

# Written evidence submitted in collaboration with the eWorklife team, to the UK Parliament Lords' Select Committee COVID-19 Committee Inquiry, "Living online: the long-term impact on wellbeing" December 2020

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House of Lords COVID-19 Committee  
Inquiry: Living online: The long-term impact on wellbeing

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## A. Introduction

A.1. Our research group, [Eworklife](#), studies the role of technology in supporting people's ability to focus while working, and to recover from work during time off – as well as its role in blurring boundaries between work and non-work periods.

A.2. Between 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and 24<sup>th</sup> September 2020, we surveyed 426 individuals who started working from home as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We also conducted 25 follow-up interviews. This helped us achieve an in-depth understanding of the challenges that new home workers are experiencing, and the impact that this has on workers' wellbeing.

A.3. We found that working from home differs from working in the office in many respects that have the potential to affect workers' physical and mental health. The issues arising are unlikely to be solved solely on the part of the workers and require urgent attention and support from employers and policymakers. Therefore, we are responding to the Committee's call for evidence and responding to questions outlined in the 'Work' section in the Terms of Reference.

## B. Executive summary

B.1. Transitioning away from the office and to working remotely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in challenges to people's physical and mental health.

B.2. The key issues for mental health of workers included the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal lives, overwork, and lack of clarity about the future.

B.3. The key challenges for workers' physical health included prolonged sedentary activity, inappropriate workspaces and lack of physical activity.

B.4. Employers need to be accountable for ensuring that workers can separate their professional and personal lives, and that they take frequent breaks during the workday.

B.5. Workers who are working from home should be encouraged to actively take breaks and avoid prolonged sedentary activity, as this poses a threat to people's health and exacerbates the negative impact of inappropriate workspaces.

B.6. It is important to support companies in embracing a new normal of work - where some employees might remain at home, at least on a part-time basis, while members of staff who particularly struggle working from home might return to offices as soon as possible, perhaps on a rota basis, if needed.

## C. How will any long-term trend towards increased reliance on digital technology affect job opportunities and working conditions? What sectors are likely to see the biggest changes? What impact might these changes have on job satisfaction?

### C.1. Work intruding into personal time and issues around work-life balance

Findings: The sudden transition to working from home had a tremendous impact on people's ability to maintain work-life balance – which negatively affected both the ability to complete work tasks and to recover from work in the evenings and at the weekends. Issues included: Lack of boundaries between the office and home reduced motivation and resulted in both work and leisure becoming less rewarding.

Many people felt that they 'owed' the time they would normally have spent commuting to their workplace and started work earlier and/or finished later.

Some workers could not switch off notifications to enable them to relax or to focus because these were redirected to their personal phones.

These issues would often reduce productivity as many workers struggled with fatigue, lower quality of sleep, and trouble concentrating.

As people continue to work remotely, greater focus is needed on ensuring that people do not regularly work longer than their contractual hours.

#### Recommendations:

As people continue working from home, policymakers should put responsibility on employers to ensure that workers can disconnect from work and reclaim the time that, before the transition to working from home, would have been spent on leisure and commuting.

Where people do have to work overtime, time off in lieu (TOIL) should be provided to ensure that workers can rest and tend to other areas of their lives.

### C.2. The impact of working from home on ability to focus and be productive

**Findings:** Many home workers struggled with focus. When unable to concentrate on complex tasks, workers would instead busy themselves with 'lower hanging fruit' tasks such as responding to emails. This fed into the sense of working all the time but not accomplishing enough. A number of workers we surveyed also reported issues around online collaboration with colleagues, which sometimes led to worry and diminished productivity, as well as a sense of isolation.

Most workers are motivated and treat their jobs very seriously. However, many employers currently do not provide sufficient support to their workers to achieve an appropriate work-life balance. Many people appear to be in a vicious circle of overwork and fatigue, and do not take adequate breaks during their workday or in the evenings, which appears to have a negative impact on both their productivity and overall wellbeing.

#### Recommendations:

There is a need for research that explores how complex tasks (such as longer-form writing) can be broken into smaller tasks that can be accomplished even when only short windows of focus time are available. This could be especially important for ensuring that groups of workers particularly negatively affected by working from home (e.g., parents, carers) are able to fully participate in their working life and achieve their potential.

It will be important for the Government to fund research that identifies ways of collaborating effectively online. This will be particularly important to ensure that people who continue working solely from their homes and those who return to offices on a full-time or part-time basis are on equal footing.

## D. What do we know about how working from home can affect our physical and mental health, and what do employers and Government need to do to protect workers?

### D.1. Fewer breaks and more sedentary time for most workers

Findings: The sense of working all the time was also exacerbated by the loss of many of the opportunities for short active breaks that the office environment previously provided (such as walking to a meeting or a photocopier, walking to buy lunch). In addition, remote workers often fear that if they are not always on call, they will be perceived as unproductive. All this leads to fewer breaks, which in turn leads to fatigue, and prolonged sedentary time. Research consistently shows that prolonged periods of sedentary activity are associated with a number of negative health outcomes, which cannot be counteracted by exercise during leisure time alone. The loss of habitual breaks and the loss of opportunities for physical activity during the workday associated with the office environment puts workers at risk of overly long periods of sedentary activity.

#### Recommendations:

Managing work/home boundaries is a new concept for many employers and employees. For many, this is a novel conversation and will be a challenge for business owners, workers and policymakers. However, it is an issue and conversation that is growing and will intensify – the longer people work remotely. One example of policy making is the French “El Khomri” Law, which introduced the right to disconnect from work outside of work hours. Policymakers in the UK should explore ways to ensure that companies protect workers’ personal time. Policymakers may need to mandate more frequent breaks than are currently mandated by law, to protect the workforce from negative health outcomes. Employers should also be encouraged to communicate a positive attitude towards taking breaks, and especially to create opportunities for workers to undertake physically active breaks. This could be done, for example, through provision of short exercise classes during the workday and switching from videoconferences to phone calls that can be taken while walking. Most important, however, is for employers to consistently communicate to workers that taking breaks during the workday is encouraged by the employer.

## E. Who will be disadvantaged by any long-term trend towards home working? How will it affect people without adequate broadband or people who lack an appropriate workspace at home?

### E.1. Using the Internet at home

Findings: While we have not studied broadband issues directly, we recorded multiple mentions of home workers having IT issues and finding it hard to make sense of all the technologies that they had to use to work from home effectively. Some participants felt that while senior staff

received more training and support, junior staff could sometimes be left to figure it out by themselves. This sometimes created a sense of exclusion, if a particular team member had technical problems and others did not.

#### Recommendation:

Workers must have access to sufficient broadband, as well as support to understand how to make the most of their broadband connections, and how to avoid connectivity or technical issues.

### E.2. Inappropriate workspaces for many home workers, and the burden on physical and mental wellbeing

Findings: While some people had or were able to create a suitable work environment at home, many people did not have adequate space and therefore had to work in suboptimal ways, for example sitting at the kitchen table or on the sofa. This was especially the case for young people living in rented accommodation. Moreover, many people were not able to take needed office equipment such as a screen or a chair home. As a result, many of our participants reported back pain, eye strain and an overall lack of satisfaction with their workspace. We are concerned that remote workers may develop physical symptoms such as back pain and eye strain due to inadequate workspaces which, in due course, will put an additional burden on the NHS. More extensive guidance from the government to help individuals improve their home-work environments could have a significant return relative to its cost. Some employers provided workers with equipment such as desks, chairs or monitors. However, this solution was not widely adopted.

Many people struggled with anxiety brought about by the lack of information about when they might be able to go back to the offices – offering an opportunity to work some of the time from the office might help ease those concerns for workers who find working from home particularly challenging.

#### Recommendations:

Policymakers could provide accessible online resources that help home workers with troubleshooting and IT skill acquisition. Moreover, as the use of remote working tools is necessary for effective remote work, policymakers should make it compulsory for companies to provide optional IT training for all members of staff.

Policymakers should make it mandatory that companies ensure home workers take more frequent breaks than are currently accounted for by law, as well as monitoring companies' compliance with laws mandating periods of rest between workdays.

Some people will not be able to have an appropriate workspace at home due to a lack of space and companies should be encouraged to allow some of their workers to work from offices on a rota basis based on their need and ability to effectively work from home.

Policymakers should consider making it mandatory for companies to provide employees with ergonomic equipment where a health and safety assessment indicates that this is required (current HSE guidelines that suggest exploring alternative solutions such as supporting cushions

may be insufficient, considering that much of the workforce has worked from home for several months now). This is particularly important in relation to the possible inequalities that might arise, where people without home offices or without funds to buy equipment will continue to suffer from much worsened work conditions.

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