Is the Office Dying?

Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024

Alan Felstead, Rhys Davies, Duncan Gallie, Francis Green, Golo Henseke and Ying Zhou

HEADLINES

Before the pandemic interest in the location of work was, at best, modest, but during and after the pandemic interest spiked with claims that the office is dying. This report examines historical trends in those working exclusively at home (homeworkers) and those working partly in the office and partly at home (hybrid workers). It identifies which groups have been affected most/least and highlights the factors most closely associated with workers' ability to carve out dedicated spaces of work within the home to create a home office.

- When working at home around a quarter (27%) of people work on the kitchen table or in the dining room and a fifth (22%) have a workstation in the corner of a room. Less than half (45%) have a home office of their own. Those contributing more to the household budget, residents of larger homes and those spending more time using the home as a place of work are more likely to have the resources and space to create a home office. As a result, men are more likely than women to have a dedicated office, and women are more likely to work in spaces intended for other uses such as the kitchen or dining room.
- The proportion of workers using a fixed place of work – such as an office, factory or shop – has fallen to its lowest point in over 20 years. In 2001 around two-thirds (64%) worked in such places, but by 2024 the proportion had almost halved to less than two-fifths (38%).
- The growth in homeworking and hybrid working are responsible for this shift. Homeworking rose from 3% in 2001 to 13% in 2024, while hybrid working also rose sharply, jumping from 5% to 21% over this period.
- In 2024, there were 3.9 million homeworkers and 6.1 million hybrid workers. However, the shift in the location of work pre-dates the pandemic with hybrid working on an upward path since 2006.
- Nevertheless, the character of homeworking and hybrid working has changed since the pandemic. Both have grown sharply among employees and those working in higher skilled occupational groups. In addition, hybrid working has grown more rapidly among men than women. However, the location of work has not changed for many lower skilled workers who remain tied to working in places such as factories and shops.

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Department for Education, and the Advisory and Conciliation and Arbitration Service with additional funding from the Department for the Economy to extend the survey to Northern Ireland (ES/X007987/1).

1. The Importance of the Location of Work

Since the industrial revolution, there has been a sharp physical boundary between work and home. Workers left their homes to carry out their paid work in a place – such as an office, factory or shop – and returned home after their work was done. However, the pandemic meant that this dividing line became blurred for many more people overnight. But combining the worlds of work and home in the same place is not easy. It poses distinctive challenges for those doing the work, other household members with whom space is shared and employers who manage workers in places not under their control. The shifting of work into the home has other effects. Its continued prevalence has, for example, been linked to changing commuting patterns, variations in house prices, declining footfall in primary city centre locations and the rising popularity of shops, cafes and restaurants close to places of residence. In addition, more frivolous links have been made such as the fall in formal office attire, the increased popularity of casual wear and even the introduction of hose pipe bans during hot weather.

2. Previous Evidence

Estimates suggest that the share of the UK workforce reporting mainly working at home rose overnight from just over 6% to 43% when lockdown restrictions were suddenly put in place. These were, of course, dramatic and unprecedented times. While some high-profile companies have mandated staff to return to the office post-pandemic, many have sought to capture the best of worlds by allowing employees to work on a hybrid basis – working part of the time on the employer's premises and part of the time at home or elsewhere. In recognition of its increasing post-pandemic use, hybrid working was the *Economist*'s word of the year for 2022. Remote working is another popular post-pandemic term. It is used as a catch-all way of describing when work which could be done on employers' premises is carried out elsewhere – sometimes at home, sometimes not.

While bringing work into the home has captured the recent attention of media commentators, policy makers, practitioners and academics, it is not an entirely new phenomenon. For centuries, homeworking has flourished in some parts of the economy, such as in the clothing and footwear industries, where it was predominately carried out by women and sometimes family groups. This historic image is one of low paid, low skilled manual work carried out in cramped, dingy and unsafe surroundings, sometimes involving child labour. This type of homeworking continues to thrive today in less developed economies.

While there are benefits of working at home – such as more autonomy, being able to deal with family matters and avoiding commuting into work – there are costs. Those working at home are often connected to work for longer and are more likely to email or attend video conference calls outside of working hours. In addition, the pressures of work can spill over into non-work life with homeworkers reporting difficulties in being able to 'switch off'. This is particularly pronounced when work is carried out in spaces within the home otherwise used for domestic purposes such as on dining room tables, in kitchens, or in the corner of bedrooms.

A common fear among employers is that without physical oversight employees will shirk and productivity will fall. However, on the balance of evidence, homeworking during and since the pandemic does not appear to have had a significant effect on productivity levels either way. Nevertheless, since the pandemic, some high profile employers have insisted that employees return to the office, sometimes on a full-time basis. The overall effect of the shift of work into the home on pollution levels is also unclear. Although fewer people may be going to the office on a daily basis, many use cars for local journeys when previously they would have used less polluting buses or trains to get to work. In addition, using the home as a place to work means that poorly insulated homes are heated for longer. The working at home revolution has become hotly contested on many levels.

3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2024: A New Source of Evidence

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 (SES2024) allows us to examine the changing location of work in Britain. The complete survey consists of three parts: a face-to-face survey of working adults aged 20-65 years old in Britain; an online survey of eligible respondents living in Britain who agreed to join a panel of respondents recruited from previous NatCen surveys; and an online survey of eligible workers living in Northern Ireland. For this report, we focus on the face-to-face survey only, hence the findings present a picture of Britain in 2024. The sample for this survey was drawn using random probability principles stratified by several socio-economic indicators. Two eligible respondents per address were randomly selected for interview, 32% of those selected were interviewed and most were completed in 2024. All parts of the data collection process were directed by the research team and the fieldwork was carried out by NatCen.

SES2024 is the eighth in a series of nationally representative sample surveys of individuals in employment aged 20-60 years old (although the 2006, 2012, 2017 and 2024 surveys additionally sampled those aged 61-65). The numbers of face-to-face respondents were: 4,047 in the 1986 survey; 3,855 in 1992; 2,467 in 1997; 4,470 in 2001; 7,787 in 2006 (includes Northern Ireland); 3,200 in 2012; 3,306 in 2017; and 2,824 in 2024. Weights were computed for all surveys in the series. These correct for differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and response rate variations between groups (such as sex, age, occupation and qualification level). All the analyses that follow use these weights.

4. Indicators of the Location of Work

Using SES2024 we can differentiate between workers according to the extent to which their worlds of home and work overlap. Since 2001 respondents have been asked the same two location of work questions. The first asks: 'In your job, where do you mainly work?' There are five response options: 'at home; in the same grounds and buildings as home (e.g., in an adjoining property or surrounding land); at a single workplace away from home (e.g., office, factory or shop); in a variety of different places of work (e.g., working on clients' premises or in their homes); and working on the move (e.g., delivering products or people to different places)'. The second question asks: 'In the last seven days have you spent at least one full day working in any other places?'

Using these questions, we define *homeworkers* as those who reported that they mainly worked at home or in the same grounds and buildings as their home and did not report working anywhere else in the last seven days. For them, the worlds of home and work directly overlap. *Hybrid workers* are defined as those who reported that they mainly worked at home or in the same grounds and buildings, but that they had also worked in an office, factory or shop in the last seven days, hence the term hybrid. The definition also includes those who reported mainly working in a single workplace away from their home (such as an office, factory or shop), but that they had worked at home or in the grounds of their home in the last seven days. For these workers, the worlds of home and work overlap to the extent that work is done at home. The third category of workers are those who either mainly or for at least one day a week work in a variety of places or work on the move. We refer to these as *mobile workers*. Finally, we define *fixed place workers* whose main place of work was a single workplace away from the home and they reported working nowhere else in the last week. For them, the worlds of work and home are spatially separate and distinct.

The 2024 survey also included a series of follow-on questions not previously asked in the series. For example, respondents were asked in what type of space in the home they worked. Four options were given: 'have your own home office'; 'share your home office with someone else'; 'have a permanent workstation but not a home office'; and 'work in spaces also intended for other uses (e.g., kitchen, dining table)'. These different response options indicate the degree to which work and home overlap when work is brought into the home. Recreating spatial separation is at one extreme and working at the kitchen table is at the other. The proportion of working time spent working at home also varies and along with it the challenges faced by bringing work into the home. This is captured by asking respondents to think about the last month and estimate the proportion of time they spent working at home.

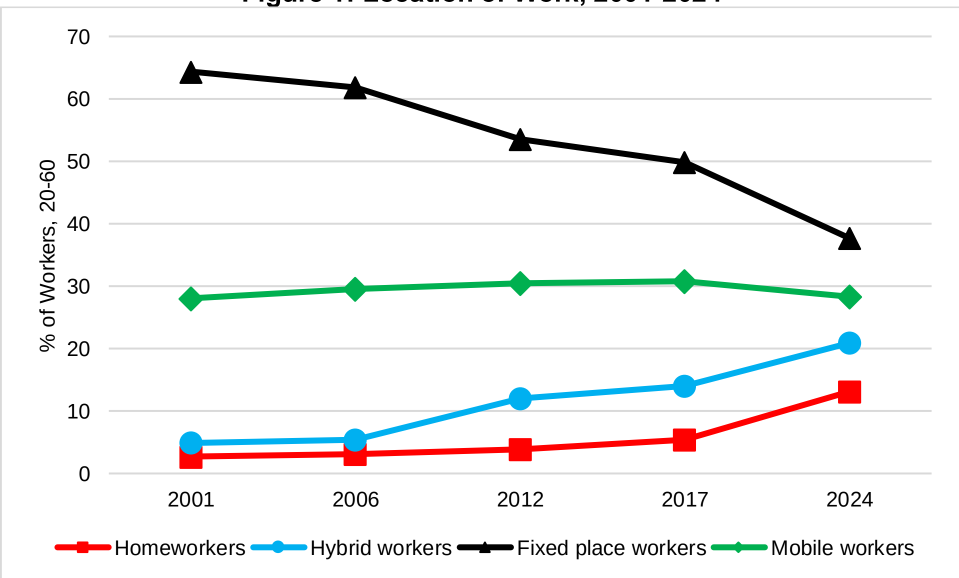
5. Findings

Trends in the Location of Work

Interest in the changing location of work rose sharply during the pandemic when millions of workers were told to work at home if they could, many experiencing working and living under the same roof for the first time. However, Figure 1 suggests that this change was well underway before the pandemic began. The proportion of workers reporting that they worked in a single workplace has been declining ever since respondents were first asked about where they worked. In 2001 around two-thirds (64%) worked in fixed places of work, in 2017 around a half of British workers did so, and by 2024 the proportion had fallen to less than two-fifths (38%) – its lowest point ever. Despite the growth in delivery services, mobile working remained relatively stable at around 30% throughout this period. However, it should be noted that many who work as delivery drivers in the gig economy, for example, do so as a second job. Information on these second jobs is not collected by the survey.

Overall, this evidence suggests that our image of the workplace as a fixed place of work such as office, factory or shop needs to change as it is no longer the norm. The decline has been long running but has accelerated since the pandemic.

Figure 1: Location of Work, 2001-2024

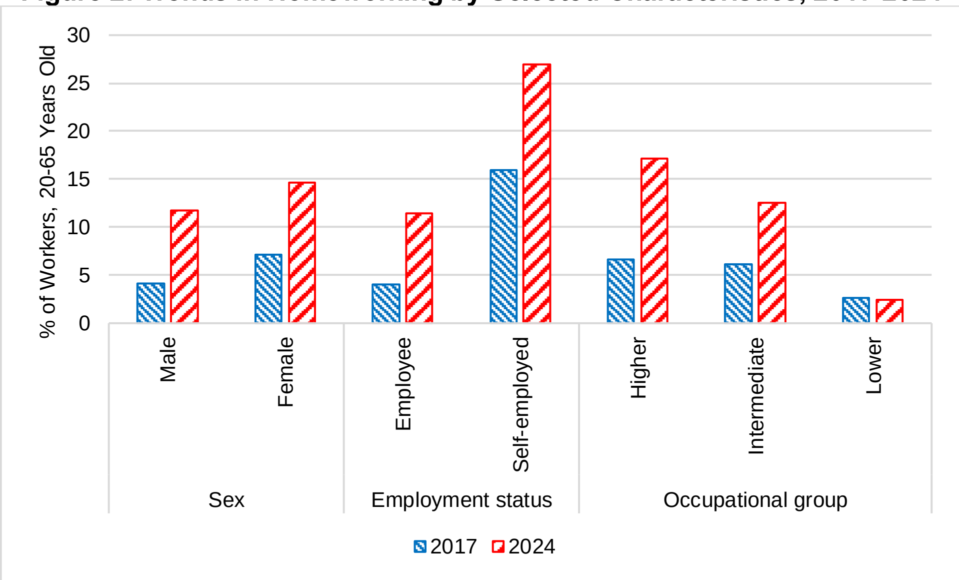


The growth in homeworking and hybrid working are responsible for this shift. In 2024, around a third of workers were using the home as a workplace with 13% homeworkers and 21% hybrid workers. However, the data also show that the shift pre-dates the Covid-19 lockdowns with a big pick-up in hybrid working before the pandemic.

Patterns of Change

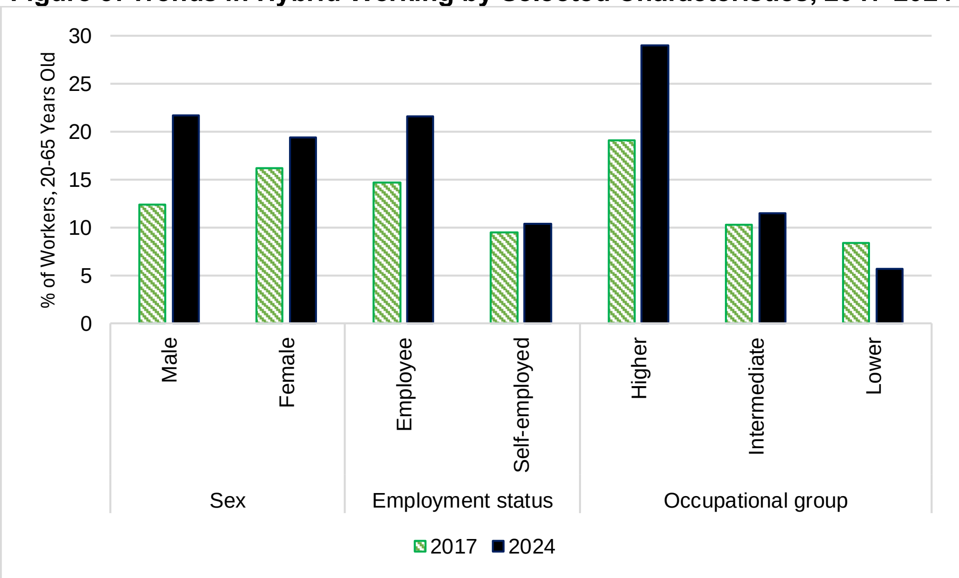
However, the patterns of change have been variable – for some groups they have been dramatic, for others they have been modest and for others they have been barely detectable. As Figure 2 shows, the growth in homeworking since the pandemic, for example, has been particularly pronounced among employees, where its prevalence has almost tripled compared to among the self-employed where its prevalence has nearly doubled – a quarter (27%) of the self-employed work exclusively at home. Homeworking has rocketed among those in higher skill jobs – such as managers, designers and analysts. Its prevalence among this group more than doubled, rising from 7% in 2017 to 17% in 2024. Among intermediate occupations – such as clerks, clerical assistants and bookkeepers – it has also risen, doubling from 6% to 13% during the same period. However, among those in lower skilled jobs – such as machinists, operators and packers which typify the historic image of homeworking – there has been little change.

Figure 2: Trends in Homeworking by Selected Characteristics, 2017-2024



As Figure 3 demonstrates the shift towards hybrid working has been similarly uneven. For example, the growth in hybrid working since the pandemic has been particularly pronounced among men where it has grown from 12% in 2017 to 22% in 2024 compared to a three-percentage point increase among women, and among employees where it has grown from 15% to 22% compared to a modest one percentage point rise among the self-employed. Hybrid working has also grown strongly among the higher occupational groups – jumping from 19% to 29% in seven years, but it has changed little elsewhere (even falling among those in the bottom three groups, although small numbers make these estimates imprecise).

Figure 3: Trends in Hybrid Working by Selected Characteristics, 2017-2024

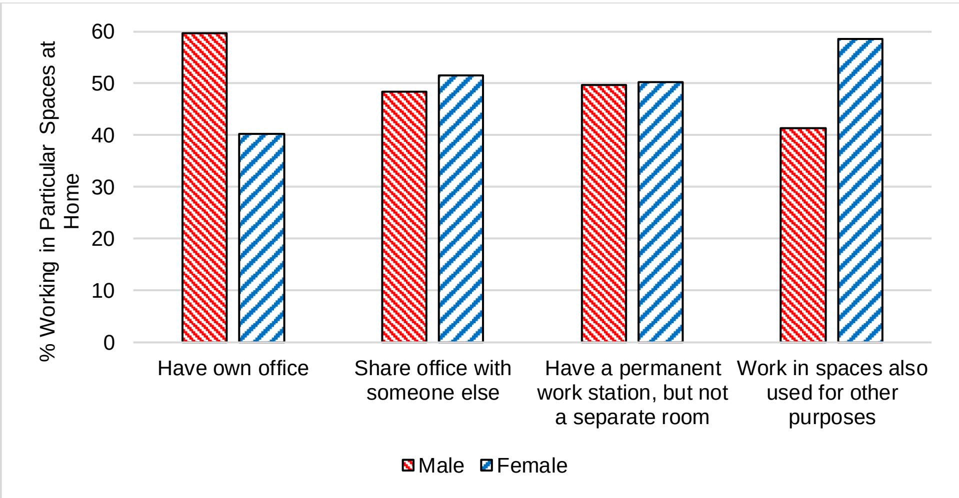


Relatedly, the decline of the fixed workplace has been most pronounced among those in the higher occupational group. In 2001 55% of these workers were in single places of work, by 2017 the figure had fallen to 44%, but by 2024 it plummeted to 28%. In comparison, 72% of those in the lowest occupational group in 2001 worked in single places of work – such as factories and shops – with 60% doing so in 2024. This figure represents a drop of just three percentage points on the 2017 figure.

Location of Work within the Home

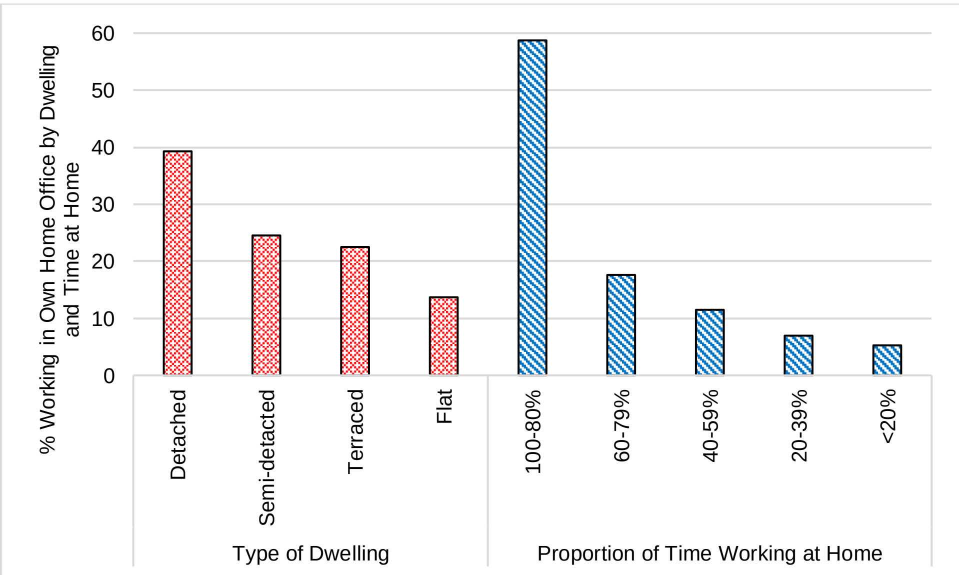
Little is known about whether those working at home can spatially separate their work and home activities and thereby create a 'home office' of their own. Our results suggest that around a quarter (27%) of people work in spaces intended for other purposes such as the kitchen or dining room, a fifth (22%) have a workstation in the corner of a room, 6% share an office with another member of the household, and 45% have a home office of their own. Our evidence suggests that there are stark gender differences. Figure 4 shows that men are more likely than women to work in a room dedicated to work – around 60% of men do so compared to 40% of women. The reverse is true for those working in spaces used for other purposes such as the living room or the kitchen – 59% of women report working in these spaces compared to 41% of men.

Figure 4: Location of Work within the Home by Gender



However, once the financial contribution individuals make to household income is taken into account access to a home office is *not* associated with gender. This analysis is based on dual earning households who took part in the survey. This suggests that what matters is the financial contribution household members make to household income with men, on average, contributing more than women. This money and power narrative is also supported by evidence which shows that the size of the home and the amount spent working at home are factors significantly associated with the creation of a home office. These differences are also evident in the descriptive data.

Figure 5: Location of Work within the Home by Type of Dwelling and Proportion of Time Working at Home



As shown in Figure 5, those living and working in detached houses are over twice as likely as those living a flat to use a home office when working at home. Similarly, 60% of those who spend four-fifths or more of their working time at home use a dedicated home office compared to 5% of those who work at home for less than the equivalent of one day out of five.

6. Policy Implications

The legal right to request flexible working, including working at home, came into force in April 2024 and the new Employment Bill will further strengthen this right when it is expected to come into force in 2026. While this will make it easier for employees to work at home, these results show not everyone can work in this way. Although falling dramatically, around two-fifths (38%) of the employed population still work in fixed places of work such as offices, factories or shops. These workers tend to be in lower skilled occupations, where the move towards homeworking and hybrid working is barely detectable. For them, working at home is not possible. Even where it is, some employers have issued return to the office mandates and are on a collision course with employees who value this way of working. Around two-thirds (63%) say that it is an essential or very important part of the employment package, and some are willing to fight for it. To cope with the challenges of bringing work into the home, many workers separate the two by creating a home office; for these workers the office is not dying but it is quite literally moving into the home. The traditional office is also changing shape as employers respond to the shift. Personal offices are increasingly being replaced by collective office space typified by bookable spaces such as 'hot desks'. However, workers' ability to create an office within the home is dependent on the contribution individuals make to household income, the size of the dwelling and the extent to which work is carried out at home. In short, those with more money and resources are more likely to work at home and be better able to lay claim to a home office which spatially separates them from the household. Policy, therefore, needs to focus on promoting all forms of flexible working and not just working at home which tends to favour the better off.

Further Reading

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All titles are downloadable free from the survey website: wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024. The NatCen SES2024 Technical Report which outlines in detail how the data were collected along with the questionnaires used is also available. You may also like to take the www.howgoodismyjob.com quiz which is based on some of the questions used in the survey.

Author Affiliations: Alan Felstead – Cardiff University; Rhys Davies – Cardiff University; Duncan Gallie – Nuffield College, Oxford; Francis Green – UCL; Golo Henseke – UCL; and Ying Zhou – Surrey University.

This report may be cited as: Felstead, A, Davies, R, Gallie, D, Green, F, Henseke, G and Zhou, Y (2025) *Is the Office Dying? Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024*, Cardiff: Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, Cardiff University.