

Return-to-office mandates:

What is at stake for workers,
companies, and gender equality?

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Executive summary

This report explores the evolving landscape of remote work in the UK labour market and the implications of employer-driven Return-to-Office (RTO) mandates. Using data from over 1 million observations in the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and over 50,000 observations in the Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes UK (SWAA-UK), we present robust evidence on who is working from home, how employer policies are shifting, and how workers are responding, particularly exploring how mothers, fathers and workers without children respond in different ways.

Key Findings:

- » Despite media narratives and public declarations from high-profile CEOs, **there is no clear trend of a mass return to the office in the UK.** Working-from-home (WFH) rates have remained stable since 2022. According to the LFS data over a quarter of all workers still respond that home is their main place of work. About 40% of workers work remotely at least once per week, and over 25% work three or more days from home according to the SWAA data.
- » **Employer policies have not shifted significantly toward eliminating remote work.** If anything, there's been a slow increase in average permitted WFH days—from less than 1 day per week in 2022 to about 1.3 days in 2024. However, there is also evidence to show that employers are less likely to allow full-remote working, with slight increase in number of 1~2 days of homeworking policies.

- » **RTO mandates, when enforced, face growing resistance:** Only approximately 42% of workers now say they would comply with a 5-day RTO mandate, compared to around 54% in early 2022. Instead, now, 9% say they will quit, another 49% would not quit straight away but will actively look for a new job offering homeworking options.
- » **Women are less likely to say they will comply with RTO mandates.** By late 2024, 55% of women said they would seek a new job if required to return full-time, another 9% said they would quit, compared to 43% of men who would look for a new job and 8% who would quit immediately.
- » **Parents - especially of young children - show the highest resistance to RTO mandates, while parents of older children show the fastest growing resistance to RTO mandates.** For mothers of young children, only 33% would comply with a full-time office requirement compared to 36% of women without children. It is noticeable that fathers are also increasing showing resistance to RTO mandates, and growing resistance is especially noticeable among fathers of school age children (6-17) according to our data.
- » **BME workers are more likely to continue complying** with mandates, potentially due to job insecurity and workplace discrimination for these groups of workers. **Younger workers are generally more resistant** to RTO mandates compared to older workers.

Implications for HR and Policy:

- » RTO mandates risk creating a **two-tiered labour market**, especially when women and parents are more likely to remain remote, while others are less likely, all remote workers are likely to face increased **flexibility stigma**, bias, and career penalties.
- » **RTO mandates can undermine gender diversity, talent retention, and workforce wellbeing**, particularly by forcing out workers, often mothers, who cannot comply due to caregiving responsibilities.
- » Flexible and hybrid working models are not only preferred by a majority of workers, both men and women, but are increasingly seen as **necessary for modern employment practices**.
- » Managers facing challenges with **skills retention, recruitment, or staffing** should actively consider remote and other forms of flexible working to attract and retain talent.
- » Organisations should frame flexibility as a **long-term business strategy** rather than a temporary perk to ensure to reap the benefits of homeworking practices.
- » Rather than RTO, organisations should consider **codifying hybrid models**, investing in remote collaboration tools, set up coordinated in-office days e.g. **Anchor days**, where teams coordinate in-office presence to maximise engagement and cohesion.
- » For HR leaders and policymakers, the message is clear: well-designed hybrid working models offer significant benefits for both employers and employees that supports equality, talent retention, collaboration, and business resilience. Rigid RTO mandates not only risk reversing these gains but may also create serious recruitment and retention challenges in a labour market where flexibility has become a baseline expectation.

Recommendation for Workers

- » Remote and hybrid working are now well-established and supported by **evidence showing they can be productive, inclusive, and sustainable when implemented effectively**. Workers should feel confident in knowing that flexible working is not a temporary perk but a legitimate and increasingly expected mode of work.
- » **If faced with rigid return-to-office mandates, know that resistance is not only reasonable—it is evidence-based**. A growing share of workers across industries and age groups are pushing back against outdated models centred on presenteeism.
- » **At the same time, hybrid working must be done well**. Workers should engage proactively with their colleagues and managers to address legitimate concerns raised about collaboration, mentoring, and team cohesion. These challenges are not insurmountable—and workers are well-placed to help co-design creative solutions.
- » **Think collectively**. Coordinate with peers to propose structured anchor days, shared communication norms, or mentoring systems that retain the benefits of in-person work without sacrificing flexibility. Hybrid working is not just an HR policy—it is a shared workplace culture that all employees help shape.
- » **Fathers and workers without children also have a right to flexible working**. When all workers—regardless of care responsibilities—request and use remote work, it helps normalise flexibility and reduce the stigma or career penalties often attached to it. This collective uptake can lead to better outcomes for everyone.
- » **Where flexibility is denied or poorly implemented, explore your options**. A growing number of organisations are embracing flexible models not just to support workers, but to stay competitive. Your skills, time, and wellbeing are valuable—there are alternatives.

Introduction

The pandemic has given rise to a new way of working, namely working remotely away from the office or your employer's premises. Prior to the pandemic, only a small fraction of workers worked from home on a regular basis. However, during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020—namely when governments forced workers to stay at home unless they are deemed an essential worker to limit the spread of the virus - we have seen up to half of the UK and European workforce working from home (Eurofound, 2022; ONS, 2020). Even after lockdown measures were eased, we did not see a sharp decline in homeworking practices. This was especially true for the UK. The UK stands out among European countries in that even in 2021, over half of its workforce was working from home at least occasionally (Chung, 2024). Such 'normalization' of homeworking has given rise to a number of changes in the labour market. One important change was that it enabled enhanced labour market participation of disadvantaged groups such as mothers, informal care givers, disabled workers, and ethnic minority workers (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018; Chung & Yuan, 2025; Hoque & Bacon, 2022). In fact, we have seen a significant increase in mother's employment rates during the pandemic with over three quarters of mothers working, with part of the increase attributed to the rise of flexible working opportunities (Chung, 2024; ONS, 2023). This has enhanced diversity in the workforce, and has opened up opportunities to level the playing field for different groups of workers (Chung & Yuan, 2025).

However, in recent years, we have seen a rise in scepticism towards home working, with concerns arising from employers with regards to homeworkers' commitment and motivation towards work. Many employers and politicians alike have publicly voiced that homeworking has brought about serious negative repercussions on workers' productivity, company culture, limiting collaboration, and is to blame

for reduced company growth¹. This has given rise to the so-called Return-To-Office (RTO) mandate. There has been increasing media attention on companies that have mandated a full-time RTO or increasing the minimum number of days workers need to come into the office (e.g. 3-4 days), eliminating or significantly restricting workers' ability to work from home. For example, Elon Musk in 2022 banned remote working for Tesla². Amazon's boss Andy Jassy announced in late 2024 that he will end all remote working practices by the end of 2025³. Jamie Dimon the CEO of JP Morgan Chase required all managing directors to be on site 5 days a week since April 2023, with recent reports stating that he will soon require all workers to be back on site with a full RTO mandate for his organisation. In fact, in a report by KPMG based on a survey of CEOs of major companies globally in 2024, it was noted that 83% of employers expect a full 5 days RTO by 2025 (KPMG, 2024). Similarly, as early as 2023, the head of the Confederation of Business and Industries - Britain's leading business lobby group in the UK - indicated that majority of employers would like to see a 5 day RTO (Sweney, 2023). These RTO mandates span across a wide range of industries in both private and public sectors. In fact, even within the UK government, there has been a push towards more days in the office in the civil service⁴ despite the government's policy push to normalize flexible working through various policy reforms⁵.

1. Some key examples are [Elon Musk](#) CEO of X and Tesla, [Jamie Dimon](#) of JP Morgan, and in the UK [Lord Stuart Rose](#) – former chairman of Asda and Marks & Spencer, and [Lord Alan Sugar](#), and the [Reform party leader Nigel Farage](#) who said he would clamp down on homeworking starting from local councils.
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-61666339>
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katewieczorek/2024/09/30/what-amazon-can-expect-with-getting-rid-of-remote-work/>
4. <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/professions/article/civil-servants-home-remove-working-60-in-office>
5. For example, the Right to Request Flexible working (RtR) bill has gone through a number of different reforms with an aim to make it easier for workers to request and gain access to various flexible working arrangements, such as enabling the RtR rights from day 1 of employment and putting more onus on employers when they reject the request. <https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working>

Is Remote Working Bad for Productivity?

Evidence shows that flexible workers are generally as, if not more, productive than those who do not work flexibly (Awada et al., 2021; Bellet et al., 2019; Bloom et al., 2015; Boltz et al., 2023; CIPD, 2021; Etheridge et al., 2020; Farooq & Sultana, 2022; Nikita et al., 2024). Above and beyond the survey directed at workers or managers asking about one's own or their workforce's productivity levels when working from home, there have been a number of studies that explore the productivity outcomes of remote and other types of flexible working using unique field experiments with more "objective" measurements of productivity for individuals (Bloom et al., 2015; Boltz et al., 2023). The studies indicate that in fact flexible working are more productive as they work more effectively, or are less likely to take breaks, or work longer. In fact, studies have shown that flexible workers tend to work longer and harder compared to those who do not work flexibly (Chung, 2022; Glass & Noonan, 2016; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Lott & Chung, 2016; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Flexible workers are also generally more loyal, committed to their jobs, and happier with their working conditions, leading to fewer problems with regards to sickness, absenteeism, and worker retention (Allen et al., 2015; Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019; Kerkhofs et al., 2008; Masuda et al., 2012; Moen et al., 2017; Ruppanner et al., 2018; Weeden, 2005). In this way, flexible working can also indirectly enhance productivity and company performance by enhancing workers' well-being – which has empirically been shown to be directly linked to productivity (Isham et al., 2021). Or by eliminating operational costs by improving retention, recruitment, reducing sickness absenteeism.

Despite these reports and frequent headlines around RTO, it is unclear the extent to which employers are in fact pushing for an RTO mandate for their workers, and whether workers are in fact complying with these mandates. What is more, we know little about who is more likely to adhere to the mandate if it were to be imposed, and who is more likely to resist. The composition of workers who will or are able to comply has serious implications with regards to how remote working is viewed (Chung, 2020; Munsch, 2016; Williams et al., 2013), – with implications for future of gender equality both at home and in the labour market (Chung, 2024). With this in mind, this report aims to ask the following questions;

- » Is there an increase in Return-to-Office trend in the UK labour market?
- » Are employers mandating a Return-to-Office?
- » What are workers' responses to RTO mandates?
- » What are the implications of this trend for workers, companies, and gender equality?

We use large-scale, high-quality secondary datasets to address these questions. By doing so, the report aims to provide robust empirical evidence on the current state of the labour market and explore the potential implications of employer-mandated return-to-office (RTO) policies on gender equality.

Are workers returning to the office?

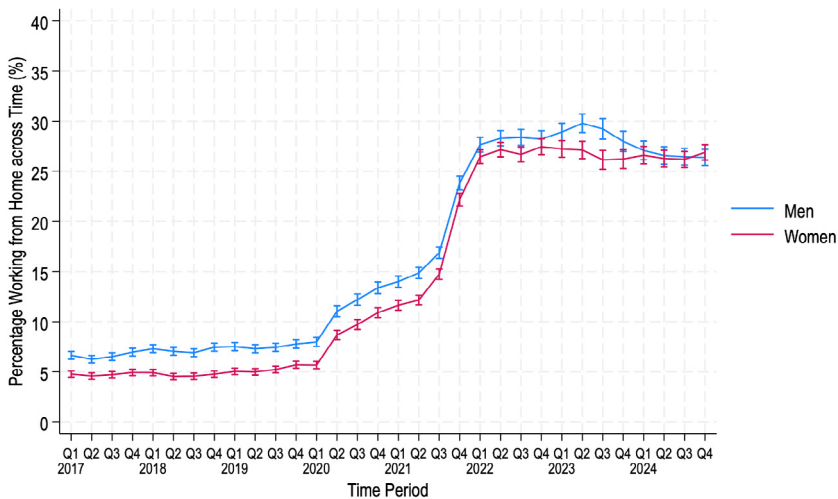
To examine trends in homeworking, we use the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) from 2017 to 2024, and the Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes for the UK (SWAA-UK) from 2022 to 2024. The LFS is the largest household study in the UK providing official estimates of employment, unemployment, and labour market characteristics of over 55,000 participants and data measured every quarterly (ONS, 2024). The LFS measure of homeworking is as follows; ‘(In your main job) do you work mainly...’, where respondents who chose 1 ‘in own home’, 2 ‘in the same grounds or buildings as home’ and 3 ‘in different places using home as a base’ are considered as homeworkers. SWAA is a unique large scale (2500 participants) survey programme on homeworking that has been measuring patterns of homeworking across the UK labour market since 2021 (Aksoy et al., 2023) (also seen in www.WFHresearch.com). In the SWAA-UK, WFH is measured by asking respondents how many full days they worked from home in the current week - no days, 1 day, 2 days, 3 days, 4 days, and 5+ days. Further in the SWAA-UK data, employees were asked about their employer’s plan for homeworking for the workforce – again measured by the number of days employers are allowing workers to work from home.

As Figure 1 shows, based on the LFS data there has been a significant increase in the number of workers who responded that they mainly work from home after the pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2017 to 2019, only around 5~6% of women and 6~8% of men were mainly working from home. This number increased significantly in recent years. However, the rise is more noticeable after the pandemic lockdown has ended. For example, in the second quarter of 2020 – which was the peak of the pandemic lockdown when official figures showed that half of all UK workers were in fact working from home (ONS, 2020) - our data indicates that only about 10% of workers responded that home is their main place of work. This is because many workers at this stage of the pandemic felt that homeworking was a temporary solution to an emergency shock at the time, and that

their official place of work was the office or their employer's premises (ONS, 2022). However, as workers remained working from home post lockdown periods in 2021 and beyond, we see a steeper increase in the number of workers who responded that home is their main place of work. By the first quarter of 2022, the number of workers who responded that home is their main place of work rose to close to 30%. This rise was especially noticeable for women. Women's homeworking levels were lower than that of men prior to the pandemic, yet their homeworking increased slightly faster than that of men, and by 2024, we do not see any gender gap.

Returning to the question of whether we see a pattern of workers returning to the office, despite the numerous headlines that were observed during the period of 2023-2024, we do not see a steep decline in the number of workers who work from home after the pandemic. For women, their homeworking remains relatively stable around 26-27% throughout 2022 first quarter to the fourth quarter of 2024 – which is the latest data available. For men, there was a slight bump increase in homeworking in the 2nd-3rd quarter of 2023, yet for the rest of the timepoints, men's homeworking also remains relatively stable from about 27-30%, although a slight decrease (1~2%) is observable in most recent data points. In sum, according to the LFS data there is no evidence of a significant RTO pattern among homeworkers in the UK neither for men nor women.

Figure 1 Working from home trend from 2017-2024 (weighted)



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey

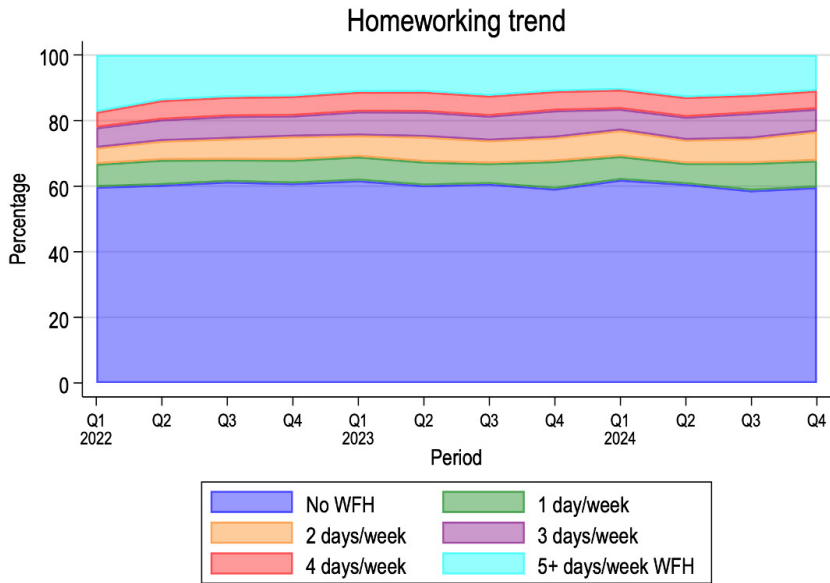
Note: Homeworking includes workers who indicated that they mainly work in own home, in the same grounds or buildings as home, and in different places using home as a base.

We now turn to the SWAA data to explore whether we see any evidence of RTOs. Firstly, we look at the trend of workers working from home in the data in Figure 2. As shown, approximately 40% of workers work from home at least one day a week, and about a quarter of workers respond that they work from home at least 3 days a week – which we can consider mainly working from home⁶. Our data therefore confirms what we see in the LFS data. These numbers do not change much at all throughout our observation period – from the first quarter of 2022 to the fourth quarter of 2024. What we do see, unlike what is shown in the LFS data, is a slight decrease in the number of workers who

6. Having said this not all workers work five days a week in the data, so this would be an underestimation of the actual pattern.

work from home 5+ days a week and a slight increase in the number of workers who work 2 days a week from home. This is especially true when we compare the 1st quarter of 2022 to the fourth quarter of 2024. In other words, although there may not have been a significant decline in the number of workers working from home, there does seem to have been some changes in the number of days workers work from home. Having said that, within our data, even in the fourth quarter of 2024, the number of workers working from home 5 days a week is still one of the largest groups of workers among workers who do work from home. This is followed by 2 days, 1 day, 3 days, and four days from home being the least frequent type of homeworking. In other words, according to our SWAA data, it seems like if there are any trends of RTOs, it is in the fact that workers may be going into the office slightly more often compared to the period just after lockdown in early 2022. However, even then there does not seem to be any major shakeups in the levels of homeworking during the period we observe.

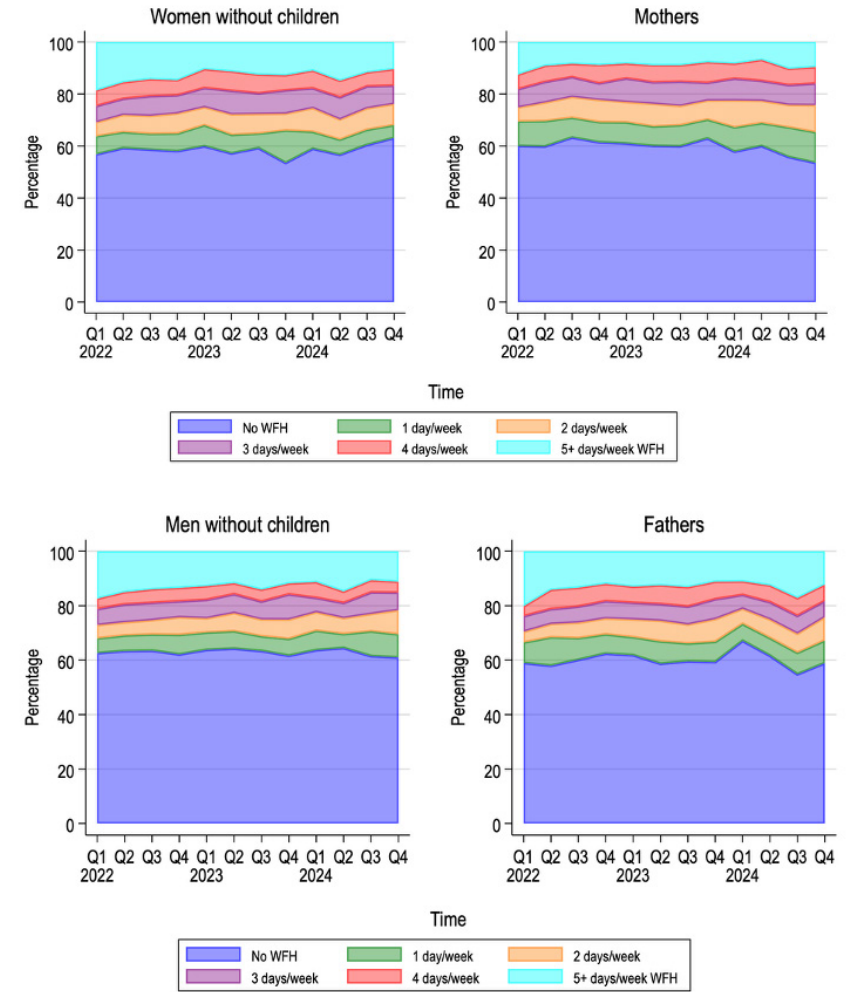
Figure 2 Working from home frequency trend from 2022-2024 (weighted)



Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024

In Figure 3, we examined the homeworking trend distinguishing between mothers, fathers, women without children and men without children to get a better sense of whether there are variations across gender/parental status of workers in their homeworking patterns. We can see parents are more likely and somewhat increasingly more likely to be working from home compared to workers without children, although there are some fluctuations among fathers. We see a clearer distinction between women with versus without children. There is a growing number of mothers who say they are able to work from home at least one day a week since 2022, with the strongest growth in 1 and 2 days a week from home. On the other hand, for women without children, we see a decline in numbers especially among 5+ days a week from home and 1 day a week from home – although for the latter the difference is very small. For men without children, we see a decline in workers working 5+ days a week from home and a bit of growth of workers working 1-2 days a week from home. For fathers, we also see similar patterns, although for them, the decline in 5+ days a week from home is not as stark as we have seen for men and women without children.

Figure 3. Working from home frequency trend from 2022-2024 by gender and parental status (weighted)



Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024

Are employers asking workers back into the office?

Exploring employee's patterns of work may not be indicative of the actual RTO mandates of the employers. This is because we have seen numerous reports of workers refusing to adhere to the policy even when employers put them in place⁷. Therefore, it is important to explore how employer's homeworking policies have changed over the years. As Figure 4 shows, there is a bit of a gap between employee's behaviours and employer's plan for homeworking with workers more likely to be working from home more often compared to employer's plan or policies around homeworking. For example, in the first quarter of 2022, about a quarter of workers were allowed to work from home at least one day a week or more often, while 40% have done so. What is more, we have more workers working from home 5 days a week compared to what they say their employer's policies are.

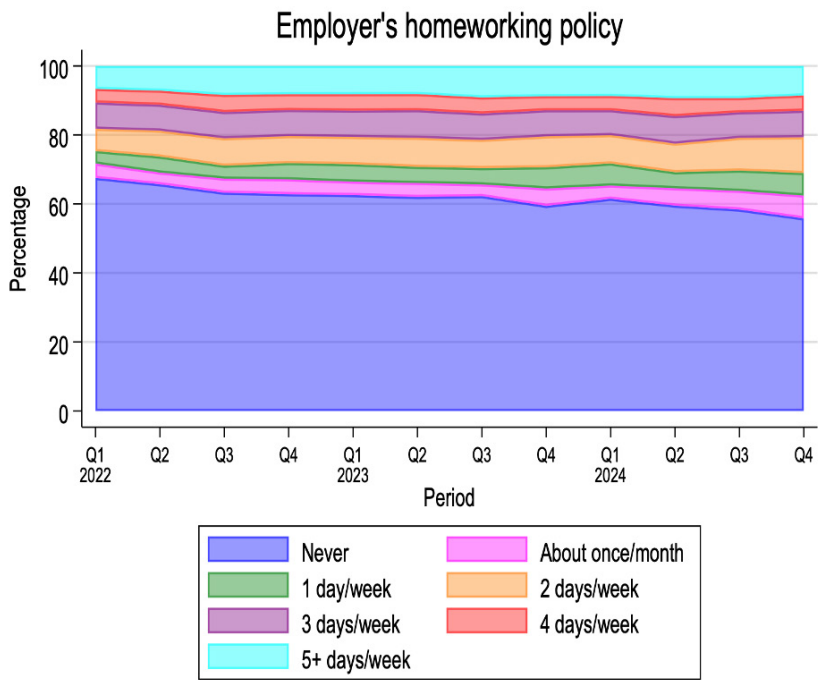
Having said this, we can see that even in employers' policies, there are no clear signs of an RTO mandate in place. In fact, we see a declining number of workers saying that their employers are not allowing workers to work from home. Like the workers' own patterns of work, there is an increase in homeworking policies especially centred around two days a week from home, with many others having the opportunity to work three days or one day a week from home. This is also a very common policy we have seen in company case studies we have observed – where many companies offer two to three days homeworking opportunities⁸. Again, when comparing the data from early 2022 to late 2024, there does not appear to be a large shift in employer's policies where working from home is reduced. Rather the pattern we observe appears to be more that of where workers who were unable to work from home – at least on paper – are now given opportunities to work from home at least occasionally. To explore whether we see a decline in the average

7. A 2024 American study showed that only 78% of workers adhere to the RTO policy of their company - <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/1-in-5-us-workers-ignoring-return-to-office-rules-rto/729472/>

8. For example, [Apple](#), [Alphabet](#) (parent company of Google), [Meta](#) (parent company of Facebook) all have 3 days in the office policy of homeworking.

number of days in which workers are able to work from home, in Figure 5, we calculated the average number of days our survey participants are allowed to work from home across time – also including workers who are not allowed to work from home (e.g. 0 days). As we can see, we see an increase in the number of days workers are able to work from home from just below one day a week on average across the labour market in early 2022, to between 1.18 and 1.30 days per week by 2024. This percentage of work being carried out at home is similar to the data found in the US with regards to the stability of homeworking trends post pandemic⁹.

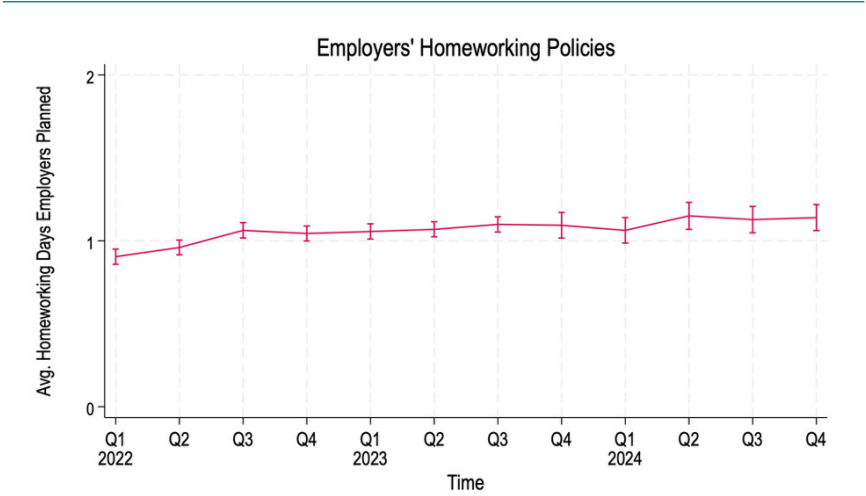
Figure 4 Employers' working from home plan trend from 2022-2024 (weighted)



Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. Note that about once a month was not a category in the previous Figure 2

9. For detail see: <https://wfhresearch.com/>

Figure 5. Average number of days employers’ working from home policy trend from 2022-2024 (weighted)

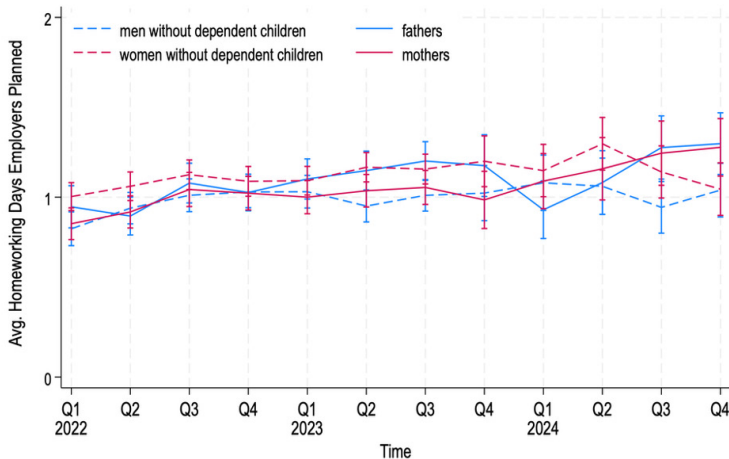


Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. Notes: The average number of homeworking days planned by employers is based on average of the variable indicating 0 = Never; 0.5 = About once/twice per month, 1=1 day per week, ..., 5 = 5+ days/week. As such, the average can be interpreted as an approximate number of days employers planned for homeworking per week.

Next, we wanted to explore if there are certain trends of employers asking workers back to the office, and which groups of workers are being asked more often. Therefore, we have explored the average number of days workers are allowed to work from home via company policy distinguishing between different occupations, sectors and gender/parental status. These results are presented in the appendix of the paper. The results show that we do not see a clear pattern with regards to certain employers or certain occupations being more likely than others with regards to a sudden rise in RTO trends. In general, we see a relative stability across occupations and sectors in the extent to which workers are able to work from home and the extent to which employers are allowing homeworking for their workers. We do, however, find a slight variation in the patterns of change when observing workers across gender and parental status across time. As Figure 6 shows, of the different groups of workers, it is especially parents (here

defined as workers living with children under the age of 18), are those who responded that their employer's expectations of homeworking have been relaxed over the years rather than restricted. For example, in the first quarter of 2022, the average number of days mothers were allowed to work from home was 0.85 (roughly 3–4 days per month). By the end of 2024 this number grew to 1.28 (roughly 1-2 days per week). Similarly for fathers, this grew from 0.95 (roughly 1 day per week) to 1.30 (roughly 1-2 days per week). Again, these numbers include all workers, including those who are not able to work from home – meaning that those who can work from home generally work 2-3 days a week from home. The growth is more noticeable among mothers, and there are more fluctuations for other groups of workers. This may be because parents especially mothers may have selected into jobs that are more likely to allow homeworking, and allow it more often, compared to workers without children. It could also be an indication that employers may be allowing parents to work from home more often, even within the same jobs.

Figure 6. Employer's homeworking policies by parental status and gender across time



Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. The average number of homeworking days planned by employers is based on average of the variable indicating 0 = Never, 0.5 = About once/twice per month, 1=1 day per week, ..., 5 = 5+ days/week. As such, the average can be interpreted as an approximate number of days employers planned for homeworking per week.

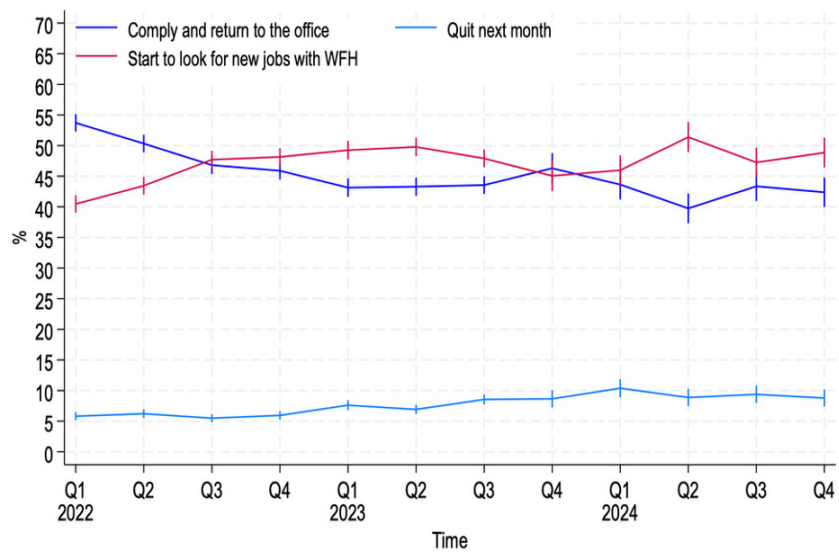
Workers response to RTO mandate

Next, we explore the question what workers are likely to do when met with the five day return to office mandate. In the SWAA-UK, we asked workers “How would you respond if your employer announced that all employees must return to the worksite 5+ days a week, starting next month?” Respondents can choose with the following options: (1) **comply** “I would comply and return to the worksite”, (2) **quit right away** “I would quit my job on or before the next month, regardless of whether I got another job”, or (3) **seek remote work** with WFH but not quit “I would start looking for a job that lets me work from home at least 1 or 2 days a week, but return to the worksite if I don’t find one by the next month.” With regards to the last statement, although the statement continues on to say that the workers will comply after one month of job seeking, without other options available with regards to two or more months of job seeking, it is difficult to know how long the workers will be looking for a new job. Given that the other two options are more straight forward with regards to comply and quit, we therefore consider the third group as the group that will be looking for remote working while staying in the job for the time being.

Figure 7 examines the responses to RTO mandate from the 1st quarter of 2022 to the fourth quarter of 2024. In the first quarter of 2022, 55% of workers stated that they would comply with the mandate and return to the office 5 days a week. This number has gradually decreased to 40% in the 2nd quarter of 2024, although we can see a slight increase in recent months. On the other hand, we see a growing number of workers stating that they will not necessarily quit straight away but will look for a new job with homeworking opportunities. This number was 40% in early 2022, but it grew up to about 50% by the 2nd quarter of 2024. Even those who said they would quit right away has grown steadily over the years. Only about 5% of workers said they would quit straight away when managers request a five day return to office mandate, but this is now close to 10% of all workers by 2024. Again, this reflects the patterns we observed in the LFS data where even as late as in 2022, homeworking was still considered a temporary adjustment to an external

shock. Therefore, there was still a hidden assumption by workers and managers that things will “return to normal” with workers having to go back to the old ways of working five days in the office eventually. In this sense workers were not as resistant to the idea of returning to the ‘old ways’ of working. As we can see from this data, as time went on and as managers enabled workers to not only work from home but also more often, and as more software and infrastructure for homeworking was put in place in many companies, workers’ confidence in the fact that homeworking is a lasting policy grew. The number of workers stating that they would quit or look for a new job – which is approximately six out of ten workers working from home, also indicates workers’ confidence that even if their managers claw back the opportunities to work from home, that they are likely to find other companies and jobs that allow homeworking. In other words, from our data, we can see that the working from home genie is in fact out of the bottle and is unlikely to return.

Figure 7. Responses to Return-to-Office Mandates from 2022-2024



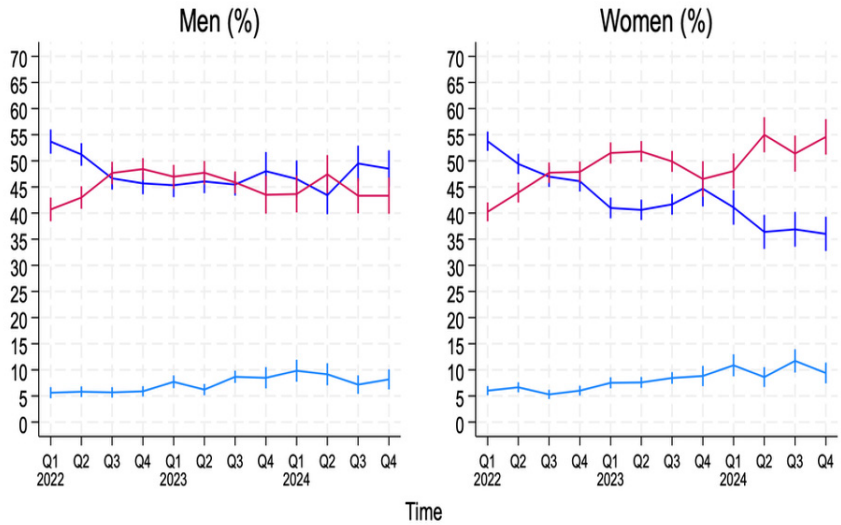
Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. Notes: This figure presents the trends in homeworkers’ (39,391 observations) responses to Return-to-Office (RTO) mandates from 2022 to 2024.

Gender/parental status differences in the response to RTO mandates

Next, we explore the difference between men and women in their responses to the RTO mandate. We expect to see a gender variation in the response to RTO mandate across gender. Previous studies have shown how remote working can help women with caring responsibility not only stay in employment but also maintain their labour market positions (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018; Lyttelton et al., 2022). This is largely because women are still considered to be responsible for housework and childcare (Allen & Stevenson, 2023) and are carrying out the bulk of these activities in families (Chung & Booker, 2023; Wishart et al., 2019). Given this, for women, losing the ability to work from home may entail having to drop out of the labour market, or significantly reducing the number of hours they work, which can lead to negative career trajectories (Connolly & Gregory, 2009; Costa Dias et al., 2018). Therefore, we expect that women are more likely to refuse the RTO mandate and more likely to quit or look for a new job with homeworking opportunities. This would especially be true if homeworking was used as a means to managing pressing work and family demands. On the other hand, men are better able to comply to the RTO mandate, partly as they are not as burdened as women with regards to housework and childcare responsibilities. On the other hand, just as mothers are considered to be more responsible for childcare, men are still considered to be the main breadwinner of the family (Knight & Brinton, 2017). In this sense, men may be more likely to comply due to the potential fear of financial insecurity of the household when not complying with the RTO mandate of the company. This is especially true when we consider the persistent bias against remote workers in the UK (Chung & Wang, 2024). Of men and women, we expect that it will especially between mothers and fathers we may see a clearer pattern with regards to the gender gap in responses to RTO mandates, with the former most likely to quit or look for new jobs, and the latter more likely to comply.

As Figure 8 shows, there was no significant difference between men and women with regards to their responses for compliance, quitting, and temporary compliance whilst looking for a new job in early 2022. However, as time went on, we can see a clearer distinction between men and women with regards to compliance. Women were significantly less likely than men to say that they will comply and return to the office and proportionately more likely to say that they will look for a new job with WFH opportunities. For example, in the fourth quarter of 2024, 55% of women say they will look for a new job if they are asked to return to the office 5 days a week, while only about 44% of men responded in this way. Another pattern that is observable here is that with men there is not a clear pattern of change with regards to how many are considering compliance versus how many are considering looking for a new job. From 2023 onwards, about 45% of men give and take a couple of percentage points said they will comply, and a similar level say they will look for a new job, without very clear fluctuations or change. Women on the other hand, we see a clear pattern of fewer workers saying they will comply as time went on – with 55% saying they will comply in the 1st quarter of 2022, falling 20 percentage points of the course of the three years that we have collected the data, with only 35% stating that they will comply. Accordingly, the number of women who stated that they will likely look for a new job has risen from 40% in the 1st quarter of 2022 to 55% by the fourth quarter of 2024. The number of women who stated they will quit has also increased from about 6% to 10% in the same period. Contrarily, the proportion of men who said they will quit when asked to come back to the office 5 days a week has not changed very much during this period.

Figure 8. Responses to Return-to-Office Mandates from 2022-2024 by Sex



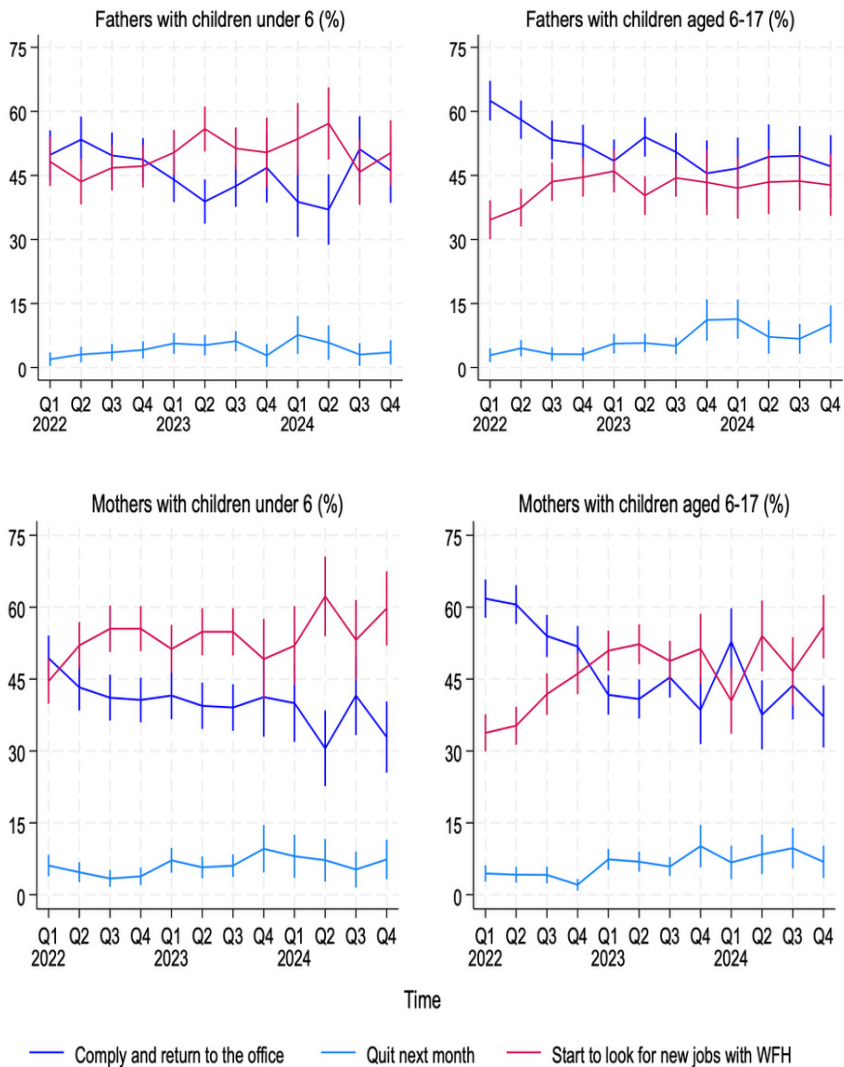
Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. Notes: This figure presents the trends in homeworkers' (39,391 observations) responses to Return-to-Office (RTO) mandates from 2022 to 2024.

Figures 9 explores the response to RTO mandates of fathers and mothers – distinguishing between those with young children (under 6) and school-aged children (6-17). We can see that among mothers, it is especially mothers of young children that are less likely to comply to an RTO mandate. For example, during the second quarter of 2024, only about 31% of mothers of young children has responded that they will comply to an RTO mandate compared to 38% of mothers with older children or 37% women without children. Similarly, comparing data in the 2nd quarter of 2024, fathers of younger children (37%) were also less likely to say that they will comply with the RTO mandate compared to fathers of older children (49%) or men without children (43%). This tendency is consistent throughout our observation period, although the gap between parents of older vs younger children has reduced somewhat in recent years. This is largely due to the fact that there has been a significant change in the way parents of older – school aged - children have indicated what their response to a five-day RTO mandate will be. Even in the early 2022, 63% of fathers of older

children and 62% of mothers of older children have responded that they would comply with the RTO mandate – much higher than the 50% of fathers of young children and 49% of mothers of young children in the same period. However, by the end of 2024, only about 47% of fathers of older children and 37% of mothers with older children responded that they would comply with the mandate, which is similar to the levels for parents of younger children. This indicates that it may be especially for parents of school aged children that homeworking has become an integral part of their work-life balance arrangement. There has been reports of homeworking becoming a useful tool for parents to either pick up children from school or parents being there at home when children come back from school reliving them from using external/wrap around childcare services (Rainy, 2024). Although there has been some criticism around this¹⁰, the ability to meet family demands has enabled parents to be better engaged at work, carry out more hours of work, help relieve work-family conflict and through that support family well-being (Chung et al., 2024; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). What is more, as mentioned in the previous section, the general large-scale evidence around parents' homeworking has found that there has been an increase rather than a decline in working hours. In other words, homeworking may have provided parents, especially of older children, an opportunity to be an engaged parent- especially for fathers – whilst being able to fully or even better engage with work (Carlson et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2021; Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Lyttelton et al., 2022; Wang & Cheng, 2024).

10. For example see a recent Telegraph's piece "[It's an open secret parent don't work after 3pm](#)" linking parents using homeworking arrangements to meet work and family demand as the cause of decline in productivity in the UK in recent years.

Figure 9. Responses to Return-to-Office Mandates from 2022-2024 of parents by sex and the age of their youngest child



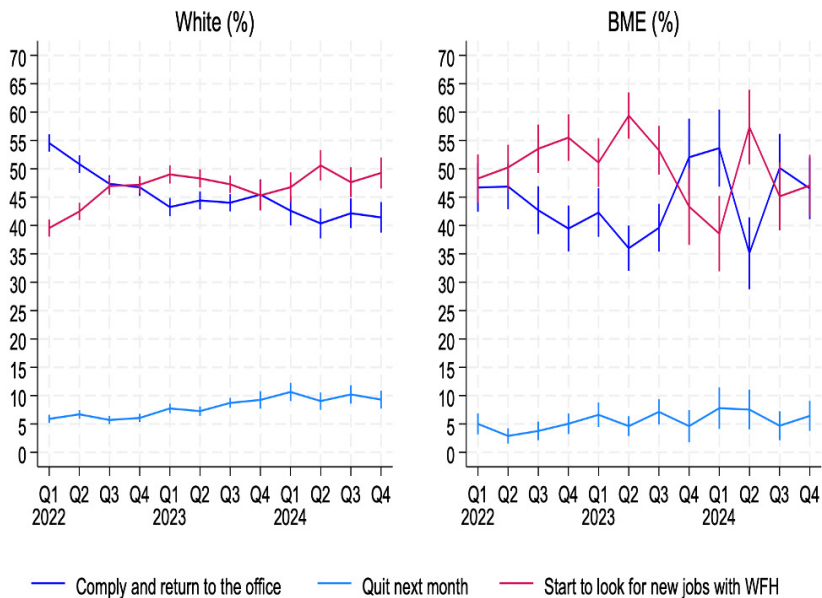
Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024

Response to RTO mandates by ethnicity and age groups

In addition to gender and parental status, we wanted to explore whether we can find differences in the response to RTO across workers with different ethnicities or workers of different age groups. Although it would be useful to intersect gender and ethnicities, gender and age groups, sample sizes do not allow for such detailed analysis. Further, it would be important to distinguish between different groups of ethnicities within the larger BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) worker umbrella (Chung & Yuan, 2025), sample sizes are too small to make such distinctions. Previous study has shown that homeworking is a widely popular policy across BME workers as it provides workers with better opportunities for work-family integration – especially when other resources are unavailable. What is more, home can provide a better environment for BME workers with regards to micro-aggression and racism at work¹¹, and online work engagement provides opportunities for networking across a wider network of workers (Chung et al., 2024; TUC, 2022). Although the gap between BME and white workers have reduced somewhat after the pandemic, the gap remained for certain pockets of BME populations such as Chinese workers and Black men (Chung & Yuan, 2025). BME workers are more likely to feel insecure about their labour market positions due to bias against BME workers' work competencies and motivation (Heath & Di Stasio, 2019). This could explain why we see BME workers are slightly less likely to say that they will quit when faced with an RTO mandate compared to white workers in Figure 10, and in recent periods, slightly more likely to comply to RTO mandates compared to white workers (although fluctuations can be seen across the period of analysis). Rather than these responses being driven by workers' preferences, these responses may be indicative of the perceived employment security workers feel in the labour market.

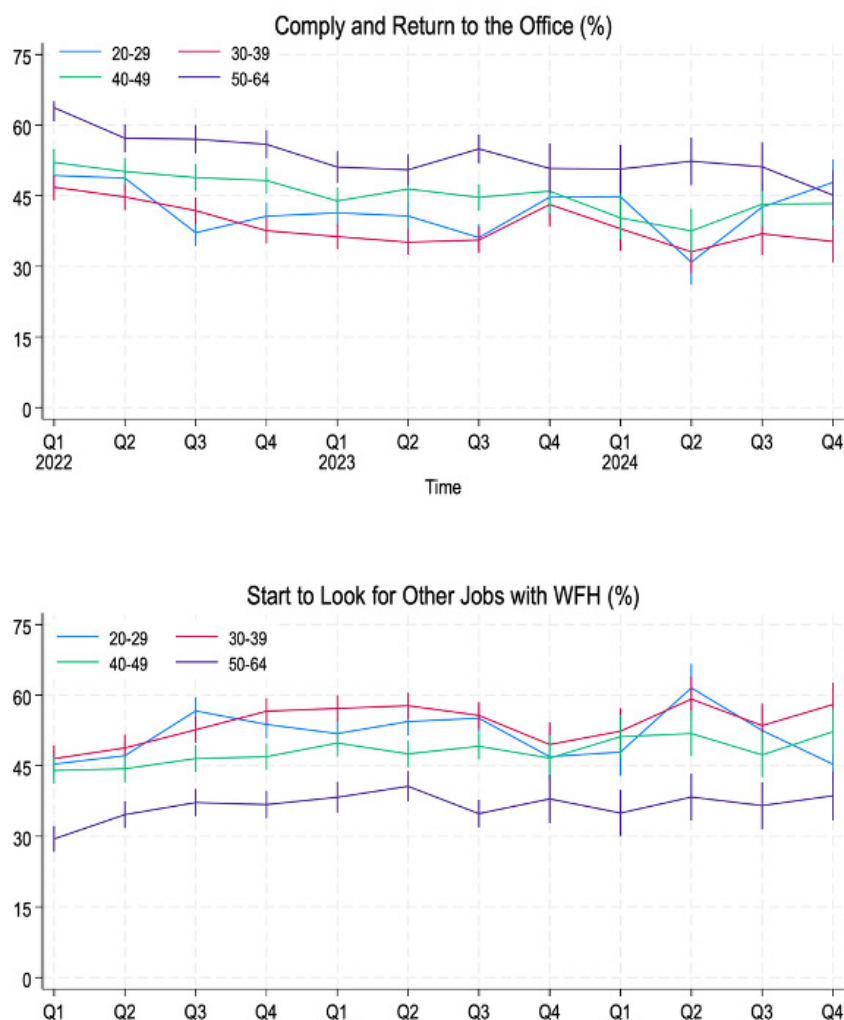
11. This does not entail that homeworking is a solution to racism at work nor does it mean that BME workers did not experience racism and micro-aggression in the online space.

Figure 10. Responses to Return-to-Office Mandates from 2022-2024 by ethnicity



Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. Notes: This figure presents the trends in homeworkers' (39,391 observations) responses to Return-to-Office (RTO) mandates from 2022 to 2024.

Figure 11. Responses to Return-to-Office Mandates from 2022-2024 by Age



Source: SWAA monthly Survey 2022 to 2024. Notes: This figure presents the trends in homeworkers' (39,391 observations) responses to Return-to-Office (RTO) mandates from 2022 to 2024.

Finally, we explore the response to RTO mandates by age groups in Figure 11. As we can see from the figures, it is those in their 50s and 60s that are most likely to comply with the RTO mandate and return to the office compared to the younger worker groups. Of the other younger age groups of workers, it is the 30-39 year old groups that are least likely to comply and most likely to look for a new job – although the gap between this group and the other two age groups (20-29, 40-49) are not very clear especially due to fluctuations of the 20-29 age group¹². In general, the 40-49 age group are slightly more inclined to comply and less inclined to look for a new job compared to the younger age groups, although the gap between the groups are not significant, especially from 2024 onwards. The variation across the age groups is in part due to the family demands workers in their 30s face – an age group which is most likely to have a young child or children in school. On the other hand, the older workers may be those who are, on the one hand, more likely to be living close to their workplaces compared to those in their 40s or late 30s (ONS, 2019), and on the other hand, due to the lack of childcare demands of this worker group which may make them better able to go back to the office if needed. It may also be due to potential differences in attitudes towards work and work-life balance. However, what is clear from the data is that there does not appear to be clear signs of younger workers (20-29) wanting to come back to the office. Some have argued that that younger workers want to be back into the office¹³ due to lack of mentorship, access to company culture, and other opportunities to learn soft skills. Although we do not dispute the fact that all these elements are crucial for younger workers and new entrants to companies, and that these things may be better achieved through in-person engagements, there is no evidence from our data to show that the five days return to office is what younger workers want.

12. This is likely due to the smaller sample size of this age group compared to other age groups, which indicates a lower representativeness of this group.

13. <https://www.raconteur.net/future-of-work/gen-z-want-rto>

In fact, from other survey of workers, it is clear that young workers are more likely to prefer remote working(Hayton, 2025). In addition, younger workers are more likely than older workers to think that remote and hybrid working allows for a better collaboration, problem solving, and building rapport with colleagues (Duffy et al., 2022).

What is at stake for workers, companies, and gender equality?

Despite the growing public announcement of CEOs and reports of mass return-to-office mandate of companies, based on two large scale representative surveys of the UK labour market we see no evidence of this. We do not see any clear signs of workers returning to the office, nor do we see evidence of employers restricting workers' homeworking possibilities in their policies. In fact, we see a growing number of workers who can work from home, and this is especially true for parents. When exploring worker's response to a potential 5-day RTO mandates, we see that most workers are not likely to comply with the mandate – with only four out of ten workers likely to comply. The proportion of workers who state that they will not comply with the mandate has grown over the years, as homeworking has become more normalised. It is likely that there is growing confidence among workers that when faced with a RTO mandate, they are likely to find another job that will offer homeworking opportunities. Of the different population groups, it is especially mothers, mothers of young children that are likely to say that they will either quit or not quit straight away but actively look for a new job. However, we also see a growing number of parents both mothers and fathers, increasingly stating that they will not comply to an RTO mandate and will likely quit or look for a new job. Of the different parent groups, parents of school aged children are the ones which have shown the biggest shifts in their attitudes. What is more, unlike popular belief, there is no evidence to show that younger workers want to go back to the in-office work culture, and rather especially among 30-39 year olds, but also among 20-29 year old workers, RTO mandate is met with resistance.

So what do the trends in homeworking patterns and potential response to an RTO mandate mean for gender equality? In summary, we see that homeworking is now an arrangement that both men and women are equally able to enjoy and this is true for both parents and non-parents. It seems that not only are mothers and fathers more likely to be and be able to work from home, they are becoming more resistant towards an RTO mandate. This is not surprising given our evidence around how homeworking can not only allow mothers to better engage in the labour market without making a career sacrifice due to their competing household demands (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018; Van der Lippe et al., 2019) but also how it allows fathers a valuable opportunity to better engage in childcare (Carlson et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2021) which not only enhance children's psychological, emotional well-being and cognitive outcomes (Chung, 2021; Norman & Davies, 2023) but also helps enhance men's own well-being outcomes (Walthery & Chung, 2021).

However, such patterns raise concerns with regards to what we can expect with regards to gender inequality in the future. We have seen that despite such rise in homeworking practices in the UK, there still exist bias against homeworkers' work commitment, motivation, productivity, negatively influencing their career prospects (Kasperska et al., 2024; Chung & Wang, 2024). What is more, when homeworking is largely carried out by mothers or fathers, managers are more likely to stigmatise homeworkers and view them as not committed. Rather than this being due to homeworkers' actual commitment, motivation or productivity (see previous sections on the evidence on homeworking and productivity), this is largely based on the status characteristics and linkages managers and other workers may make with regards to homeworkers (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). In other words, when homeworking is associated largely with parents, or even worse just mothers, it is likely to be seen only as a DEI or work-life balance policy, rather than a policy that can enhance performance outcomes for companies. This is due to persistent social norms around mother's roles in society and in family, where mothers are seen as not being able to live up to the 'ideal worker' standard (Anker, 1997) – as their priorities are expected to lie at home (Blair-Loy, 2009).

Recommendations for workers

Remote and hybrid working have become a core part of how many people work in the UK today. As the data from our study shows, around 40% of workers now work from home at least once a week, with a quarter doing so three or more days. Despite public statements from CEOs and ongoing headlines about a “return to the office,” we find no clear evidence of a mass return, nor of employers tightening their remote work policies. In fact, flexible working has become more normalised. This is not surprising. When done well, homeworking supports productivity, work-life balance, and wellbeing. It allows both women and men to stay engaged in paid work while meeting care and other private responsibilities. This includes taking care of one’s own physical and mental health, which is increasingly become an important issue in UK workplaces post-pandemic (Chung et al., 2024; HSE, 2024).

At the same time, hybrid working does require thought and coordination. For it to work well, for workers and for organisations, we need to address the challenges that managers often raise, such as collaboration, mentoring, and building workplace culture. But this shouldn’t mean a return to rigid, one-size-fits-all office mandates. Instead, workers can and should engage collectively with colleagues and managers to design smarter ways of working. Coordinated anchor days, clear communication practices, and peer support are just some ways teams can strengthen cohesion while protecting flexibility.

It’s also important to recognise that flexible working should not be framed as a women’s issue or a parent’s perk. Fathers and workers without children have just as much right to request and use flexible arrangements. In fact, when remote and hybrid working is normalised across all groups, it reduces stigma and bias, helping to create a more equitable and inclusive workplace for everyone. By taking collective responsibility for shaping how we work, we can protect the gains made and push forward towards a future of work that truly works for all workers.

Recommendations for managers

Organisations should frame flexibility as a long-term business strategy rather than a temporary perk, in order to fully reap the benefits of homeworking practices. Managers need to recognise that RTO mandates risk undermining gender diversity, talent retention, and workforce wellbeing. Flexible and hybrid working models are not only preferred by the majority of workers, both men and women, but also are increasingly seen as an essential employment practice.

When companies do mandate an RTO policy regardless, it is likely that more women, particularly mothers, will be unable to comply, resulting in exits from their jobs or even the labour market altogether. This will exacerbate the current levels of economic inactivity and the skills shortage in the UK labour market. While many fathers may also prefer not to comply with an RTO mandate, they are more likely to return to the office, not because they want to or because it enhances productivity, but because they fear the career consequences and the potential financial instability for their families. If fathers and workers without children return to the office while mothers remain at home, we risk deepening gender inequality in the labour market. Furthermore, we lose the broader societal benefit of remote working, for example, enabling greater paternal involvement in childcare - something that could help address many of the pressing challenges we face today, including growing concerns around the wellbeing and development of boys¹⁴.

14. For example, see recent reports from the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys. <https://menandboys.org.uk/missing-men2025/>

Therefore, managers should be cautious about using an RTO mandate to address concerns around work culture, collaboration, or the lack of in-office training and mentoring for younger workers. These issues can instead be addressed by establishing coordinated in-office days, e.g. anchor days, where teams align their office presence to maximise engagement and cohesion. How best to coordinate such anchor days will be the focus of the upcoming GIWL report in June 2025, where we outline key strategies for redesigning work to harness the benefits of both in-office and remote working practices. In doing so, organisations can strengthen performance, culture, and team cohesion, while also supporting employees' work-life balance and overall wellbeing.

What this report also shows is that homeworking can be a very useful tool for managers who are facing challenges with sickness, absenteeism, skills shortage, recruitment, or staffing – a problem many companies are currently facing. Recent studies in the UK have shown that more than one out of eight companies faced staff shortages, with 80% of small and medium sized companies stating skills shortages (House of Commons Library, 2023). In addition to recent reports we have seen with regards to workers' preferences for homeworking¹⁵, this report further evidence how homeworking is now a considered a baseline for many workers. Employers should therefore consider offering remote and other forms of flexible working as a means to attract and retain talent, especially if they are suffering from problems of recruitment of skills. In fact, a study from the Behavioural Insights Team has indicated that jobs that advertised flexible working options attracted 19 to 30% more applications¹⁶.

15. For example, a recent report has shown that 85% of workers found work life balance as an important factor workers chose in terms of choosing their current or future job, 70% stating flexibility in location, 74% saying flexibility in scheduling is important.[https://www.research-live.com/article/news/research-finds-worklife-balance-more-important-than-pay-for-workers/id/5135013#:~:text=The%20study's%20findings%20also%20suggest,%25%20in%20the%202024%20report\).](https://www.research-live.com/article/news/research-finds-worklife-balance-more-important-than-pay-for-workers/id/5135013#:~:text=The%20study's%20findings%20also%20suggest,%25%20in%20the%202024%20report).)

16. <https://www.bi.team/case-studies/how-can-employers-be-encouraged-to-advertise-more-jobs-as-flexible/#:~:text=Jobs%20that%20advertised%20flexible%20working,seekers%20looking%20for%20flexible%20work.>

In sum, for HR leaders and policymakers, the message is clear: well-designed hybrid working models offer significant benefits for both employers and employees—supporting equality, talent retention, collaboration, and business resilience. Hybrid work also promotes family wellbeing by enabling more equitable sharing of care responsibilities, encouraging greater involvement of fathers and men in housework and childcare, and helping to reshape norms around masculinity. These changes can contribute to addressing broader societal challenges. Rigid RTO mandates risk reversing these gains—creating serious recruitment and retention challenges that can significantly harm organisations, while also having far-reaching negative consequences for workers, their families, and society as a whole.

The future of work requires a reinvention, not a return to old ways of work. It must be flexible, inclusive, and designed for the world we live in now, not based on outdated notions of productivity, based on presence or control. This is not a moment to look back, but to boldly adapt. The future of work is already here and those organisations that embrace it will lead faster, adapt smarter, and thrive stronger.

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