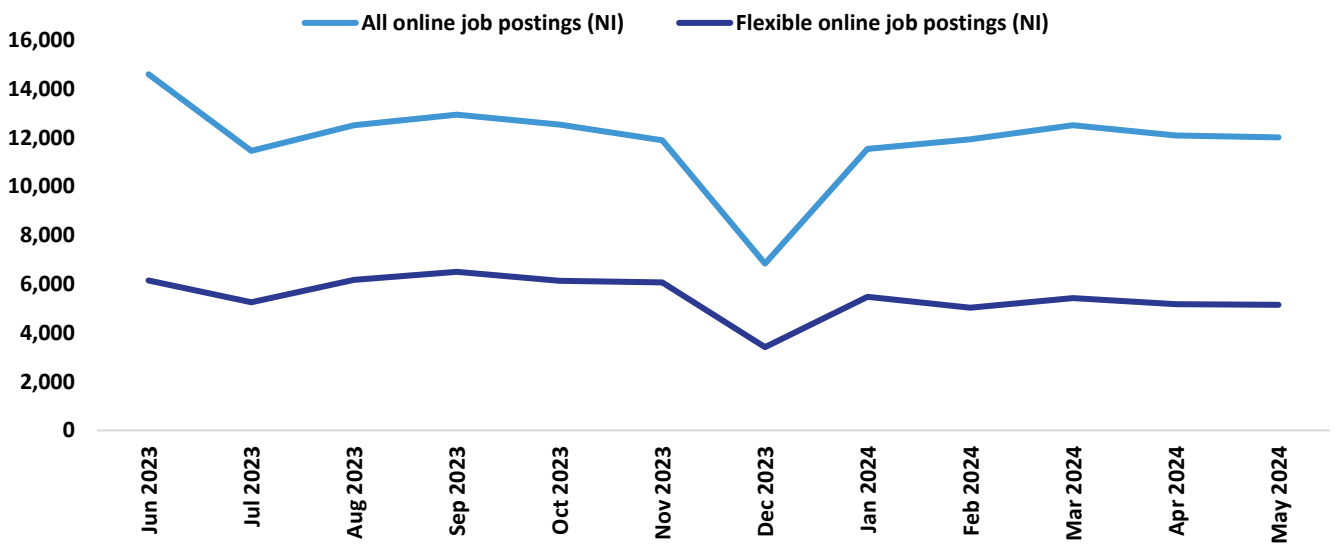
From Figure 7 we can see the proportion of employees with flexible work has been increasing in high skilled jobs over the past four years with the rate increasing from 44% to 53% (an increase of 9 pps). The difference has been less stark in low skilled jobs with the rate increasing from 52% to 56% (an increase of only 4 pps).^{xiii}

Share of Flexible Jobs in Online Advertisements

Pre-pandemic (May 2019 to March 2020), less than 4% of adverts referred to remote, home or hybrid working. However, post 2020, the volume of flexible jobs has increased very significantly across the UK, but not to the same level in NI (around 14 pps lower^{xliii}). Adzuna^{xliv} have reported that the share of 'fully remote' job adverts is now much lower than those for a hybrid model with a similar picture for the Republic of Ireland, indicating a partial return to the office.^{xxviii}

According to Lightcast data,^{xlv} over the past 12 months (June 2023 to May 2024), there were only 66,000 jobs that offered flexible working out of the 143,000 advertised in Northern Ireland, representing less than half (46%) of online job postings (Figure 8). The median advertised salary during this period for all online job postings in Northern Ireland was £27,500 compared with £25,100 for flexible online job postings. When comparing the latest quarter to the same quarter in 2019 (pre-pandemic) job postings for flexible working roles have increased by 26%, whereas all online job postings have only increased by 14% in Northern Ireland.

Figure 8: Online Job Postings in Northern Ireland, June 2023 to May 2024



Source: Lightcast.

Impact of Remote Working on Productivity

In the first quarter of 2023, UUEPC consulted with 45 employers and the findings reveal that employers in Northern Ireland observed either consistent or slightly improved productivity compared to 2019. Despite participants noting an increase in working hours, there was no clear evidence of enhanced efficiency or higher output. However, 44% of respondents reported an improvement in the quality of work produced by employees.^{xlvi} Furthermore, according to a report from the University of Birmingham and the University of York, 51.8% of managers agree working from home

improves employee concentration; with a further 59.5% agreeing it increases productivity; and a further 62.8% agreeing it increases motivation.^{xlvii}

According to the Business Insights and Conditions Survey,^{xlviii} improved staff well-being is the primary reason businesses would want to increase remote working (85% NI firms and 77% across UK). More than half of NI firms cite the ability to reduce overheads as the next largest reason to increase homeworking alongside a greater ability to recruit staff. Firms in both NI and the UK more widely point to increased productivity as a rationale to increase remote working.^{xlix}

A research report commissioned by the Labour Relations Agency found that reduced working hours and flexible working promotes innovation and innovative behaviour. It was found that it can also enhance learning and innovation processes both within and between firms.ⁱ Findings on job quality and productivity using the Good Work dimensions also found that longer working hours impede productivity and therefore a positive relationship can exist between work-life balance and productivity, particularly for some forms of flexible working.ⁱⁱ

Conclusions

This article highlights that flexible working has a range of benefits which can increase job satisfaction and improve job retention, however in some aspects of flexible working such as remote working, uptake in Northern Ireland remains lower when compared to the rest of the UK. The focus on hybrid working arrangements has displaced attention from other forms of job flexibility, which can be more important to some workers.

There are significant disparities in flexible working across different industries and demographic groups, with higher-paid professional roles and office-based jobs seeing more flexibility. However, as stated at the Labour Relations Agency's Flexible Futures 2024 Conference, *"The inherent power of flexibility is that it applies to everyone – those with families or caring responsibilities, and those without."*ⁱⁱⁱ Research suggests the need for legislative changes to allow flexible working requests from the start of employment, which could improve job quality, enhance living standards, and support economic growth. The Minister's Economic Vision can be realised by encouraging more constructive dialogue about flexible working and prompting both the employer and employee to focus on identifying an arrangement that will bring benefits to both parties.

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For further information or queries please contact analyticalservices@economy-ni.gov.uk.

ⁱ Lightcast is a software package which scans job postings from more than 40,000 sources posted online (through recruiters, job websites or company sites) and pulls data together in a standard format describing the specific skills, education, experience, and work activities required, allowing users to interrogate the results. It should be noted that Lightcast provides a valuable source of data on the jobs market but should be used as complementary to official data. The data from Lightcast comes from job adverts and is therefore dependent on what employers put in those adverts. It is also worth noting that a job posting may not always indicate an actual vacancy as some postings can refer to posts yet to be created. Other limitations in the data include the actual level of detail in job adverts (which can vary for different postings) and the fact that most postings tend to be from larger companies, as smaller businesses tend not to use online adverts.

ⁱⁱ [Statement from Minister Murphy - economic vision | Department for the Economy \(economy-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [New Decade, New Approach](#)

^{iv} [Measuring Good Work: The final report of the Measuring Job Quality Working Group - Carnegie UK Trust](#)

^v [The 'Good Jobs' Employment Rights Bill Public Consultation, Department for the Economy](#)

^{vi} [Employment Relations \(Flexible Working\) Act 2023](#)

^{vii} [Work quality | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

^{viii} [Work Quality in Northern Ireland](#)

^{ix} [Open University Business Barometer 2024](#)

^x [Spare capacity in the Northern Ireland labour market - Paper 1](#)

^{xi} [Flexible working - the essence of a 'good job'? | Labour Relations Agency](#)

^{xii} [Encouraging employers to advertise jobs as flexible](#)

^{xiii} [Flexible Working: the business case](#)

^{xiv} [Flexible working and work-life balance | nidirect](#)

^{xv} [Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)

^{xvi} [Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)

^{xvii} [Oral statement - launch of Good Jobs - Employment Rights Bill consultation | Department for the Economy](#)

^{xviii} [Scottish Flexible Jobs Index](#)

^{xix} [Flex For Life 2023 - Flexible Working Scotland - Flexibility Works](#)

^{xx} [Flexibility is a key factor in revitalising the Dutch labour market - Blogs - PwC](#)

^{xxi} [Flexible Working in the UK](#)

^{xxii} [Flexible working | Public administration | Government.nl](#)

^{xxiii} [Open University Business Barometer 2024](#)

^{xxiv} [Work Quality in Northern Ireland](#)

^{xxv} The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a sample survey carried out by interviewing individuals about their personal circumstances and work. It is the biggest regular household survey in Northern Ireland and provides a rich source of information on the labour force.

^{xxvi} Prior to 2020 the questions on flexible working were not asked on every quarter and so could not be produced on an annual basis, thus only the Oct-Dec quarter is available. For 2020 onwards the data is available on an annual basis.

^{xxvii} [Remote working in Northern Ireland 2023](#)

^{xxviii} [Remote working in Northern Ireland 2023](#)

^{xxix} [Remote working in Northern Ireland 2023](#)

^{xxx} [The Timewise Scottish Flexible Jobs Index 2022](#)

^{xxxi} [Work Quality in Northern Ireland](#)

^{xxxii} [How to reduce the motherhood penalty and the gender pay gap | World Economic Forum](#)

^{xxxiii} [Career or Care](#)

^{xxxiv} [NISRA: Work quality Northern Ireland July 2022 - June 2023](#)

^{xxxv} [Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)

^{xxxvi} [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain](#)

^{xxxvii} [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain](#)

^{xxxviii} [Living longer: impact of working from home on older workers - Office for National Statistics](#)

^{xxxix} [Work Quality in Northern Ireland – July 2022 to June 2023 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)

^{xl} [Future of Remote Working in Northern Ireland: Full Report](#)

^{xli} [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain](#)

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- xlii [Work Quality in Northern Ireland – July 2022 to June 2023 | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency](#)
- xliii [Remote working in Northern Ireland 2023](#)
- xliv Adzuna is an online job search engine that collates information from thousands of different sources in the UK. Adzuna is working in partnership with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and has made data available for analysis including online advert job descriptions, job titles, job locations, job categories and salary information. The data provided are a point-in-time estimate of all job adverts indexed in Adzuna's job search engine during the point of data extraction.
- xlv [Lightcast](#)
- xlvi [Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)
- xlvii [Flexible working and the future of work](#)
- xlviii [Business insights and impact on the UK economy - Office for National Statistics](#)
- xlix [Is Remote Working, Working in Northern Ireland? Trend is Still Lagging Far Behind Rest of UK - Ulster University](#)
- l [Building a Business Case for Good Jobs | Labour Relations Agency](#)
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