Tracy Keogh, Co-founder of Grow Remote

Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development

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On behalf of Grow Remote Ireland and our 40+ chapters across the country, I'd like to thank you sincerely for inviting us to speak here today. In particular, Minister Carey for supporting our chapter lead Paul and his community from the start.

I have a fundamental belief in the power of true community, when it's given the space to be done right. And we know our community's challenges, and I know you know them as I watched all of the sessions you had here. The housing crisis, congestion, carbox tax, we need more and higher quality regional employment, and we need to relieve the pressure valve on our urban areas.

So think of de-centralisation again, but this time, for the private sector and by choice. It's our belief that remote work does that.

We work with three groups to make it a reality:

First, companies, whose number 1 challenge is talent.

Second, the talent, the people themselves. The 77%, according to a Vodafone study who expect more flexibility, or those 50%+ of Wicklow County Council's commuters who want to work and live within the county.

And third the regional communities themselves who need to ensure the economic sustainability of vibrant rural communities, and who are building capacity to hold this new type of employment.

So how do we drive it more?

Remote working companies have identified remote as a skill they are actively seeking this when sourcing for roles. Grow Remote will help you by surfacing up the huge amount of remote skilled talent, and provide a place you can point to, to locate this talent - but we're going further, we're training them up with free scholarship programmes and accredited certifications. This will help us attract the kind of companies who can hire in the most rural, hard hit locations in Ireland.

By creating jobs in the regions you relieve the pressure valve of our major urban areas with housing, congestion and everything else. Many people will tell you broadband isn't sufficient, and for sure it's not, but it's not inhibiting these companies to hire here now.

So how did we get started?

The origins of Grow Remote is a mobilised group of coworking managers, employers, employees and recognised an opportunity that has evolved into a recognised organisation that's mobilised 40 Grow Remote chapters across Ireland with one in Spain, Portugal and the US. We didn't mean to our scale, but when you hit on a fundamental need, that's only natural.

What are we finding?

Telecommunications company Blueface did a survey, there are an estimate 216,000 people who work remotely either full or part time. However we want to be able to dig further and understand the companies they're working and the skills they've got. And our first job is to work to uncover those in local Grow Remote chapters. At a recent Grow Remote event in rural town, we had employees from Wayfair, Dell, Github, Hotjar, and Pfizer - none of these companies are based in Castlebar but their employees live AND work there. These well-paid, productive people work, live and contribute to rural communities in every part of Ireland.

I know that when we think of rural jobs the focus tends to be on SMEs. And at that session a man called John Horkan spoke - and John is founder of the Horkan Garden Centre that employs 150 people. It was through that event that he recognised the opportunity to scale his digital business through the sourcing of talent anywhere in Ireland - no longer geographically constrained by the location of their main office.

What We Do?

The idea at the heart of Grow Remote is very simple. We build the bridge between remote work and local impact.

Our focus on remote work is on full time employees, with all the same benefits you'd get with any local employer, simply without the office. We see suppliers of remote work in two streams - fully distributed companies such as Shopify, Buffer, 10UP, and those on the journey who operate an ad hoc remote policy where appropriate and others who are just recognising this opportunity.

And how do we do it?

We bridge that gap between remote work and local impact by operating in Chapters on a platform called ChangeX - and there - textbook community development - we give people the tools and resources to make change in their own communities.

Our chapters range from communities of 465 people (Arranmore island) to Dublin so what our chapter leads do depends on what's local to them.

And, why are we doing this?

Bringing economic life back to rural Ireland

Well-paid workers living and contributing to local communities are the life-blood of rural Ireland. We want to 'open the rivers'' and let this life force flow.

Community co-working spaces

Regional hubs have started off and tend to focus on anchor tenant, and local SMEs getting access to space, the final pillar of these hubs is remote workers. People who wish to work remotely, but not necessarily within their own homes.

So what is your role in supporting grow remote?

Number 1: we'd like to commission a more in depth study on the opportunities remote working presents, and the challenge currently faced by those companies wishing to pursue such a strategy.

Number 2: We need solid coordination across government agencies on remote work.

While we have had positive engagement with government bodies on an informal basis, we're asking this committee to direct the government agencies with responsibility for job creation work closely with our team at Grow Remote to deliver the necessary supports.

To recap:

For our part, we need to show the abundance of remote jobs, that don't come with a ribbon cut and already available in brilliant international firms like _Shopify, Wayfair, Trello, Buffer, 10up, Scrapinghub, Nearform and more._

The proverbial "Win Win" is normally too good to be true. But let me tell you here today: Remote working is already delivering on the promise of being good to employees, the communities in which they live, and their employers anywhere and everywhere in the Ireland.

While it is not a silver bullet and it is not THE SINGLE solution to our changing world of work and life, it is a smart, effective, economically viable solution that has yet to be fully embraced and to go 'mainstream' for employers, employees, communities. What else have we got in our arsenal to drive job creation in Ireland and this is the last remaining one is remote work.

While I'm here, last week we launched grow remote Tubbercurry as part of Ireland's first smart community. And I'd to thank the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment for their forward thinking and practice supporting on the ground in particular - Caroline Henry, Stephen Brennan and Minister Canney

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