

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHIONTAR, TRÁDÁIL AGUS FOSTAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 27 Aibreán 2022

Wednesday, 27 April 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Richard Bruton,	Garret Ahearn,
Joe Flaherty,	Marie Sherlock.
Paul Murphy,	
James O'Connor,	
Louise O'Reilly,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Matt Shanahan,	
David Stanton.	

Teachta / Deputy Maurice Quinlivan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly took the Chair.

General Scheme of the Right to Request Remote Work Bill 2022: Discussion (Resumed)

Acting Chairman (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I will run quickly through the public health arrangements. The proceedings of our Oireachtas committees will be conducted without the requirement for social distancing, with normal capacity in the committee rooms restored. However, committees are encouraged to take a gradual approach to this change. Members and witnesses have the option to attend meetings in the relevant committee room or online via Microsoft Teams. All those attending in the committee room and environs should continue to wear masks, preferably of medical grade, and wear properly covering the mouth, etc. They should continue to sanitise and wash hands and be respectful of other people's physical space and practise good respiratory etiquette. If they have any Covid symptoms, no matter how mild, they should not attend the meeting room. Members and all in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. Members will be aware we are required to participate in the meeting remotely from within the Leinster House complex only. We have not received any apologies as yet.

The general scheme of the right to request remote work Bill 2022 was referred by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy Varadkar, for pre-legislative scrutiny, PLS, by the committee. The Bill aims to provide a legal framework around which requesting, approving or refusing a request for remote work can be based. It also aims to provide legal clarity and procedures to employers on their obligations for dealing with such requests. The committee has discussed the proposed legislation with officials from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, representatives from IBEC and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU. Today I am pleased that we have an opportunity to consider the matter further and that we will hear from Grow Remote, whose representative will join us in person, and Glofox, appropriately, will join us remotely. I welcome from Grow Remote Ms Joanne Mangan, the employers' lead, and from Glofox, Mr. Finn Hegarty, the chief product officer.

I will run through the parliamentary privilege and a brief note for the witnesses. Before we start I want to explain the limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practice of the Houses as regard reference witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected, pursuant to both the Constitution and statute, by absolute privilege. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. If the witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative they comply with all such directions.

The opening statements have been circulated to all members. To begin our consideration of the matter, I invite Ms Mangan to make her opening remarks on behalf of Grow Remote. Mr. Hegarty will be available to answer questions and contribute to the committee debate following Ms Mangan's opening statement.

Ms Joanne Mangan: I thank the Acting Chair and wish all the members of the committee a good morning.

On behalf of Grow Remote, I sincerely thank the members for the opportunity to come before of the committee today. Joining me remotely is Mr. Finn Hegarty, who is chief product

officer, CPO, and co-founder of Glofox, an Irish remote company.

To begin, I would like to highlight the work done to date by the Government in relation to building a sustainable remote working ecosystem in Ireland, in particular, by the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, in relation to the roll-out of both the national remote-working strategy and Our Rural Future - the national rural development policy. I would also like to give particular thanks to Senator Emer Currie, who has been a tireless advocate for remote working in Ireland and who-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Apologies, we are encountering problems. There is a technical issue with MS Teams. We will have to suspend for a few minutes and start again.

Ms Joanne Mangan: No problem at all.

Sitting suspended at 9.34 a.m. and resumed at 9.38 a.m.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Apologies for that interruption. There was a small technical issue. Would Ms Mangan mind starting her statement again? I apologise again for that brief interruption.

Ms Joanne Mangan: No problem at all.

I thank the Acting Chair and wish all the members of the committee a good morning.

On behalf of Grow Remote, I sincerely thank all the members of the committee for the opportunity to come before them today. Joining me remotely is Mr. Finn Hegarty, who is chief product officer, CPO, and co-founder of Glofox, an Irish remote company.

I would like to highlight the work done to date by the Government in relation to building a sustainable remote working ecosystem in Ireland, in particular, by the Tánaiste, Deputy Varadkar, and the Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and Community Development, Deputy Humphreys, in relation to the roll-out of both the national remote-working strategy and Our Rural Future - the national rural development policy. I would also like to give particular thanks to Senator Emer Currie, who has been a tireless advocate for remote working in Ireland and who has played a key role in Grow Remote being here with the committee today.

Grow Remote is a social enterprise and we are on a mission to unlock the power of remote working to enable everyone to work, live and participate locally all over Ireland. We do this by providing training for managers to employees and to jobseekers and practical supports to businesses to enable them to take the advantages of remote working.

We also enable communities of remote workers to power social connections locally. In this space, we have begun an ambitious project to map every remote worker in Ireland and beyond to build a living census of the remote working population. In broad terms, we welcome the draft legislation before us. Before I address specific issues in the general scheme, however, it is important to highlight that, ultimately, the success or failure of remote working in Ireland does not lie within legislation alone. What is needed is systemic change at all levels to support companies to make the transition to remote-first working. Over-focus on specific legislation risks missing the point of what remote working can achieve for businesses, people, families and communities from Malin Head to Mizen Head.

We need to act now to build a robust remote working ecosystem or we risk losing the momentum we have gained over the past two years. Legislation allowing individual workers to request to work remotely, while very welcome, simply will not equip Irish businesses to compete at the highest level nationally and globally. The evidence shows that businesses benefit from remote working, and a vast proportion of the Irish workforce wants the opportunity to work remotely. There are 80,000 remote jobs available in Ireland today, and that number is growing at a rate of 5% to 7% monthly. Employees have options, and those options are only growing. Companies are currently operating in a highly competitive hiring landscape, and employers in Ireland who do not adopt remote working models run the risk of losing out to those who do.

In asking companies to make the transition to remote working, however, we are expecting them to undertake a significant, costly and time-consuming transformation project. We must take bold steps to de-risk that change for employers. Therefore, the Government's focus must be on catalysing real action and ring-fencing the investment needed to support businesses and to drive major cultural change in the Irish workplace. With that in mind, we have three asks. First, we call for funding supports for Irish businesses that want to transition to remote working models. This should be designed to empower companies to hire without location in Ireland. It should include a local enterprise office fund to support small to medium-sized companies at a local level. Second, ensuring that Irish businesses are remote-ready and equipped for the future will require an awareness and communications campaign at the level of the Brexit Ready campaign. We urge the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to fund and to develop that. Third, we believe it is imperative that the Government lead by example and prioritise embedding remote working across the public sector.

If we fail to put the right supports in place, we will face three significant risks. Irish employers who are unable to offer remote working will run the risk of losing talented employees to those who do. Without a thriving, robust ecosystem for remote employment in Ireland, we will struggle to compete internationally with other countries that are moving very quickly in this space. More importantly, we risk losing the current window of opportunity to drive significant social and economic change on the island of Ireland by making decent employment available to everyone, regardless of where they live.

Moving to the draft legislation, it is important to call out that the conversation and the legal frameworks must move away from one-off deals for individual people. There must be an active move towards a remote-first culture whereby the jobs, not the people, are remote. That said, Grow Remote strongly welcomes the draft Bill on the right to request remote work as a step in the right direction. The general scheme and the public debate on the topic of remote working are far too heavily stacked towards providing reasons employers should not enable their staff to work remotely. We are here to argue that the debate needs to move away from the reasons to say no and towards identifying solutions. We are taking bad practice and allowing it to hold us back. For each of the reasons listed in the legislation to say no, innovative, global and fast-growing companies have figured out solutions and are coming for our talent.

That is why we are so grateful to have one of those leaders, Glofox, here with us today. Bringing companies such as Glofox into the debate means we can all learn how they are addressing the challenges and building successful remote-first companies. The committee will really benefit from hearing first-hand how organisations are finding solutions to the challenges that are often raised: challenges such as how to successfully onboard new staff, how to manage health and safety requirements and how to collaborate, communicate and foster a shared sense of culture and belonging. Glofox and many other companies that Grow Remote works with

have put measures in place to meet these challenges and have built successful businesses with a highly engaged and satisfied workforce in a remote setting. There is a lot we can learn from Glofox and others, and they are willing to share what they have learned with us to support others on the journey.

Despite the progress made in the past two years, there are still many misconceptions about remote work and we need to address them if we are to truly realise its potential. Many of these misconceptions are embedded within the draft legislation. They are misconceptions that will restrict and limit the potential of remote work as a driver of social change.

Head 6 of the general scheme states that an employee shall be entitled to submit a request for remote work when he or she has completed at least 26 weeks of continuous service with an employer. We question the need for this eligibility criterion and urge the committee to recommend the removal of this requirement from the draft Bill. By imposing a six-month eligibility criterion, the legislation restricts one of the key benefits of remote work, the removal of location as a barrier to employment. When new hires have to be in the office for the first six months of their tenure with a company, they will have no option but to live within commuting distance of the office. This requirement serves to reinforce a common misconception about remote working, that is, that it is not possible to effectively onboard and ramp up a new hire remotely. Remote-first companies such as Glofox have proven that it is entirely possible to onboard a new hire remotely and for new employees to feel engaged and connected from day one without any need to default to the office setting.

Head 12 covers the reasons an employer can decline a request for remote working, with 13 business grounds for refusal listed. We recognise that there can be valid business reasons for an employer to say no to a request for remote working - for example, connectivity issues or an inadequate work-from-home space. However, a number of the current reasons for refusal in the draft Bill are far too subjective and open to interpretation. Some of these reasons serve only to feed into damaging misconceptions about remote work. For example, one reason for refusal is where an employer “cannot reorganise work among existing staff”, which implies that the person working remotely will not be working at full capacity and will need his or her work to be reorganised among other staff to allow for this. There is strong evidence that remote working enables employees to be more productive, not less, yet this reason gives weight to the myth that people who work remotely are not working as hard as those in the office. We urge the committee to recommend changes to this head in order that the spirit and letter of the eventual Bill will shift entirely towards supporting companies to say yes to remote working.

Head 13 states that the right to appeal is limited only to procedural grounds. We encourage the committee to allow for appeals to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, to be based on the substantive decision of the employer, not merely on procedural grounds. We strongly urge the committee to strengthen the legislation in order that employers must have a firm rationale for refusal that is based on objective and measurable reasons. We can then be in a position to provide employers with the right supports and guidance to help them overcome these challenges.

There has been a shift in remote work where we are missing out on tax income because employment is landing in other countries. We need to support Irish companies to hire without location within Ireland to mitigate this severe and rapidly increasing risk. This is the committee’s opportunity to create a legacy whereby location is no longer a factor in the opportunities available to our people across the country.

I thank the committee for its attention. We are happy to take any questions.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan took the Chair.

Chairman: Thank you, Ms Mangan. I apologise for being late. I now invite members who wish to discuss this with representatives of Grow Remote and Glofox. I remind members participating remotely to use the raised hand feature and, more importantly, when they are finished speaking to take it down. I ask those in the room to indicate to me. The first person who has indicated is Deputy O'Reilly.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank our witnesses for coming and for joining us remotely. I have a couple of questions. I share a lot of the concerns Ms Mangan has about legislation that is, effectively, in some respects, a charter for an employer just to say "No". Some of the difficulty we have is that remote working is seen as a bit of a gift, something you have to earn, something you might get after a service qualification, a benefit that accrues with service rather than an actual way to run a company. I hear what Ms Mangan says about the cultural shift that is required. I also understand what she says about the limitations of proposed legislation, but if this is not driven by positive legislation, we will end up simply codifying the reasons workers will be just told no, and that is not good enough.

I welcome the fact that the Tánaiste has recognised that the Bill is flawed in many aspects and has indicated that he will accept amendments. Hearings such as this are very valuable. It means we can construct those amendments and make sure that we can make the legislation fit for purpose and make it work and drive the change Ms Mangan talked about. Ms Mangan mentioned she was working on mapping remote workers. I was not aware of that. It is very welcome. When will that work be completed? What will the map look like in terms of where remote workers are?

Ms Joanne Mangan: We launched a project approximately three months ago to map where remote workers are located throughout Ireland. There are no data readily available to say where remote workers are located or how many there are. There are some data from the Central Statistics Office but we look to build a comprehensive map of where people are throughout the country and the companies for which they work. We have launched a survey. It is on the Grow Remote website. Workers can go to the website, log themselves and put in the details of where they live and what company they work for. Our ultimate aim is that one will be able to see at a glance where there are clusters of remote workers. All these data are very valuable in terms of regional dispersion of remote workers, what parts of the country are more popular for remote workers and who the remote employers are in Ireland. We are building those data. That is an ongoing project about which we are very excited.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It will be very useful. Added to that, the information from the census will give us a very good picture. Ms Mangan did not talk much about the hybrid model of half and half, one quarter and three quarters or four and one. Does Ms Mangan see a role for the hybrid model as well as the remote-only model? Remote only might work for some but my understanding is that the vast majority of people want to feel that connection to the office and to be physically present sometimes. It is not for every job.

Ms Joanne Mangan: Absolutely. Obviously we are advocates for remote working but we are not necessarily advocates for remote only. We recognise that not every company is fit to be set up as a fully-remote organisation. A practical example is where there are staff who have to be in the office or on the premises because of the nature of their role. Fairly strong evidence

has come out in the past year or two through the CSO survey and the Western Development Commission and NUIG Whitaker Institute survey around what employees want to show that probably the majority of workers are looking for a hybrid model.

We advocate for remote but there is not necessarily anything wrong with the hybrid model if it is done in a remote-first way. What I mean by that is an employer saying that every employee needs to be in the office every Monday and Friday but can work remotely the other days of the week is not an ideal situation, because the employer is not giving flexibility to employees to live where they choose. I cannot live in the west of Ireland if I have to be in Dublin two days per week or I have a bit of a nightmare commute ahead of me. The flexibility needs to be there for the employee for him or her to make the choice of whatever suits him or her within the confines of the role.

Ideally, remote first means the employee can decide when to go to the office and when to work from home. All processes and policies are designed around the fact that there are remote workers. Where hybrid goes wrong is when it still ticks the office as the default and the remote workers are the forgotten employees. They are not seen in the office anymore and are invisible. They may miss out on promotional opportunities. They may miss out on FaceTime with the boss or the water cooler moments.

Companies that adopt the hybrid model very much need to think about these things and be intentional and plan around the fact that they now have a remote workforce. Otherwise, they run the risk of having a two-tiered workforce where the remote workers are at a disadvantage. An important point to make around that is there is evidence to show that more often, but not always, people who look for remote work are women with caring responsibilities or other people who may, for whatever reason in their lives, not thrive as much in the office nine-to-five environment. They could have hidden illnesses or doctors appointments to which they need to go. There is a real risk of further marginalising people who may already be marginalised in the first place. I encourage any company that adopts a hybrid model to take a remote-first approach and design all processes and policies around both office workers and home workers.

Having said that, doing so is very complicated. Any company we work with that is doing hybrid at present is wrestling with many of these questions. How does it manage fairness when some people are at home? Some people are in the office and they can go to the canteen. What about the home workers? There is considerable complexity to that. We need to support employers with these questions because it is what employees want. However, it is not as simple as letting it happen organically. Considerable work, thought, intentionality and planning needs to go into it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I have been saying for years that remote working should be recognised as the specific form of work it is, just as shift work is recognised. It is its own form of work. It should have its own sets of procedures to ensure that one can stay connected. I noted that Ms Mangan referred in the statement to workers as they start being engaged and connected from day one. Perhaps people who are more used to the traditional model might struggle to understand how that will happen and how one manages that. Will Mr. Hegarty outline how that works in his company?

Mr. Finn Hegarty: Our company has 220 people all remote. Some 50% of those folks are in Ireland. We have been on our remote journey for approximately seven years now. We were co-located, we were the hybrid model and now we are fully remote. The challenge in terms of new joiners over the past seven years has certainly been how we onboard these new folks. We

need to get value from these people straight away as they join and try to get them ramped up in a short timeframe. Doing this remotely poses its challenges especially for those folks in more junior roles.

We are very deliberate about how we onboard people. We invest a significant amount of time on making sure we onboard people correctly. That might be significantly more touch points with their manager, making sure they are embedded within the culture and meet other people outside their own department from day one in order that they can feel the overall culture of the company as opposed to feeling isolated. They are going into a new role. They are working remotely and not directly working with a manager. We have certain policies and procedures that we refined over a number of years of being able to ramp up those people quicker.

We hire in clusters. We have more than 100 people in Ireland. We plan to hire another 150 or so this year. Some 80% of those people are outside Dublin. There is a cluster of folks in each province at this stage. There are some challenges with the social interaction as well of being remote but the benefit is that we can bring people together once per month or once per quarter. In terms of the Deputy's question on onboarding, we bring those people together once per month. One needs that human interaction especially at the start.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Mr. Hegarty makes a good point about how important human interaction is. No one wants to get to a situation where we completely lose that but people are very anxious to have the flexibility. Ms Mangan did not touch on the issue of the right to disconnect. When a worker's home is his or her workplace, a worker is always and never in work. Does she see a role for legislation on that? Should it be built in? I would absolutely introduce legislation on it. A worker should have a legal right to disconnect.

In terms of the experience of workers so far, I have a concern that there could be a grey area. However, it also exists in an office environment. There is a view that the culture of presenteeism could be challenged by remote working or the hybrid model. It does not always work like that unless one has the legal right to disconnect. When Grow Remote works with companies, are they conscious of that? Are they prepared to do it anyway? With the best will in the world, a worker still needs that legal protection. Without it, one will have an issue. We all know we are in the middle of a housing crisis. We could talk all day about how we got there. We can all see how we got to where we are. There are many people who live in inappropriate accommodation. For those people, access to a hub is going to be essential. Would Ms Mangan see it as the role of the employer to provide the hub or that of the worker to source it? How would that work? Could it work in a clustered situation similar to what the banks are doing? They are bringing their workers together in branch buildings that may not be open; the bank workers are going to be working in there even if the branches are closed.

Ms Joanne Mangan: On the right to disconnect, it is important that there is a legal framework in place to protect employees from overworking. I guess before I get into that there are a couple of things to highlight. Yesterday the Central Statistics Office came out with some figures around remote workers. It found that remote workers had the highest level of job and life satisfaction of any worker group in Ireland. That is important to highlight. While there is a lot of talk about overworking and over-productivity in a remote setting, it is not really borne out in those statistics.

Having said that, there are risks of a greying of boundaries between work and life when we work from home. Anecdotally we hear people saying they work later. There is evidence to show people are more productive when they work from home. I do not think there is evidence

as to whether that is down to more hours being worked or because people can focus better and be more efficient and effective when they work remotely. I would be leaning more towards the latter. Nevertheless it is important that there are measures in place to protect employees from the risk of overworking. The right to disconnect is an important piece of the legislation to protect against that.

I also think the onus is on employers and managers, particularly. This is a very difficult time for people managers. There are a lot of transitions and transformations they need to make. Wellness needs to be top of mind for employers. For most of the employers we work with, including Glofox, wellness is something they are very aware of with their employees, particularly because of the last two years and the situation we have all found ourselves in. The companies we work with are very mindful of people's time and put measures in place. For example, people would know from day one that they are not expected to answer a work email outside of working hours. Email sign-offs include a wording to the effect that if the person receives the email outside their working hours they do not need to answer it. That is repeated all the time, it is not just said at the beginning and then forgotten by everyone. It is reinforced. That is what companies need to do. They need to be very specific when employees start, telling them they are not expected to answer emails if they are working remotely and it is evening time, that they need to turn off their phone in the evening.

One important benefit of remote working is flexibility. We are also hearing a lot, particularly from parents who log on early in the morning and do an hour or two before the kids get up. Then they take an hour or two off and get the kids off to school, then they go back in. My daughter comes home from school at 2.30 p.m. and I take an hour to be with her. Then I log back in and work until a little bit later in the evening. We do not want to lose the benefit of the flexibility. People like to schedule work around their life but we do not want work to take over their lives. There is a balance to be found.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I thank all the speakers for coming in. We have seen significant progress in remote working over the past two years, helped in part by the pandemic. We have also seen the springing up of a large number of hubs across the country. We recently saw the opening of the co:worx hub in Edgeworthstown in County Longford. It is a wonderful initiative which is really going to help champion the cause of remote working.

It is important to point out that there are some people who still like to go into the workplace. This was borne out throughout Covid also. There are people who like the social aspect of going to work. While remote working is good and has many positive outcomes, there are people who still want to go into the workplace. We have to acknowledge them as well. One of the previous speakers was correct that the blended work pattern is now the second most important item when it comes to negotiating terms and conditions with an employer, after salary. There is no doubt that people in the main want the opportunity to work remotely.

The legislation is what it is. It is never going to please everybody. At the same time, we have to try to come to a point where we accommodate workers but also as many businesses as is humanly possible. We have to acknowledge that 96% of employers in Ireland employ fewer than 19 people. That is evident when I look out from my constituency office back home. I can see those small businesses first hand and know how challenging it is going to be for them to move to a remote working situation. It was suggested that there could be funding for businesses to help them move towards remote working. Could Ms Mangan expand on that?

Ms Joanne Mangan: The Deputy's question ties in with the point he made about small

businesses. The shift to remote work has been quite a costly exercise for a lot of companies. The larger multinationals have been able to pivot more easily because their infrastructure and technology was set up to work remotely before the pandemic. They are international businesses and are used to working with distributed teams. It is the small to medium-sized companies in the main that have really struggled with remote working. I am talking about companies that would have been paper based with paper files. Nobody would have ever used Zoom before. They may have had desktops on desks and no laptops. Imagine those companies suddenly being told they had to work remotely. The challenges they faced in the last two years and particularly the costs are something we think they need some support with. That is what we are asking for.

We would like to see a local enterprise office, LEO, fund or grant system set up similar to what has been provided in the past for digital readiness for companies. The cost is an up-front cost so in the longer term we would see a cost saving for businesses if they make the move to remote in terms of being able to reduce their real estate footprint and other efficiencies that may be gained through remote working. We are not talking about a long-term funding model or supports but something to kick-start and support companies that have had to invest quite a lot of money. There is also a time and resources factor. It is not just the cost of equipment, technology or infrastructure. A lot of companies have had to appoint someone to do this full time. In Grow Remote I work every day with people whose job is the remote transformation. That applies to large and small companies. The time and resource issue is also costly for businesses.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: I would agree that the LEO is certainly the vehicle to do this. Has Ms Mangan seen any examples in Europe of governments that have done this and how it has worked? She referred to the e-voucher, a €2,000 payment on behalf of the business to an e-mentor or business to help them develop their website. Is she thinking of something like that?

Ms Joanne Mangan: Yes, something along the same lines as that, a voucher payment. I do not have an amount in mind or anything like that but I am referring to a once-off grant or voucher that can be used to support a business's remote work transformation or remote-ready transformation similar to the digital transformation that companies have been through in the past.

I am not aware of any specific countries that have a similar model. Portugal is very ahead of the game when it comes to supports and legislation and being very proactive around remote working. There may be something like that in place there. We could have a look at that after the meeting if the Deputy is interested in finding out more.

Deputy Joe Flaherty: Lovely, I would appreciate that. I thank Ms Mangan.

Deputy David Stanton: I found the presentation fascinating. One of my sons told me recently I am not a digital native. I looked it up and discovered that I might be a digital immigrant or even a digital refugee. That goes to the heart of some of what Ms Mangan has been saying where it is not just legislation but a change of mindset, of how we view things, and so on, that is needed. For many employers, businesses, companies and workers, this is very new and very challenging. There are built-in prejudices that if someone is not there under someone's gaze, perhaps they are not working at all but are skiving off. I know of one particular young man at the moment who is employed in Ireland but is based in Mauritius and he is extraordinarily productive, doing very well and making a great deal of money for his company. Perhaps the issue of the change of mindset is where we need to get to. Ms Mangan cited that early on in her presentation, if one reads between the lines.

I have a number of questions. Ms Mangan mentioned that there are more than 80,000 remote jobs available in Ireland today. Could she expand on that please at some stage? Can she tell us exactly where that figure comes from, what kind of jobs they are, if they are available and, if there are difficulties in filling them, why is that the case?

Could she also talk a small bit about the hubs and the hot desk offices? I have said in the Dáil on a few occasions that I do not believe we are thinking big enough on this issue. In many rural towns people leave them in the mornings and there are lines and lines of traffic heading into cities and into big companies where they sit at desks all day for much of their time. They could do that in their own towns.

Working in one's own house is difficult. I have also read, and perhaps our guests might help me on this point, that it can be quite expensive if one is at home all day in respect of heating, lighting and so forth, where the carbon emissions can actually go up if one is working at home rather than working at a central employment point, and so forth. I have been looking at the idea of the larger remote working hubs in towns and villages. In some of the provincial towns, in particular, one can leave home, go to work but not actually have to travel into a city 20 km or 30 km away. Ms Mangan might comment on that please.

I also know that she mentioned Portugal as having best practice. Could Ms Mangan talk about third level; I believe the University of Edinburgh and perhaps MIT have also done a great deal of work in this area? Perhaps those universities should be leading the way here by not having all of their students going to a central campus but in having more remote working areas.

Should workers have a choice as to whether they might like to work remotely as opposed to employers insisting that workers would have to work remotely? Should we look at this the other way in respect of workers having a choice as to whether they would like to go into the office for half or some of the time, or whatever, rather than having to stay home, especially if there is not a hot desk or hub in the workers' town or locality?

There are many businesses which cannot facilitate remote working and I believe Ms Mangan alluded to some of those in her earlier presentation. Should we give those companies an opt-out at the very beginning so that they would not have to actually prepare a policy in this regard? It seems to me to be time-wasting and expensive for a company or business to have to prepare a policy in this area if none of their workers can work remotely. I am thinking here perhaps of services where people work in nursing homes, for instance, where people have to go in, or in restaurants where people have to attend, or plumbing companies where people have to be physically on site.

Those are all of my questions for the moment, Chairman.

Chairman: I call Ms Mangan now and I believe Mr. Hegarty also wishes to contribute.

Ms Joanne Mangan: Does Mr. Hegarty want to go first?

Mr. Finn Hegarty: Sure. I will address the Deputy's first point about mindset. I agree with that. It is all about a big mindset and culture shift for these companies, particularly if one is coming from a co-located office to a hybrid workforce. It is not just a case of getting a policy and the technology. It is very much about creating, as Ms Mangan mentioned, this remote-first culture and a fundamental change in the way we work. That is, in the way that we communicate with each other, how we manage people, how we manage performance and how we on-board staff. These are all fundamental changes in the way of working as a business. That is not easy

as we went through this for the past seven years and we did not have the support. I see Grow Remote out there now and we need to support these small businesses with that content and in how they can make that shift.

On the Deputy's point in respect of the hubs, that is something where we give our employee the choice as to whether he or she wants to come in. We have an office in Dublin, and a couple of smaller offices around Ireland as well, and we give them a choice. If they do not have a suitable working arrangement in their house where it could be shared accommodation straight out of college, we would compensate them in going into a local hub. I even worked last week from Achill Island and there are these very good hubs out there that have the connectivity and the infrastructure to support these roaming in and out workforces.

On the Deputy's final point on the opt-out policy, it certainly makes sense for certain businesses that would not necessarily need this requirement to have this exemption, whether this is construction or services for businesses. I will pass over to Ms Mangan now, please.

Ms Joanne Mangan: Picking up on some of the points there, the statistic of 80,000 remote jobs comes from *euremotejobs.com* and in Europe itself. These are jobs that can be taken up by individuals living in Ireland and the jobs are across Europe. These jobs cover every industry and every type of job. One would be amazed at what jobs are being done remotely compared to two years ago.

On the topic of the hubs, I am very glad that Mr. Hegarty has highlighted the fact that his company uses hubs because we believe that hubs are a fantastic resource and are possibly an underutilised one right now. It is a little hard to say because they only started opening up since the Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. We see hubs as an answer to many of the puzzles of remote working. One of the big ones of these is the social aspect and interaction as not everybody likes to work in their home and not every day, at any rate. One may wish to get away from the house for a day or a week and the hubs are a very good solution to that as one can meet other people and can connect and network. One can also pop to the local coffee shop on one's lunch and spend some money locally. They are very good for the local economy and they also answer other issues around, for example, Internet availability. If one does not have a good enough Internet service one can use a hub.

There is also the fact that not everyone has the luxury of a home office. We have heard some horror stories of people sharing flats where there are two people at a kitchen table trying to do calls at the same time. The hubs answer many questions and provide answers to many of the challenges around remote working.

Our view on the hubs is that, first, the Government has done great work on rolling out and committing to 400 hubs nationwide and we are seeing hubs being put in place all over the country in some really amazing places. Mr. Hegarty mentioned Achill Island, and one can find these up in Donegal and down in Dingle. Many of these hubs are of a very high quality, have a very good Internet connection and it is almost like being in an office in respect of the standard available.

What needs to happen and what is not happening yet is that employers are not really taking up the hubs in any great numbers and it is still being driven by the individual employee. I might decide that I would like to work in a hub so I will ask my employer and they will say "no problem". In the main it is that situation where I may end up paying for it myself. It is a question then as to whether the employer will pay for it or I will pay for it. Ideally, the employee should

not necessarily have to cover the cost. That is a question that is yet to be answered.

We are seeing other cases where it is small business owners, entrepreneurs, people who are working for themselves or freelancers who are using the hubs right now. There is definitely scope and potential there to drive the occupancy and uptake of the hubs among employees and it has to start with going to businesses and encouraging them to share the benefits, and perhaps addressing some of the challenges as they may have some issues or challenges around security or privacy. These are things that the hub owners are more than happy to talk to businesses about. It is really about bringing the hub owners and that organisation together with employers to find ways to better utilise those hubs, which are a fantastic resource.

On the question of third level, that is a difficult one to answer. We talk about employment rather than education. Education is moving more towards digital learning but I also know that the third level universities want to have people coming on to the campus. It is a little difficult for me to give my viewpoint on that. We are a training organisation not a university but we do a great deal of online and blended learning, which is becoming more common. Some students like to be able to do this work in their own time from home but I would not want to give a comprehensive answer on that because it is not really an area that we are involved in.

On the question of workers' choice, yes, they should have such a choice if a worker wants to go to the office and if there is one in place. At the end of the day, it comes down to choice. If people are going for a job and in the job description there is no office, they can look for something else if they do not like that. It is quite a misconception that remote companies do not have offices or a premises and people do not meet. We often say that people are remote at first but they are not remote only. As Mr. Hegarty said, we need to find ways to bring employees to get the social interaction and collaboration.

A lot of the organisations we work and partner with have premises or an office. They may have a satellite office or couple of offices, use a hub or have headquarters in Dublin. For example, Liberty Insurance made the move to fully remote from in office while maintaining a couple of offices around the country. Its staff are allowed to go into the office for up to two days, but no more than that. They have to use the office for something they would not necessarily do at home. Nobody goes into the office to sit at a desk and work on emails by themselves all day. People go in to the office for meetings, team events, collaborations, brainstorming sessions and those kinds of things.

I would not necessarily be militant about saying that workers should not have a choice. There is a place for the office. Most companies will retain that. The number has grown and will continue to grow, but we are still talking about 20% to 25% of companies that might consider fully remote, whereas in the main there will be a hybrid model involving an office or premises.

Chairman: Does Deputy Bruton want to come in? He has just over two minutes, but can come in again later on if he wants to.

Deputy Richard Bruton: I will use the two minutes for one question and then come back to the other ones. Returning to the proposed legislation, successful countries have a different approach in a way that would promote the evolution of solutions. Could the witnesses suggest some amendments? For example, if we are to move to remote first, I understand the proposed legislation envisages that employers should have a statement on remote working. Could that be strengthened? Do the witnesses have suggestions as to how that would be done?

In the view of the witnesses, would removing the six-month eligibility criteria be an absolute in all cases or would they allow some employers to specify that certain jobs would be handled differently? What is the experience of the witnesses on the practicalities of making legislative proposals that will apply to everyone, rather than just the pioneers?

Ms Joanne Mangan: With the eligibility criteria, for the most part if a job can be done remotely, it can be done remotely from the outset. As I mentioned in my statement, it is reinforcing a misconception about remote work that we need to be in the office to get ramped up. That sets everybody off on the wrong foot and basically says that the office is better for certain things. In this case, as Mr. Hegarty spoke about, the office is not necessarily a better place for onboarding. Onboarding can be done from home, we just need to put the right processes and policies in place to make that work.

We would like to see the eligibility criteria removed on a practical level. For example, people working for an organisation that will offer them remote work in six months' time have to wait six months before they know they can relocate. I live in Athenry. If I apply for a job, I cannot apply for one in Dublin. I am missing out on those opportunities because I need to be in an office for six months which would not work for me. That creates an issue. Does the Deputy have another question?

Ms Joanne Mangan: Do other governments have different legislative frameworks that would promote an evolution by the companies which, as Ms Mangan rightly said, may be ill-equipped to make a quick move?

Ms Joanne Mangan: Other countries that have provided legislation around this include the UK, which has a similar model to the Irish model. The only other one I know of is the Portuguese model, which I understand is more heavily weighted towards the employee choice as opposed to the employer having a rationale for being able to refuse requests. I do not have the details of that legislation in front of me. I am not able to give any more definite information on that.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Bruton. He can come in again shortly.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I thank Ms Mangan and Mr. Hegarty for attending the committee today. Ms Mangan gave a passionate contribution on the potential of remote work. I hear what she is saying in terms of legislation alone not being sufficient. It is, of course, vital to have a strong legislative framework. We are here today because we had pre-legislative scrutiny of the right to request flexible work.

Last week, the Government announced a work-life balance Bill. Both proposed Bills have a very rigid perspective on who should access remote and flexible work. Should the Government see remote and flexible work as separate things? From the perspective of the Labour Party, we see the right to flexible work with regard to the hours and place of work as being the same thing. We produced a Bill on the right to request that. I would be interested in hearing the views of the witnesses on the separation of flexible and remote work, in particular in the context of everything they have said with regard to women and other groups of workers who may want to access the labour force.

Ms Joanne Mangan: There is, obviously, a distinction between remote and flexible work. However, we would see them as being within the same sphere. Ultimately, it starts with trust and flexibility for employees. Out of that, businesses start looking at different models. The dif-

ferent models that come out of that are things like remote and flexible work. They are definitely in the same family, even though there are differences between them.

I keep talking about a remote culture because it is not just an employer telling me I can sit at home and work but I still have to continue my 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. day and everything else stays the same. There is a cultural shift that comes from remote working, and it is important to emphasise that. Within that culture is flexibility. Flexibility of choice, location and hours worked and also trust in terms of the work people are doing are important. It is not just a different style of working; it is a completely different approach to work.

That is where the flexibility in terms of flexible hours, to which the Senator referred, also comes in. For people who are working remotely, it does not work to be told they have to be at a desk at 9 a.m., a boss will check up on them to make sure they are there at 9 a.m., they have to be there at 5.30 p.m. and take a lunch break between 12 noon and 1 p.m. Some people do that and like that structure but, as I said earlier, some people may want to work around their caring or other responsibilities.

A lot of companies that have remote working options in place also offer other flexible options, such as different start and finish times or reduced hours. We have not seen a four-day week with any of the companies we have worked with, but it is something that is getting a little traction. Some companies, including our company, offer unlimited paid time off. That can sound completely crazy, but for some companies it is about the idea that people manage their work, do it when they need to do it and take their leisure time. Life takes over at the times when it suits the people. We would definitely see those things as interrelated.

Senator Marie Sherlock: Ms Mangan spoke about the 13 grounds for refusing a right to request remote work as being far too broad. I am conscious that the Tánaiste has said he will come forward with amendments, but that was two months ago and we have yet to see any detail on that.

We are conscious that not every worker can work remotely. In the Labour Party Bill, we referred to the grounds for refusal relating to data protection and confidentiality, because there is an issue with regards to security, a minimal level of Internet connectivity and the work space, because not every person's home is suitable to work in. Reference was made to the fact that some people are house sharing or there are two people at a kitchen table. Are there other grounds for refusal? Should there be fewer grounds for refusal? I am interested in hearing the perspective of the witnesses because we are discussing what the ideal Bill should look like.

Ms Joanne Mangan: The reasons for refusal should reflect the feasibility and reality of whether the job can be done. The first reason, then, is that the job cannot be done remotely. Even with that, companies need to interrogate their assumptions around certain jobs. I say that because we are still seeing, even after the last two years, that it is the same types of jobs in the same types of industries that have more remote working than others. Examples include the technology sector and other professional services. Other jobs can be done remotely as well. With a little bit of imagination and open-mindedness, companies could see that certain jobs could be done remotely, or be done remotely some of the time. However, if the job that needs to be done involves practical aspects such as serving customers face-to-face or working a machine, for example, then it is not possible for people to work remotely in those situations. Other similar practical aspects involved include Internet connectivity and a lack of suitable desk space or a place to work safely because of health and safety reasons. Those are all valid reasons jobs cannot be done remotely.

For businesses, there are also other reasons. I feel we must give businesses a little bit of a break in this regard as well. Sometimes perhaps, and in the media especially, there is a misconception that there are some big bad companies that just do not like remote working and that they are dinosaurs making everyone go back to the office. Perhaps there are a few of those companies, but as I said earlier many challenges are encountered in making the transformation. It is not as easy as everyone just going home and working remotely. It is very difficult. I talk every day to representatives of companies that are struggling, including those that have significant resources and large budgets to spend on this undertaking. Therefore, we must give a little bit of leeway to companies.

Having said that, however, some reasons given do not make sense. I mentioned one of those already in the context of ensuring remote working can be embedded. Another example is the distance from the office to the home being judged too far. That really questions the whole logic of remote working, because where anyone lives should not be a factor. Given everything I have said already, location should not be a factor when it comes to remote working. Another reason given that is subjective is the quality of work being impacted. Again, the question here is how it can be proved that the quality of work has been impacted. This is about measurable, objective and fair grounds being used in the context of remote working requests and giving employees the option to be able to question decisions. If they are not happy or satisfied, then what is required is to provide frameworks to enable them to take a request further, while also balancing the needs businesses have in respect of the time, space, resources and support they require to overcome some of the challenges faced.

Senator Marie Sherlock: Sure. I am glad Ms Mangan called for there to be recourse to the Workplace Relations Commission for any worker based on the substance of a rejection of a request for a remote working, as opposed to the procedure, which is what is in this Bill.

Deputy Richard Bruton: It would be useful to hear a little more about how the witnesses think the legislation could be changed. I recall that the American with Disabilities Act 1990 famously had a system whereby it was necessary to have a statement about a policy in that regard. It was then necessary to show each year that positions had been evolved to ensure it would not be a case of just saying that things were done a certain way and that was that. It was necessary to show each year that reasonable steps were being taken to advance the policy. If we could change this legislation to envisage that sort of approach, would that be a practical way to evolve it?

Turning to the public service, it seems to me that some of the bodies that are the most reluctant to undertake remote working are in the public service itself. Has Ms Mangan any data that could shed light on resistance within the public service to remote working and the advantages for the public service of moving to a remote-first strategy? The impression one gets is that the sort of command-and-control approach which still prevails leads to shutters being thrown up straightaway. Can we evolve some legislative nudges, which I think is the word people use, to force the public service, as well as the private sector, to undertake this approach?

I have a question that Mr. Hegarty might address. One possible way of resolving this issue in legislation is that we could see the establishment of codes of practice that companies would not be required to apply immediately. Over time, however, those would become factors used in situations where employers had unreasonably turned down requests for remotely working. Has Glofox evolved a set of protocols that could be pointed to for use in dealing with the onboarding aspect described, as well as to some of the other tricky issues employers throw up as being obstacles? Perhaps we could learn from that approach and enshrine in legislation the expectation

that codes would evolve and that companies would have to respond. Drawing on his experience, does Mr. Hegarty think that a remote-first approach will be accompanied by significant vacating of office properties? Has Glofox's advocacy of this approach been substantially driven by a desire to avoid property costs as well as running the company in a different way?

Ms Joanne Mangan: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I will deal with the first two and then pass over to Mr. Hegarty for the third. Deputy Bruton's suggestion is a reasonable one in respect of evolving the legislation or asking companies to state their position today and then returning to them and seeing where they are in a year's time. That is exactly what we are talking about. I have said this several times. We keep talking about a balance between carrot and stick approaches for employers. We want to push employers and we want them to adopt remote working, because this is not going to work without them. We need them to be creating the jobs and making them available without being location-specific. Having said that, however, we must also understand the challenges that companies are facing and that not all companies are not where we would like them to be, or where they could be, regarding transitioning to a remote-first culture. Therefore, the idea of companies stating their position now, while also putting commitments and measures in place to evolve over time, is a practical and positive one for those companies far behind in this regard.

I keep talking about the difference between technology companies and small businesses. They are worlds apart in respect of where they could be with remote working. Including a requirement in the legislation to have a policy, even when remote working may not be available, is a good approach. I refer to situations where that policy would evolve and need to be revisited over time, with certain steps being put in place to move the needle forward. I say that because much of the rationale in the legislation for refusing remote working requests involves things that can be overcome. They are things that Mr. Hegarty and companies like Glofox have been able to overcome. However, companies might not know how to do that now, so we must bring them on that journey.

Turning to the question on the public service, we have no data in this regard. Anecdotally, we have heard of public sector organisations bringing people back to the office. The public service does appear to be much slower than the private sector in respect of a longer-term adoption of remote working. We are happy to see that the Government has committed to making 20% of jobs remote. We would like to see how that will play out. If that 20% refers to the working time of public servants, then that means working remotely one day each week. That is not necessarily going to have the transformative power we would like to see remote working having. We are calling for the public sector to adopt remote working much more broadly and to make remote working available to employees in the public sector in the same way that it is available to employees in the private sector. I ask Mr. Hegarty to address the third question from the Deputy.

Mr. Finn Hegarty: Regarding codes of practice or best practices, we have learned the hard way about some of these aspects over the last seven years. Organisations like Grow Remote have not always existed. People have learned from international companies, as well as from some peer companies in Ireland, about what they have done regarding onboarding. We evolved that over time and now we have our own documentation and procedures. Working with Grow Remote, we have come up with a playbook to share those best practices, whether those involve onboarding, how to manage people remotely and-or establishing a remote first culture. That has all been documented and we have been working closely with other peers in Ireland as well to come up with a playbook. The key thing is to share that with new businesses to ensure they can pick up these approaches. Every culture and every company is different, so there is a need

to adapt. Having this framework, however, is a good start.

Turning to Deputy Bruton's question regarding the key driver in making this shift, we had seven offices globally before and cost is one of the benefits, but it was not the original driver of this change. We made this shift because it enabled us to get access to talent. We are a technology company and Dublin was a very competitive location in which to try to scale up our team. We were competing against the Googles and Facebooks of the world. For us, therefore, this shift was about getting the best talent and not necessarily having to hire those folks in Dublin. For us, that was the driver, and it still is. It has resulted in a competitive advantage for us because we provide the flexibility to hire people wherever they are based. Covid has shifted everyone's mindset in the past few years towards at least thinking about making the shift to hybrid or remote working. My concern is that we are not just competing against Irish companies for talent anymore. There is a massive talent war right now in the tech space. We are actually competing against global companies because they are remote as well. Those who join a company in the EU, UK or US are still in Ireland, but we are losing their talent. That is the risk. This Bill is a great step towards addressing this, but the risk is that we will lose the talent to other companies if we do not make a fundamental shift.

Deputy Richard Bruton: Would it be possible to see the documentation or the playbook just to give the committee an idea of the range of challenges Mr. Hegarty seeks to address?

Mr. Finn Hegarty: Yes. The playbook we have come together on is on the Grow Remote website.

Ms Joanne Mangan: We can share that with the committee. We built it in collaboration with Glofox and several other remote companies. It has been a very useful tool. We have got great feedback from small companies that have been using it to help them to build their own remote working policies and strategies. We are happy to share.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I welcome the witnesses. I compliment them on the submission and opening statement. From my experience, the submission was among the best we have had in the past few years. Ms Mangan mentioned Senator Currie and her work in this field over the past couple of years. Senator Currie has, within her own party, brought this forward. Unfortunately, she cannot be here today but I know she is watching. She has asked me to make a contribution on her behalf. I will say essentially what she would say, and then ask questions. She said she supports the witnesses' submission and concerns, which she believes can be fixed. She entirely agrees that this is not just about legislation, which has been described as a floor of rights, but that it is also about breaking through the ceiling and creating better opportunities for people and communities. A national campaign and supports are essential. Senator Currie would add that we need to match the demand for remote working and investing in remote-ready communities that create a supply of remote workers in every part of the country. Other countries have this legislation but it goes hand in hand with culture change where it is successful. Can the witnesses directly address employers' concerns and how they might be overcome? Concerns can be about insurance, health and safety, onboarding, cybersecurity, data protection, fostering a team dynamic, and how, and if, staff are monitored. Some of these have been listed as grounds to refuse remote work. Could the witnesses tell the committee how, in their experience, they can be overcome? I will come back with some other questions.

Ms Joanne Mangan: I reiterate our thanks to Senator Currie for her support. She was advocating for remote work long before I joined Grow Remote. I am very disappointed she was not able to be with us today. There are many employer concerns, with good reason. We have

worked in offices for over a hundred years and never got that perfect. Therefore, we cannot expect the new model of remote working to work perfectly after two years, particularly when we were implementing it in the middle of an emergency. The remote working over the past two years is not how we envisage remote working in the future. One of the most important aspects of making remote working work is careful, deliberate planning on the part of companies, with support and guidance to help them along the journey.

How can these challenges be addressed? One of the most important aspects involves what we are doing today: bringing a company like Glofox into the public arena and hearing about how it is addressing some of the challenges. Glofox and some of the other companies we talked to will hold their hands up and say they do not have all the answers yet, which means we are in a period of experimentation and transformation. The more open companies are about this, the better. Last September, Grow Remote founded an alliance called the Remote Alliance and brought together some of the companies that are in the process of transformation, including eBay, ESB, Vodafone and Liberty Insurance. The purpose was to hear from them about how they are addressing the challenges and to share solutions publicly. That is what we need to be doing over the next year or two, or even longer, as companies start testing. Really, we are still testing this model, particularly the hybrid model. It did not really exist before, or not in any systemic, procedural way. Where it existed, it may have been a one-off. We need to support companies with some of the supports I have talked about today. We need to ensure companies are given platforms and opportunities to share through organisations such as Grow Remote so that we can build a library of case studies and references and so companies can follow guidelines, playbooks and how-to guides on how to make the changes. The most important thing is to give companies an opportunity to share publicly how they are addressing these challenges.

Senator Garret Ahearn: I have a couple of follow-up questions from Senator Currie. Ms Mangan mentioned supports from local enterprise offices in her contribution and how these could assist businesses in making a financially beneficial transition. Could she expand on that? Is the biggest issue with the legislation that it does not reflect and unlock the full potential of locationless work? Could she talk about the local enterprise offices' work? Could she talk about her organisation's chapters in communities and the work done in this regard?

Ms Joanne Mangan: The legislation is not necessarily the lever that will unlock locationless work in Ireland. As I said at the start, it is more than being just about legislation; it is about a systemic, cultural shift we are making in Ireland. Some of the feedback we have given on the legislation relates in particular to removing some of the misconceptions about remote work, building in opportunities to identify solutions and coming up with ways to address some of the challenges so companies will not just say they will not allow remote work because of all the challenges we list. It is a matter of having a bit of a driver and support for companies to help them in overcoming those challenges.

I can talk a little about Grow Remote's work. At our heart, we are a local community development organisation that advocates remote work as a driver of community development. We have a very broad community of members, who are local people all over the country and beyond who come together in person as well as online. Much of this is about solving the social isolation that remote working can cause. We have chapters in towns and villages all over Ireland whose members meet up, get to know each other and engage in local activities. Our chapters, which are groups of remote workers around the country, are also very instrumental in promoting remote jobs available in their towns. They are almost like mini jobs boards in the towns around Ireland. They might ask people whether they know they can get a great job in

Shopify or eBay and do it from their locality. It is a matter of spreading the word and generating awareness. The chapters also play a key role in attracting people back to towns. They are trying to reinvigorate their local communities. Those are the three things our chapters are driving. Even though we are all about remote working, we are actually very focused on face-to-face, offline community activity because we regard remote work as the lever to enable it. Owing to the additional time remote work gives and because it enables people to stay in their town, members of local communities will have the time and space to meet up, contribute to the local GAA club or join Tidy Towns.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I thank Ms Mangan and Mr. Hegarty for their very comprehensive reports. I am a fan of remote working. It offers a great opportunity, particularly around the regions. Anything that reduces people's commuting time has to be welcomed in promoting a green environment. May I ask a couple of questions? Ms Mangan said her organisation is surveying people on remote working and remote-working hubs all around the country. Has it surveyed the types of employment that lend themselves to remote working and specifically the types that do not? Is there an opportunity to see if ways of working can be adapted? I know some cannot and, for instance, a forklift driver is very unlikely to be remote working any time soon. Where do the witnesses think that is going? How will we produce graduates in the future who are going to be oriented to the idea of moving into jobs that have a high technology component that probably lend themselves to remote working? That is the first point.

The second point is that I think blended working is where we are going to arrive at the finish. Most businesses will find there are benefits to both remote working and having people in the workplace for all of the reasons that were mentioned, such as access to the boss, access to promotion, being visible and being seen doing what they are doing. I believe blended working is the way to go and, therefore, it brings up the whole issue of trying to get broadband rolled out nationally to give people an offering. I would like an answer to those points.

On a point that has come up at the committee previously, Mr. Hegarty's company is 100% remote, as he pointed out. Does he have any issues around the idea of employee liability where an employee might suffer an accident in the workplace while working from home? Has he had any issues in that regard and could he outline any of those? Those are my two questions.

Ms Joanne Mangan: On the first question, in our survey, which is our map of remote employees and their employers around Ireland, we do ask the type of work the person is doing, so that data are something we will have available and that we are building on. There has been other research in this area. I cannot recall the organisation that did research on the types of jobs that can be done remotely - it was a consultancy, perhaps Deloitte or some company like that - but I can look it up after this meeting. As to what types of employment are more suitable to remote working, it did identify that it is more the knowledge jobs. We also see this at Grow Remote because we have a remote jobs board and we just recently launched a new one. Through the data from last year, we were able to pull what types of jobs were being advertised there. It was still quite heavily weighted towards tech jobs, that is, jobs in the technology sector, in software engineering and in data, and so on, but growing more and more are jobs in other sectors such as marketing, legal and sales. One very fast-growing area is customer service and support, and Shopify, HubSpot and eBay are good examples of companies with quite large customer support teams. A lot of that is moving to remote because these are jobs where the person is on the phone or email all day and does not have to be co-located with the customer, and as it is all done virtually, it can be done from anywhere.

Obviously, there are jobs that cannot be done remotely but, as I mentioned, we also need to

keep an open mind about not boxing certain jobs into a non-remote box because what we are not seeing yet is the jobs such as administrative and secretarial jobs. What we would love to see is more of what we might call the more entry-level jobs and the less well-paid jobs becoming remote. What we definitely do not want to see is a type of two-tier inequality, where the really high-paying, high-quality, high-education and high-skills jobs are remote because there is a war for talent in that sector. We want to see companies being open-minded about making remote jobs available across the board if the job can be done remotely and if it is feasible to do so.

It is very important that graduates are upskilled and ready to adapt to remote working from day one. We have a training programme, Remote Work Ready, which we are developing right now to gear towards graduates. There are certain skills people need to learn to be able to work remotely. These are all very teachable and easy to pick up, but there are certain skills and a certain profile that people need to develop to be able to successfully work remotely.

I will pass on to Mr. Hegarty for the second question.

Mr. Finn Hegarty: I want to make a point on the first question. There was a statement around blended or hybrid work being the future but that having people come into the office is going to help them get promotion because they get that visibility. That was definitely a challenge that we faced when we had that hybrid structure in that our remote workers felt they did not have that visibility, they were out of sight, out of mind, and they were being overlooked for promotion. We had to shift our performance management and the way we made promotions in order to not have that bias for people who were not in the office or in person even some of the time. That is a deliberate change we had to make to put everyone on that level playing field. Even as we made that shift to hybrid, that was something we had to change because we did not want to create the stigma that people who are outside the office are not going to progress in their careers at the same time.

On the Deputy's question on liability, when new joiners come on board, on an annual basis we do health and safety assessments for their workspace and where they are working. We have insurance which covers us for home workers and we have various controls around security to make sure we are protected when folks are out of the office. Fortunately, we have not had any incidents where someone has had an accident in the home but that is definitely an area we need to do more research on regarding who is liable in that instance - for example, if someone is making a cup of coffee and slips, are we liable? That is the sort of issue we are still doing a bit more research on.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I have one final question. It was said that the six-month period is potentially a barrier that is causing people to be hoovered up by companies which are offering remote working. Is there a halfway house? I wonder is it fair to ask employers who are taking on new hires to immediately offer them a remote working opportunity if they have not seen them operating within the business and if they have not got their feet under the table to some degree. Is that something that is achievable within three months? I can understand the reason the six months is there but I can also understand the point made by Grow Remote that it is potentially creating a recruitment challenge. Would a halfway house of three months perhaps meet the needs of both parties?

Ms Joanne Mangan: It still opens the question of the practicality of that person having to be in the office for the first three months where he or she may not be living in that area, so I would still question the need. I would go back to my original point about the misconception that it is too hard to onboard a new hire remotely. I know a lot of people started new jobs in the

last two years completely remotely and they are probably only now travelling into the office and seeing their colleagues for the first time face to face, which is not ideal either. To go back to what we were talking about earlier, it is important in the onboarding stage or the ramp-up stage that a new hire actually gets to meet, where possible, face-to-face with his or her manager and team, but that does not necessarily mean the person needs to be in the office every day for that first three months. As I said, people do not have to be 100% remote and not meet face-to-face. That social interaction, collaboration and opportunity to meet are important. People get more out of a half-hour face-to-face meeting than they might do over a week on virtual, and I know that myself from our team. Giving opportunities to meet is one thing but I would still question the need to have it in the legislation as a specific time period.

Senator Marie Sherlock: On a question to Ms Mangan, a huge part of the conversation today is that remote work was a much smaller feature pre-pandemic and is going to be a much larger feature of the world of work in future years. A key enabler of that is the availability of artificial intelligence, AI. I see that 23% of Irish enterprises rely on artificial intelligence or use artificial intelligence, which I think is the highest rate across all EU member states. That says something in itself. The conversation today is very much about promoting remote work but my particular interest is about protecting workers in the context of remote work. I would be interested to hear the perspective of Ms Mangan and Mr. Hegarty on the need to introduce projections for how artificial intelligence is used with regard to how workers are managed, in particular because AI has transformed how work is managed in some instances, though not in all. Do the witnesses believe there is a need to set down legislative protections for workers in that regard and, by extension, ensure that remote working can become an even greater and more accepted feature of the world of work in this country?

Ms Joanne Mangan: I have a clarifying question. When Senator Sherlock says “AI” does she mean the use of employee monitoring tools?

Senator Marie Sherlock: Precisely.

Ms Joanne Mangan: Earlier I spoke about trust and monitoring tools. The use of technology to monitor employee activity goes against everything I said about trust. We would not be supportive of companies that use this technology. There are many questions around data privacy and security, particularly with regard to working from home. People are in the background when people are being monitored through cameras. There is the privacy of the people in the background to take into account. I would be very hesitant to recommend any type of monitoring tool.

I can only speak from my experience, which is that in Ireland it is not used in any real widespread way by the companies we work with. Luckily in Ireland we have GDPR regulations. We have some legislation in place to protect in terms of the use of these technologies and privacy. I would not be in favour of it. At Grow Remote we support the idea that people trust their employees. Give employees targets and outline and communicate well what is expected of them. Give them the support and guidance they need. Employers should make sure they take care of employees and give them plenty of opportunities to interact with the manager or teams and they will get their work done. That is all employers need to do rather than breathing down people’s necks virtually. It is the same idea as breathing down their necks in the office. That is also bad management practice.

Senator Marie Sherlock: I was going to ask about the extent. Traditional management skills are still very much needed. Does Mr. Hegarty have anything to add on this?

Mr. Finn Hegarty: We are also against monitoring. It goes back to Ms Mangan's point on trust. We create a culture of trust. One of our values is that we trust our team. We do not manage whether they are online from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. We measure people on outputs and achieving results. It is not about the number of hours they clock up during the day. It is about getting the tasks done and getting the results. It is not easy. We have had managers who came from an environment where they were co-located and then they had to go into a remote environment. They may have been a micromanager or sat next to the team. They have to make a shift to trust the team and measure on output and not necessarily monitor their every hour or wonder why they are not getting a response at 3 p.m. People's days are much more flexible now. This is a key element. We are against any monitoring or using such tools. We use tools to better collaborate and better communicate in the remote and hybrid world but not anything on the monitoring side.

Senator Marie Sherlock: There was a conversation earlier with regard to the use of hubs. We need to see an increase in the number of hubs throughout the country. Of course there is concern among some that remote work is an attempt to fragment workplaces or that hubs would displace the office. I want to be crystal clear. Does Ms Mangan see hubs as a complement to the office as opposed to a substitute for the office?

Ms Joanne Mangan: More of a complement. The hybrid model would be not necessarily a replacement. There is always a place for the office and many companies will retain their offices. As I also said, many companies will let go their premises. We have heard of many companies that have already done this and have decided to make the move to going remote. The hub brings in another place to work. People think working remotely means working from home but it does not. Home is one place people can work. Working remotely means working without a specific location. A hub is a good option and it complements the home. It also complements the office. There is no ideal model I can share today. Grow Remote is very much in favour of fully remote working. If the job can be fully remote it means people can live in their community. Many companies are trying different approaches. Some companies use a hub plus home model. Some companies use a home plus office model. We even have some that use an office plus hub plus home model. It adds another option. It is a really good option for people where the office is too far away or where they do not want to travel to the office every day but where their home is not necessarily a suitable location or where they want to meet people in the local area.

Senator Marie Sherlock: The experience of the past two years has demonstrated that remote working can function very successfully in certain enterprises. In the Bill before us there is no recognition of this past experience. In our Bill on the right to flexible work we speak about using the experience of flexible work as a ground to enable workers. Would this be useful to ensure that greater numbers of workers can access remote working?

Ms Joanne Mangan: There are things we can learn from the past two years that could be brought into consideration in the legislation. This would be more leaning towards the experience employees have had and how much they want to continue working remotely. How this is embedded in the legislation I cannot say but it is something that needs to be taken into account when the legislation is being finalised. It is something that employees want. Many employees are afraid they will be brought back to their office and they will not have a right or recourse to be able to say they cannot do so. Over the past year we have learned that remote working can work. It has surprised everybody how much they have found it to be beneficial to their work-life balance and all of the other positive issues I spoke about. We can also learn from the past two years how not to do it. It was dropped on everybody in a last-minute emergency. People

just packed up their desks and went home. Many companies tried to take the office and put it in the home. We are not starting from the beginning because we know it can work and we have learned a lot from the past two years. It has brought us to a place that could have taken 20 years for us to get to. This momentum was happening but it was happening slowly. Perhaps the lessons that can be learned from the past two years is to look at some of the challenges that companies have had and try to figure out why they have had those challenges. Is it because of remote work itself or because of the situation they were put in? This is a very important question when we are looking at the reasons for refusal in particular.

Deputy David Stanton: A paradigm shift is occurring. I have listened to Mr. Hegarty speak about trust between the workforce and employers. Building up a relationship is hugely important. It gets away from the old confrontational model that was there in the past and from the monitoring model. I have detected this among younger workers in particular in the technology sector. It is important and underpins what the witnesses are speaking about.

There are 13 grounds whereby an employer can refuse. I agree that a lot of them are nonsense and we need to change them. One of them is the burden of additional costs and the witnesses alluded to this in their introduction. It is to take into account the financial and other costs entailed and the scale and financial resources of the employer's business. Will the witnesses comment on this? If somebody is to work from home or from a hub there are costs involved in both instances. Is it expected that the employer would supply chairs, desks, computers, printers and whatever else would be needed for the employees? This would be not just for one employee but for many who are working remotely. The witnesses have also alluded to the cost of renting space in a hub, which can be substantial over time. Some of the hubs have to pay rates, which is causing a big problem for their own financial viability. Will the witnesses comment on the cost implications of this? We know that employees do not have to travel to work so they do not have this cost. In some instances it may very well be that a family might end up with just one car rather than two. There are savings there. Has work being done on this side of it and how it might be balanced and whose responsibilities lie where?

Ms Joanne Mangan: This is a very good question. Over the coming year we will see more cost-benefit analysis on remote working, which is needed,. It is not quite clear. Take the example of individuals working from home. Are the additional costs they may have in terms of their electricity and heating offset by the fact they do not have to commute and they do not have to pay for their lunch? We can get into a lot of granular detail on the potential savings. For the company, the answer to the question is "Yes". There is an upfront cost in setting up people to work remotely. If they work in their home, it is common practice in most companies to provide employees with everything needed to do so, including a laptop, monitor, mouse, keyboard, and usually a desk and chair. At the start of the pandemic, companies were not providing the desk and chair, for example, but as time evolved, they realised from a health and safety point of view they had to make sure their employees had a decent place to work and a good chair to sit on. Mr. Hegarty may talk about this as well, but most companies offer a stipend for employees to purchase the equipment or provide the equipment. It depends on the size of the company. Larger companies provide it and send it out when the employee starts. Smaller companies may give the employee some money. The stipend can vary. I have seen figures varying from €300 to €1,500 per employee, depending on the size of the organisation.

The Deputy is correct about the hub. There is a cost for space in a hub and hubs face additional costs. That is something to consider. We need to work out the business case. The business case for remote working has not been worked out in terms of the economics. There is

an upfront cost, but also potential cost saving for the business in terms of office space and rates paid on that space, which are significant, and in terms of better retention and less attrition, sick days and absenteeism, which we see with remote working. There are many variables. As we move forward and get into a more steady state with remote working, more work will be done on figuring out what the business case is. We are happy to work with companies and some of our partner companies to try to figure it out. We are keen to get started on that.

Deputy David Stanton: Maybe it is something for ESRI to do. Mr. Hegarty alluded in response to a question from my colleague, Senator Ahearn, to the health and safety aspects of this. He also mentioned that his company had an insurance policy to cover something that might happen in the home. We have come across instances where the employer has the right to inspect the workplace, which is a person's home. Has that come up in Ms Mangan's experience, and will she speak to it?

Ms Joanne Mangan: Most employers of which I am aware fulfil the criteria of making sure the employee is well set up from a health and safety perspective by doing virtual inspections as opposed to physically attending. I do not think there is a need for the employer to attend the person's home. It can be done virtually and the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, has guidance on its website on how to do health and safety ergonomic assessments and checks. Most companies we work with do it through the employee self-assessing, taking pictures and sending them in. If any flags come up from that, the employer is required to take action and they give education and training around best practice for health and safety.

Having said that, and Mr. Hegarty will probably have a similar comment, there is a gap in the guidance for remote companies on health and safety. We have been asked how to build a health and safety statement remotely, which is a challenge, as opposed to being in the office. Further work could be done, maybe by the HSA, to provide more guidance for companies. Many companies are worried about the health and safety aspect, particularly because over the past two years it was an emergency situation and may have been more lax. Now that things are moving into a place where this is a more permanent sustainable option for working, it is important to make sure employees' health and safety is taken care of and that employers are confident they are ticking boxes and ensuring their employees are safe.

Deputy David Stanton: A new hire signing a contract and becoming employed by a company would have conditions that may include the right to work remotely initially. I am puzzled about the six-months business. A new hire may negotiate that from the outset so I am not sure how important that is.

The twelfth one is: "Employee is the subject of ongoing or recently concluded formal disciplinary processes". Will Ms Mangan give her views on that reason for an employer not to accede to a request to work remotely?

Ms Joanne Mangan: Is that when there is a disciplinary issue?

Deputy David Stanton: Yes.

Ms Joanne Mangan: This is another one where we have a question mark as to whether it is necessary. It goes back to the idea of the need to default to the office when something goes wrong or in order to do certain things. In a remote-first setting, you should not need to default to the office. Performance management issues will not necessarily be solved simply by bringing the employee in, sitting them in front of you and giving them a talking to or whatever is

envisaged by this part of the legislation. Ideally, in a remote-first setting there are management practices and culture, and the managers are able to handle performance management issues in that setting. It is good to have the option of being able to meet, but I do not think it needs to be called out specifically in the legislation because it reinforces the idea that the office is the best and when things go wrong, we need to default to the office.

Deputy David Stanton: Is Ms Mangan aware of any large companies building remote working spaces or hubs or thinking of doing so? I refer to companies with thousands of employees, many of them travelling every day. Would she encourage such companies, who have, as she said earlier, substantial resources, to invest in rural towns and build remote working spaces for their employees?

Ms Joanne Mangan: Companies that we work with have not built them but they have regional offices. For example, Liberty Insurance has a couple of offices around the country, as does the ESB. Some of the banks are using their regional premises and branches as hubs for their employees. I am not aware of a large company planning to build a hub. Shopify, since before the pandemic, uses local hubs and premises, such as hotels, to bring employees together. As Mr. Hegarty talked about, it has clusters of employees around the country and it bring them in. That could be a good approach and a great way of investing in the region, and any opportunity for the employees to meet is always a positive thing.

Senator Garret Ahearn: The first question is for Mr. Hegarty and concerns workers' rights for people who are not in Ireland. The EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, was before the committee a couple of months ago. I asked him about people who want to remote work, for example, somebody in the Algarve in Portugal working for a company in Ireland. Is there a challenge going forward in respect of their employment rights being in a different jurisdiction? Has Mr. Hegarty come across any challenges in that area? He said approximately 50% of his staff were outside Ireland. The Commissioner said in his contribution that the EU did not want to change employment rights in each country, which means they will be all different. Is that a challenge for his company?

Mr. Finn Hegarty: Certain companies hire remotely as individual contractors so someone in the Algarve would be seen as an individual contractor as opposed to a permanent employee. They would not get the benefits of holidays or anything else. In certain markets we have entities, so we employ them as PAYE folks locally. Where we do not have an entity, we rely on third parties. For example, *Remote.com* or the Irish company Boundless enable that support. We can hire locally through those entities or intermediaries and that gives us the benefit. These folks are seen as employees so they have rights based on their local global employment organisation, GEO. If they are individual contractors, their rights differ in those countries. We have not seen any issues like that over the years. We hire them as PAYE employees and pay local tax in each market, as opposed to hiring them as individual contractors.

Senator Garret Ahearn: When Ms Mangan spoke about challenges relating to the hybrid model and the way it works in the home, I connected with much of it. In my household, my wife was working from home five days per week for almost two years. She works for a wind energy company in Cork as an accountant. As people have gone back to work, her company has been good in providing four days at home and one at work. It gives the right to disconnect, as well as the opportunity to manage your own hours in some ways. In my household, it is common for work to start before a child wakes up. Remote working gives that opportunity.

We need legislation probably because we cannot rely on trust. People who are currently in

that hybrid model have told me they almost work over the hours because they do not want to lose the remote working balance they have. They have seen the opportunity it brings and its positive changes in their whole life structure. My area of Tipperary is approximately an hour away from four cities. For the past 20 years, we have seen cars parked just off a motorway and people carpooling or otherwise travelling to Cork every day. Many people used to have a round trip of two and a half or three hours each day. They consider the extra work they might be doing in the morning or evening to be a counteraction to the travelling to work that they used to do. They do not really see it as extra work. They decide to do it themselves but the companies are benefiting on the back of that. The employees feel as though they are benefiting on the back of that because they do not wish to lose the option of remote working. Have our guests experienced that with employees? We speak about the right to disconnect and it is really important but there is a hesitance for employees sometimes because they do not wish to lose what they believe has been an advantage in recent years.

Ms Joanne Mangan: Absolutely. It is a good point. Anecdotally, it does seem to be the case that for some people the additional time they are getting back from their commute is being used to work. It goes back to the point that we need to make a cultural shift and not look at remote working as a gift, benefit or favour an employer is giving to individual employees. Remote work is not simply another benefit like health insurance or a gym membership; it is a culture and within that culture one has flexibility. The onus is on employers to ensure they build that culture internally so their employees know this is not just a favour they are getting for good behaviour; it is the way the company works. In that way, employees do not need to feel like they have to work the extra hours but, rather, those hours are for them. We in Grow Remote feel strongly about the potential of that extra time and are in the process of working on a project to capture the additional time people have, how they are spending it and whether they are spending it in their local community. Yesterday, the Western Development Commission and NUI Galway released a survey that I completed yesterday evening. One of the questions asks how the respondent is spending the time saved on commuting. It is important that we capture that because if people are spending that time working, it is work the employer is getting for free and the employee is not benefiting. A cultural change is needed at the level of the employer. It needs to be clearly articulated to the employee that this is not something that will be taken away again but, rather, it is systemic and normal that one works remotely and it is part of our culture, so there is no need for an employee to do any juggling or bells and whistles to make sure an employer does not take it away. Employees should not have that worry.

Senator Garret Ahearn: It is a strange situation. Both the employee and the employer feel like they are winning here. The employer sees the employee is working the hours they were formerly spending driving, while the employee feels that at least he or she is not driving and is saving money as a result. People who used to drive from Clonmel are saving more than €100 a week, especially given the current increased costs.

Ms Joanne Mangan: I am not considering telling people how to spend their time. If they wish to spend that time working, that is completely up to them. It may be that they are enjoying their job and want to put some extra time in. However, as a cultural shift, we need to move away from the idea that the employee has been gifted this time by his or her employer and needs to give something back in response. We are looking for a cultural shift.

Senator Garret Ahearn: Could hubs make a difference in that regard? If an employee is going to a hub rather than working from home, the normal 9 to 5 work time kind of falls back into place for him or her. Employees may currently be working for an hour at home before the

child gets up and doing an hour after 8 p.m. when the child goes to bed. If one goes to a hub, however, it feels like one is going into a workplace even though it is just the local town. The employee kind of goes back to some sort of normality. Hubs can bring that sort of advantage in managing one's work.

Ms Joanne Mangan: They can. They can bring structure for parents in particular, who may wish to have a separation of work and life and may like to be in a hub away from home where they can focus on their job. It all comes down to choice. It is still important, however, that the time people are getting back from their commute, which for some can be two hours a day and really adds up, is time they should be spending doing something for themselves. It is their own time. We are discussing work-life balance and the benefits remote working brings. It is not really helping employee's work-life balance if there is an expectation on the part of the employer that the employee will spend that time working or that the employee feels pressured to work that way. It comes back to the idea of the right to disconnect. It is tricky because one wants to give people who wish to work early in the morning the opportunity to do that while also ensuring they understand they can switch off when they need to do so.

Mr. Finn Hegarty: I will chime in on one point because it is important to recognise that people who are outside the office may tend to compensate for not being visible. As the Senator stated, they are working the time they got back from the commute. The challenge we have seen through the years is that leads to burnout. We are back to Ms Mangan's point on the right to disconnect. We encourage employees to see the time they get back as being time for them rather than for us. In the long run, employees who work for that time will end up burnt out. Productivity has certainly improved for us through the time and it is not because we have gotten those hours back from people's commutes. It is the flexibility we are giving people to work when they want and changing the culture in getting used to asynchronous communication. Employees do not have to respond to an email after working hours but, rather, can reply when they wish to do so and when it works for them.

Senator Marie Sherlock: On the important conversation in respect of the right to disconnect, there is no doubt that workers are compensating. It is great to hear what Mr. Hegarty and Ms Mangan are saying in respect of all this. Of course, we know that, effectively, for many people the experience has not so much been working from home but, rather, living in the office. The main concern is that some workers need to take the onus themselves to be able to switch off but for others that the onus is not on them; they are pressurised into working late hours, very early mornings, weekends or whatever without compensation. The Labour Party brought forward legislative proposals in November 2020 on a right to disconnect and we still believe we need to have that in legislation.

Obviously, leadership is important, particularly from Departments and the public service. It is important to state that from the accounts I am getting in from various workers across the public sector, some Departments have been very good but others, including the sponsoring Department of this legislation, could do a lot better. I am thinking of two other Departments in particular whose record has been very poor, frankly, in facilitating workers who wish to work remotely. It is important to put on record that Departments need to show greater leadership. There is an onus on them to show leadership because we cannot expect the private sector to step up to the mark if the public sector itself is not doing so.

Ms Joanne Mangan: The public sector needs to lead by example. A job in the public sector is considered a Holy Grail for many people. It is a great job for life but, as the public sector lags behind and the private sector moves forward with remote working, one may find some people

working in the public sector think they do not have the flexibility they need or the opportunity to work from home. There is a risk that staff will begin to think about leaving the public sector. It is important that remote working is embraced in the public sector as much as it has been in the private sector.

Deputy Matt Shanahan: I have a couple of observations and a question for Mr. Hegarty. Ms Mangan referenced several times the work of the Western Development Commission in the context of applied research that is feeding into the research of Grow Remote. It is a hobby horse of mine that I have been asking the Government to support the development of a south-eastern development commission but we have not got any traction on that. It shows the importance of regionalised applied research. That may be a message our guests will convey to their members.

Irish Small and Medium Employers, ISME, wrote to the committee this morning to make a couple of points. It asked the committee to be mindful of the impact of the legislation on small businesses and noted that 96% of Irish businesses employ 19 people or fewer. When we are talking about the public sector and large FDI employers it is important to remember that we are talking about large employer criteria there.

One of the points that ISME raised was that of back-office functions that can be done remotely outside Ireland. Does Mr. Hegarty see the possibility that companies switching to remote working would start to look at in terms of individual cost silos? They might look at employing five people in Ireland or they might potentially look at employing five people in eastern Europe who have good English because of the cost benefits. Does Mr. Hegarty want to comment on that? Is that something he is seeing? I presume that companies that are very profit driven are looking at siloing out back-office operations through remote working.

Mr. Finn Hegarty: From our perspective, we hire in clusters and we do not look to offshore any back-office functions. Even before the shift to remote working and before the pandemic, people were outsourcing, off-shoring or near-shoring work anyway. What we do is really about creating a culture and whether we keep hiring in Ireland, that would be the main driver. It is not something we are focusing on right now, to look for efficiencies through off-shoring. It is not something we are investigating.

Chairman: Deputy O'Connor is next.

Deputy James O'Connor: It has been really interesting to hear everybody's contributions and the submissions of our guests today. Remote working is very much part and parcel of modern-day life. It was a growing trend anyway but obviously it was increased incredibly by the onset of Covid-19. While there are so many different benefits to it from a work-life balance point of view, especially for young parents who may wish to spend a little bit more time at home, obviously there are challenges too. I would like to hear the perspective of our guests on a number of issues.

My primary concern is around having the workplace in the home, through remote working or in remote working hubs, where people are not necessarily in an office setting in the traditional sense. Has any research been undertaken, either by Grow Remote or Glofox, to indicate there is a concern around employees being able to switch off? People are entitled to be able to leave their workspace and to have the time off to which they are entitled. This is a concern when it comes to remote working in that people are, essentially, always switched on.

Ms Joanne Mangan: In terms of working from home and the blurring of the lines between

home life and work life, it is definitely a factor that we have discussed previously. There is an onus on the employee and the employer to make sure this does not happen. Remote working is a different way of working and it does require a different way of thinking on the part of the employee. It requires people to be a little bit more self-motivated but also more disciplined in terms of structuring their own time. I have talked a lot about trust but with trust comes the need to be able to manage one's time effectively, take breaks and make sure one is adhering the time for work and making sure there is a separation between home life and work life. That can be a little bit more difficult in the home.

I have talked to friends about remote working and told them that I do not have someone to come and tell me that it is time to stop for lunch because I work from my home and I am on my own in my house during the day. Employees need to be careful about that. There are different steps people can take. Some of Mr. Hegarty's employees might do this and we have heard of other companies where people do a fake commute by going for a walk in the morning before they start working, they take a walk on their lunch break and are very disciplined about leaving their work space. Having a separate workspace is ideal, if one can do that, and then close the door on it at the end of the working day.

There are some things the employee can do but there is also a huge onus on the employer to make sure people are switching off. It can be a little bit more challenging for managers of a remote team because they do not always know that their employees are looking a little bit stressed because they do not see them all of the time, every day. Therefore, it is really important to have a lot of one-to-one time with them. In a remote setting, managers need to over-communicate. That does not necessarily mean back-to-back Zoom calls all day long but just checking in with employees on a regular basis. People managers need to check in every day with members of their team, even if that is just a voice message or WhatsApp note asking how they are or how they are getting on. Regular one-to-one communication is really important.

Deputy James O'Connor: That is interesting. I am 24 years old and many of my friends and colleagues are going into the working world for the first time after completing higher education. One thing that many have really missed out on, particularly at the very outset of their career, has been that introduction into the workspace. They were not able to have induction sessions with their employers throughout Covid and obviously the birth of mass remote working, which we are now seeing internationally, is having an impact. I would question the current standard practice by a lot of firms that are offering remote jobs. Many are allowing their employees to leave Ireland and work in other locations. This is becoming quite common and is having a detrimental impact on people who are going into a working environment for the first time. I make that point to the witnesses, having spoken to people who are just starting out in work. They are losing out on that face-to-face engagement with their managers. Perhaps we need guidelines rather than legislation around this because the latter would be too prescriptive but it is important that the Government looks at this matter.

When it comes to the provision of broadband, has any research been undertaken on how many people engaged in remote working are having significant issues with broadband connections? Is it more of a problem in rural areas? Are there any statistics available on that? Obviously, there is a big difference between areas that have access to high-speed broadband and those, mostly rural areas, that do not. My own constituency has quite poor broadband infrastructure outside of the main towns. Obviously that is having an impact on people who want to engage in remote working. I invite our guest to answer that question.

Ms Joanne Mangan: I do not have statistics on broadband connectivity or on where there

may be broadband issues. I can only speak anecdotally to what some of our community members and the people we work with would say, which is that there are areas of the country where broadband is still an issue. Some members of our chapters in Dublin would even say that they sometimes have trouble with their broadband. Outside of the cities and in some of our more rural locations, there are definitely gaps in service which really hinders people's ability to work remotely. People need to have adequate broadband to be able to work remotely. It is really important. We are doing a remote call here today but if we had issues with broadband, this meeting could not have gone ahead. It is critically important to have good broadband. Obviously the national broadband plan is being rolled out and we hope that it will be expedited so that everyone in the country has access to high-quality, fast broadband because it is really essential. It was surprising for me to hear Mr. Hegarty talking about working on Achill Island. We have a lot of chapters in Donegal, a couple in Dingle and in west Cork. There are some areas where there is really great broadband, places where one would not expect that to be the case. It is really about making sure that it is consistent and available equally to everyone, wherever they need it.

Deputy James O'Connor: Another interesting issue identified by Ms Mangan in her opening statement relates to the legislation that has been proposed. She referred to the eligibility criteria and the provision on requests for remote working being submitted after 26 weeks. I ask her to elaborate on that. I think it is quite a sensible provision although obviously it is not applicable in all walks of life. It is just not an option for certain employers and certain industries. In general, however, I think it is quite a clever idea but I understand that it is a concern for Ms Mangan so I invite her to elaborate on that.

Ms Joanne Mangan: The main concern in that regard would be around the idea that remote working should remove location as a barrier to employment. People should be able to access good quality, decent employment regardless of where they are living. If they have to spend the first six months with a new company in its office and that office is not nearby, then in the first instance, they probably will not apply for that job if that condition was included in the job description. It would really make life difficult for people if they had to relocate for the first six months. If people are looking for a remote job and they want to work remotely, it would be very off-putting to have to be in the office for the first six months.

I understand there is an issue from the perspective of younger workers, those in their 20s who are just starting out in their careers. We hear feedback on that from our partners and Mr. Hegarty from Glofox mentioned as well about hiring graduates, onboarding them and ramping them up when it is their first job. It can be a little more challenging in a remote setting because one does not get the immersion in the office and the first day when a recruit is brought around to meet everybody.

Companies really need to be very deliberate and plan a really strong onboarding process. It does not even start from the first day; it starts even before that. We see good practice in companies where they engage with new hires from the day they are told they have the job. They even try to facilitate some meet-ups with new team members and the recruits might meet their manager a couple of times before they start if they are willing to do that. From day one they have a really strong onboarding, which includes ensuring they get time with everyone they need to meet and they have access to the information they need. That is the level required and there should also be opportunities to meet face to face, as we have spoken about a few times. If a few colleagues live in a person's area, the company might provide a budget to meet for a coffee or beer or something in the evening. The people would still meet and interact in a remote scenario.

Having those kinds of opportunities is really important but I reiterate my point about it being possible to onboard and ramp up a new hire remotely if the process is done well.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank Ms Mangan for the information, which is very helpful. I hope the irony is not lost on the witnesses that I am in my office and I should have come downstairs to the committee room. This has been a really interesting conversation and the debate is certainly not going away. I thank the witnesses.

Chairman: As nobody else has indicated a wish to speak, that concludes our consideration of today's topic. I thank the representatives from Grow Remote and Glofox, Ms Mangan and Mr. Hegarty, for their assistance to the committee in its consideration of this important matter. The committee will consider it further as soon as possible.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.42 a.m. and adjourned at 12.03 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 4 May 2022.