

NORDREGIO REPORT 2024:7

Remote Work in Rural Areas

Possibilities and uncertainties



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Summary (in English)

This study delves into the increasing relevance of remote work in fostering resilient municipalities and regions in rural and remote areas of the Nordic countries. By conducting policy reviews and interviews with planners and practitioners, the study examines ongoing efforts to harness remote work as a catalyst for rural development.

Emerging from the research is that hybrid work, mainly where employees split their time between home and office, is becoming the new norm in the Nordic regions. The hybrid work format's acceptance and implementation may vary and is in fact largely influenced by individual employers and employees perceptions. Notably, most public authorities do not have a formal remote work policy, relying instead on frameworks that were already in place before or developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. These arrangements often reflect the needs and wishes of individual employers and employees, emphasising a commitment to work-life balance and employee satisfaction.

Municipalities are however acknowledging remote work's potential in retaining and attracting people, particularly those with deep roots in the community, and in recruiting skilled workers needed for economic vitality. Politically, there is a drive across the Nordic region to amplify these opportunities and utilise for regional and rural development.

In some ways, regional and rural areas maintain more traditional, and a larger share of employment is still considered on-site jobs. However, various initiatives, including the creation of co-working spaces, spearheaded by private enterprises and public authorities alike, are bringing remote work to the forefront of rural development. Critical to this movement is the improvement of digital infrastructure without which the progress of remote work would be significantly hindered.

The study shows that this modern working trend of remote and hybrid working formats seems to be more than a mere solution to the crisis during the pandemic; it's a shift towards long-term regional development, with municipalities in rural areas engaging in providing the infrastructure and an environment conducive to such a transformation. Interestingly, it was found that there are few official remote work policies in place. Rather remote work has further been integrated into existing policies and procedures. Therefore, municipalities and regions are mainly focusing on their overall attractiveness in their pursuit of attracting remote workers, e.g., quality of life, affordable housing, infrastructure, environmental sustainability, social inclusivity, cultural and recreational amenities, public safety as well as

physical and natural environment. There are however also some challenges to be faced such as legislative bottlenecks, ensuring adequate public services, and negotiating issues around taxation related to remote working.

In essence, the research concludes that remote work can act as a strategy for sustainable regional development, potentially enriching communities with new skill sets, innovating business environments, and improving public services. This is something that is shared across the case study areas in the research. For municipalities in the Nordic regions, there is a general agreement that this new development entails a significant opportunity to use remote work to combat out-migration and enhance the overall quality of life. To leverage the full potential of this trend, there is a need for investment in digital infrastructure, the creation of more supportive work environments, and fostering regional attractiveness for both locals and potential newcomers. When integrated into broader strategies, remote work promises a more vibrant and sustainable future for these regions.

Sammanfattning (in Swedish)

Denna studie fördjupar sig i den ökande relevansen av distansarbete för att främja resilienta kommuner och regioner på landsbygden i de nordiska länderna. Genom policygranskningar och intervjuer med planerare och praktiker undersöker studien pågående insatser för att utnyttja distansarbete som en katalysator för landsbygdsutveckling.

Forskningen visar att hybridarbete, där anställda delar sin tid mellan hemmet och kontor, håller på att bli den nya normen i Norden. Acceptansen och implementering av hybridarbete varierar och påverkas till stor del av enskilda arbetsgivares och anställdas uppfattningar. De flesta regioner eller kommuner har ingen formell policy för distansarbete, utan förlitar sig istället på ramverk som redan fanns på plats före, eller utvecklades under, covid-19-pandemin. Dessa arrangemang återspeglar ofta enskilda arbetsgivares och arbetstagares behov och önskemål, och betonar engagemang för balans mellan arbete och privatliv samt nöjdhet hos anställda.

Kommuner ser potential med distansarbete för att behålla och attrahera invånare, särskilt de med rötter i samhället, men även för att rekrytera kvalificerad arbetskraft för ekonomisk vitalitet. Det finns en politisk drivkraft i hela Norden för att förstärka dessa möjligheter och utnyttja dem för regional utveckling och landsbygdsutveckling.

På vissa sätt är regionala områden och landsbygdsområden mer traditionella, med

en större andel av sysselsättningen som utförs på plats. Olika initiativ, inklusive utveckling av co-working spaces som drivs av både företag och offentliga myndigheter, sätter dock distansarbete i förgrunden för landsbygdsutveckling. Avgörande för denna utveckling är förbättring av digital infrastruktur, eftersom distansarbete är beroende av en väl fungerande digital anslutning.

Studien visar att den nya arbetstrenden med distans- och hybridarbetsformat verkar vara mer än bara en tidsbegränsad lösning på krisen under pandemin; det är en övergång mot mer långsiktig regional utveckling, där kommuner på landsbygden engagerar sig för att tillhandahålla infrastruktur och en miljö som främjar en sådan utveckling. Intressant nog visar studien att det finns få officiella riktlinjer eller policyer för distansarbete. Distansarbete har snarare integrerats i befintliga policyer och rutiner. Därför fokuserar kommuner och regioner främst på sin övergripande attraktionskraft i sin strävan att attrahera distansarbetare, till exempel livskvalitet, bostäder, infrastruktur, miljömässig hållbarhet, social inkludering, kultur- och rekreationsfaciliteter, allmän säkerhet samt fysisk och naturlig miljö. Det finns dock vissa utmaningar, till exempel flaskhalsar i lagstiftningen, att säkerställa goda offentliga tjänster och att förhandla om skattefrågor i samband med distansarbete.

I huvudsak drar forskningen slutsatsen att distansarbete kan fungera som en strategi för hållbar regional utveckling, och potentiellt berika samhällen med nya kompetenser, innovativa företagsmiljöer och förbättrade offentliga tjänster. Detta gäller för samtliga fallstudieområden i forskningen. För kommuner i Norden råder en enighet i att denna utveckling innebär en betydande möjlighet att använda distansarbete för att motverka utflyttning och höja den övergripande livskvaliteten. För att utnyttja den fulla potentialen i denna trend behövs investering i digital infrastruktur, skapandet av mer stödjande arbetsmiljöer samt främjande av regional attraktionskraft för både lokalbefolkningen och potentiella nykomlingar. När distansarbete integreras i bredare strategier, kan det bidra till en mer levande och hållbar framtid för dessa regioner.

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a transformative period for labour markets worldwide, causing an extensive and rapid adoption of flexible work arrangements, and profoundly altering conventional work-life dynamics. This widespread shift, precipitated by the necessity to move work away from centralised environments, challenged the idea of traditional workplaces and changed people's spatial relationships between home and work. As a result, it led to a rethinking of how work is organised, with far-reaching implications for the future of labour policies and the structure of workplaces (Vyas, 2022). The fact that so many workers were forced to change their working habits because of the pandemic, and that they had to perform their tasks from home, triggered what seems to have become a long-term shift in working culture (Müller et al, 2023; Randall et al, 2022; Dahik et al., 2020; OECD, 2021; Sostero et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, online tools and processes were quickly developed, adopted and refined to support online collaboration. In its aftermath, employees of both businesses and public institutions alike have seized the opportunity for a better balance between their work and private life by continuing to work, at least partially, from home. These evolving work models have substantially changed traditional employer–employee relationships, introducing a newfound emphasis on flexibility in work schedules and locations. The distinction between working hours and personal time, which was once clear-cut, has become blurred and redefined work-life balance. Moreover, this evolution of the workplace has led to a re-evaluation of people's attachment to their jobs and offices, reshaping their professional identities and everyday experiences. Workplaces have therefore continued to develop remote working policies, often in an attempt to better facilitate employee well-being while also minimising overhead costs. As a result, remote working, or some form of hybrid working, has become the new norm in some the sectors.

In the context of rural development, this shift shows indications of it having a significant impact on such areas and requires adaptations in policy. The rise in remote work opportunities completely changes urban-rural migration patterns, as individuals and families reassess their living and working environments in light of greater work flexibility. This phenomenon may stimulate the revival of rural areas and potentially attract a demographic that had previously gravitated towards urban centres for professional endeavours.

Regional studies examining the repercussions of remote work offer insights that are pivotal for understanding its broader implications. Research conducted by Region Stockholm reported that one-third of individuals who relocated out of Stockholm County cited remote work as a factor influencing their decision. Notably, this

demographic was disproportionately composed of self-employed individuals and those possessing higher qualifications. People with the flexibility to work remotely for half or more than half of their time often maintained their employment within Stockholm County after relocation. The primary motives driving these migration choices were identified as housing affordability and access to natural and outdoor spaces (Region Stockholm, 2022; Andersson and Wolf, 2022).

In Denmark, regular remote work is a reality for 35% of the workforce, with it now being the norm for people to work from home one day a week. This percentage increases to 44% within the office-bound job sector, and to 61% when considering digital- or knowledge-intensive fields (HBS Economics, 2023). While remote work is not the only impetus, longer commuting distances are observed among professionals who can work remotely, as opposed to those in roles requiring their physical presence. The trend stands out most significantly in urban settings. Across the border in Norway, remote work is embraced by 44% of the workforce, yet the bulk of this cohort works remotely less than half of the time. Office employees are predominantly telecommuting, with remote work being mostly adopted by people aged 40–49 years (Statistics Norway, 2023).

In Iceland, there has been a rise in the adoption of remote work post-pandemic, with 47% of its workforce engaging in some form of remote work as of 2023. Before the health crisis, this figure was slightly above 30%, with it approaching 50% at the peak of the pandemic. A notable shift is observed from 2018 when 69% of the workforce reported never working remotely, compared to around 50% in 2023. This shows a clear shift towards hybrid work arrangements in the aftermath of the pandemic (Hagstofa Íslands, 2024). Finland presents an interesting case where approximately 40% of workers were engaged in remote work in 2022 while the the Finnish workforce has the highest proportion of individuals who work remotely for more than half of their working hours, recording a rate of 24% (Statistics Finland, 2023).

These studies collectively show a pronounced shift towards hybrid working models across the Nordic region, which is influenced by the flexibility offered by advanced telecommunication technologies and changes in work culture. The studies somewhat point to an emerging dynamic where the choice to take up remote work could reshape residential and migratory trends.

A strategic response in rural development policy should take these possible changes into consideration. Investment in digital infrastructure becomes pivotal in supporting widespread, reliable access to remote work capabilities. As workers have increased autonomy over where they can be physically based, rural areas may benefit from economic diversification, property market stabilisation, and improvements to local services and businesses. However, these positive outcomes

depend on carefully curated rural development policies that are designed to maximise the advantages of flexible work arrangements and mitigate potential drawbacks, such as increased pressure on local infrastructure or social services. Furthermore, rural development initiatives may now need to incorporate provisions for co-working spaces, community networking events and services that cater to the needs of remote workers.

In framing policy for the post-pandemic work era, it becomes imperative for authorities and policymakers to tailor rural development strategies that capitalise on the transition towards flexible work arrangements while fostering sustainable growth in rural communities.

Nordregio's research project **Remote Work: Effects on Nordic people, places and planning 2021–2024** wanted to understand the implications of increased remote work for Nordic people, places and planning. Its aims were to understand the spatial changes and new trends of remote working and multi-locality, and how planners and policy makers are utilising these new potentials to shape urban and regional development. The first phase of this project produced a literature review and statistical analysis which were presented in two reports: [*Remote work: Effects on Nordic people, places and planning*](#) (Randall et al., 2022a) and [*Local and regional experiences of remote work and multilocality*](#) (Randall et al., 2022b).

This publication provides further insight into the emerging trends in rural and remote regions and municipalities in the Nordic countries. It is based on previous research findings and statistical data analyses, and interviews with stakeholders, as well as national, regional and local policies. A total of six case studies were conducted for this report to shed light on the effects that increased and more normalised remote work culture may have on regional development.

The project is funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers through a joint effort between the three thematic groups established under the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning 2021–2024. The research activities conducted for this report were funded by the thematic groups Green and Inclusive Rural Development, and Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions.

Summary of previous project results from Remote work and multilocality post-pandemic

The results of this report are based on and related to the findings of previous studies in the Remote work project. A short summary of these studies is given below. A comprehensive summary of the project, as well as all published reports and policy briefs, can be found at [project website](#).^[1]

In 2022, the project published two reports: *Remote work: Effects on Nordic people, places and planning* (Randall et al., 2022a) and *Local and regional experiences of remote work and multilocality* (Randall et al., 2022b). The findings support the clear potential for Nordic cooperation in developing and planning strategies to embrace remote work opportunities for Nordic municipalities and address the challenges associated with temporary and permanent population changes.

The first report, *Remote work: Effects on Nordic people, places and planning*, gives an overview of remote work patterns in the Nordic countries at the time of publication (May 2022). Prior to the pandemic, the Nordic Region was already unique in terms of its remote work patterns. From 2002 to 2019, more people worked from home in the Nordic countries than in any other part of Europe. As discussed in the report, there are a few possible explanations for this trend. They include the flexible work-life balance in the Nordic countries, the high levels of digitalisation and digital competencies among the general population, and the large share of workers in sectors where distance work is more commonly found, such as knowledge- and IT-intensive sectors. Furthermore, the high levels of trust reported in the Nordic countries play an important role in making remote work possible.

According to studies carried out in the Nordic countries, 50–65% of people who worked remotely during the pandemic expressed a desire to continue remote working after the pandemic, but not all the time. Most expressed a favourable situation of 2–3 days per week, suggesting the importance of hybrid workplaces and geographical flexibility.

The second report *Local and regional experiences of remote work and multilocality* makes a statistical analysis of migration and multilocality in two case studies conducted in Denmark and Finland. It also presents the results of a survey targeting the regional and municipal actors. The first case study on migration patterns out of Copenhagen, Denmark, found no significant change in migration

distance pre- and post-pandemic. Both before and after the pandemic, more than half of the migrants moved less than 25 km from Copenhagen, and only 20% moved to a municipality further than 100 km away. The study found no notable differences between genders. The second case study investigated whether people spent more time in a region with a larger number of second homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Google Mobility Data was used to investigate weekly and seasonal changes to the essential activity categories "Grocery & Pharmacy" and "Retail & Recreation" in the Etelä-Savo region in Finland. The study indicated that these activities were indeed affected by the pandemic.

Moreover, one-third of the respondents in the aforementioned survey considered increased opportunities for remote work to be an *important* factor for both permanent and temporary population developments in their region or municipality, and 46% considered it *one of many* factors.

The policy brief [Strengthening Nordic cooperation on remote work and multilocality](#) (Ormstrup Vestergård, 2022) summarises the findings of the first two reports and can be found here.[2]

In addition to the research above, a new Nordic urban-rural typology has been developed. This territorial typology is a tool that can be used to analyze settlement patterns and trends as well as other phenomena in different areas, ranging from the sparsest rural areas to the densest urban areas across the Nordic countries. This territorial typology is free to use and can be accessed [here](#). [3].

[1] <https://nordregio.org/research/remote-work-and-multilocality-post-covid-19/>

[2] <https://nordregio.org/publications/strengthening-nordic-cooperation-on-remote-work-and-multilocality/>

[3] <https://nordictypology.ubihub.io/>

Research framework and method

The rapid adoption of remote work has caused significant shifts in the labour dynamics of the Nordic regions, creating a potential impact on regional development and sustainability. The research framework and methodological approach designed to examine these shifts, which provide crucial insights into the evolving world of work post-pandemic, are based on previous findings as well as on six regional and municipal cases studies that were conducted specifically for the report. An additional cross-border case was also selected. The six case studies therefore provide information from both a municipal and regional level, and from different places on the urban-rural scale.

The Remote work and multilocality post-pandemic had three main aims. The overall aims of the project were to examine the potential of increased remote working practices for different regions and to investigate the Nordic municipalities' and regions' responses to greater opportunities of remote work. Finally, it also aimed to analyse the strategies employed by policymakers and planners to navigate the challenges, capitalise on openings and mitigate the uncertainties that the remote work evolution brings in the post-pandemic context. The results presented in this publication will primarily support the last two objectives, which focus on understanding and exploring the capabilities of remote working and multilocality across diverse regions.

The earlier phases of the project were navigated by two key assumptions. First, that remote working would become a long-term arrangement for a substantial segment of the Nordic workforce. Second, that the rise in remote working would reshape mobility and migration patterns, potentially increasing less densely populated areas. The research also aims to reflect on how remote work contributes to sustainability and resilience. More specifically, how remote work can help create sustainable regional development socially, environmentally and economically, and how it can help create more resilient rural regions and municipalities in the Nordic region.

Drawing from this, our formulated research question is: *How can remote work contribute to resilient municipalities and regions?*

The case studies will collectively address this question as well as the relationship between mobility, migration and multilocality in the possible transformation of Nordic local communities.

The methodological construct of this study adopted a multi-case approach based on the *maximum case variation sampling method* defined by Shakir (2002) as “cases, despite having diverse variations, exhibit important common patterns that cut across variations” (Shakir 2002). This selection method allows us to better answer our research question and the aims of the project, that is, how different

regions and municipalities approach and work with the potential related to remote work. The cases were selected to exhibit a common theme active engagement with remote work potential while presenting substantial diversity, notably in administrative structures (local, municipal, regional, macro-regional and self-governing territory) and response focuses (e.g. establishing co-working spaces, focusing on decentralisation of state-level jobs, increasing second home usage and promoting remote work in relation to 'workcations'). The case studies explored in this project aim to portray how remote work opportunities can look very different across the Nordic region.

The selection criteria for the cases included geographical location, population density and population development in previous activities. To identify these cases, Nordregio's New urban-rural typology of Nordic countries was utilised (Stjernberg, Vasilevskaya and Penje, 2023). The cases were classified as either **"rural areas close to urban areas"** or **"sparsely populated rural areas"**. They were selected from a list of ideal case studies based on the previously mentioned criteria and following advice from the reference group members of the project. This expert group consists of the members of Nordregio's thematic group for Green and Inclusive Rural Development and members of the thematic group for Green, Innovative and Resilient Regions.

The case studies included the municipalities of Keuruu in Finland, Stykkishólmur in Iceland and Orkland in Norway. The autonomous region of Åland Islands was included as a regional case, as well as the region of Jämtland Härjedalen in Sweden. The Danish island of Bornholm was then included as a cross-border case. The different cases sum up responses to the fast increase in remote work, illustrating various rural and regional development policies in connection to remote work opportunities in the Nordic region.

The principal method employed for the case studies embraced qualitative dimensions through interviews and field visits. These approaches were chosen to get insights into local situations, and the potentials and challenges of the accelerated remote working trend experienced by practitioners during and after the pandemic. The different actions that were identified in the first report from the project "[*Nordic Knowledge Overview*](#)" as responses to the accelerated trend of remote work are covered by these cases to show that remote work has the transformative potential of contributing towards the debate on regional and rural resilience and sustainability.

A total of 25 expert interviews were conducted with elected officials, practitioners and planners within local and regional government, business and workers' associations, operators of co-working spaces, as well as individuals working specially with skills and recruitment. The interviews were designed to collect comprehensive data and gather knowledge from policymakers, planners and community leaders about the interrelation between remote work and regional development policies, with a specific emphasis on social sustainability and quality

of life in rural areas. The interviews and field visits took place between June and October 2023.

Nordregio's researchers also conducted a policy and document review to compliment and prepare for the field visits. The initial data were collected between October 2022 and May 2023. Since the topic of remote work is continually unfolding, the researchers continuously reviewed additional policy reports, academic papers and media articles during the research activities. Combined, this data gathering was performed and then analysed to see whether public sectors and businesses are responding to and planning for a more sustainable rural and regional development in relation to remote work. And, if so, in what way. This included an investigation of municipal strategies to see if the resources allocated to facilitate remote work and the actions taken either encourage or utilise remote work opportunities. The aims were to explore the strategic opportunities for regions and municipalities to increase their permanent resident base or enhance the number of non-resident populations, such as second-home users and tourists, by offering remote work opportunities. Challenges encountered during the development were also highlighted to understand how the new initiatives, strategies or planning tools that have emerged in response to shifts in remote work trends have played out in practice.

The initial phase of the study indicated that the most significant demographic shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic were seen in metropolitan regions, with a notable trend of individuals relocating from urban centres to suburban areas. At the same time, some of the more rural or isolated regions, which had previously been experiencing a decline in population, saw these declines stabilise or even slightly reverse (Lindall et al, 2022a). In light of all these observations, this research concentrated on six more rural and less densely populated areas to explore the role of remote work in sustaining and potentially growing their populations. A parallel study focusing on more urban contexts has been published simultaneously.^[4] In the next step a joint analysis will be the foundation of a common report.

Report overview

After this introduction, the six case studies are presented in separate chapters. Each case is introduced, framing the ongoing and previous work with remote work. Main challenges and opportunities are highlighted with a short discussion and key take aways. The report concludes with a discussion on the results of the study and main conclusions.

[4] <https://pub.nordregio.org/r-2024-5-remote-work-in-smaller-towns/>



Case study rural areas

Case 1: Keuruu, Finland

Keuruu is the sixth largest municipality in Central Finland by population and is situated just 80 kilometres from the regional capital, Jyväskylä (Keski-Suomen liitto 2021; Keuruu website). Despite its strategic location, recent studies highlight Keuruu's limited engagement in multilocal living, which is evidenced by low frequency of travel for work, education, or leisure (Lehtonen et al. 2023). There has been minimal public sector support for remote working, yet there is an untapped potential linking long-term development and remote working, as indicated by surrounding regions and education sector initiatives (Interviewees 1, 2 and 3). The surrounding Central Finland has been at the forefront of support for remote work, setting a precedent that Keuruu might well consider for future development (Interviewee 4).

Demographics and labour market

Keuruu has a population of around 10,000, with the main township being home to 6,000 residents (Keuruu.fi). Projections indicate a stable demographic with a slight anticipated dip of 2% by 2030, though the working population might face a sharper decline (Keski-Suomen liitto 2021). Despite this trend of a contracting population, especially among working-age individuals, the allure of the Keuruu lakeside and its 2,000 second homes remains strong (Aro 2019).). The slight increase in remote

workers during the pandemic was somewhat visible in the municipality, for example, with an increase in participation at village association events and the council of summer house owners (Interviewees 1, 2, 3).

The population of Keuruu has been steadily decreasing for decades with a 10–15% decrease over the last ten years. As for the birth rate, it has decreased by 36% over the last decade, and at an approximate rate of 0.9%/year over the last five years. The population of people of working age has also decreased by 2%. The pandemic had no effect on the birth rate with the population continuing to decrease even then. The population of Keuruu has decreased particularly in the urban area of the municipality, while the situation in the more sparsely populated areas has remained relatively unchanged. The old-age dependency ratio of Keuruu is significantly higher than the national average and, according to estimations, there will be 85 elderly people per 100 hundred people of working age by 2040 as the proportion of people of working age may decrease to 25%. (Aro 2019; Keski-Suomen liitto 2021).

The municipality's financial challenges have led to reduced public services, together with cutbacks to state funding post-healthcare reform, highlighting the need for innovative economic change (Mertaniemi 5.4. 2023). In 2023, Keuruu's employment rate was slightly higher than the national average (TEM 2023). Within an hour of travel of Keuruu, there are around 215,000 people and 82,000 jobs. A positive characteristic of the labour market is that only 2.1% of the population is considered as long-term unemployed. The number of private enterprises has been on the decrease in recent years, but it is still above the national average with 70.3 companies per 1000 inhabitants. (Aro 2019).

Remote work policies and strategies

There is no remote work-focused strategy in place in Keuruu or the Central Finland region. Although Finland supports remote work as a policy goal and has conducted several studies on the matter, there is no specific remote work strategy at national level. Rather, the expectation is that regions and municipalities make their own decisions. Associations such as the Association of Finnish Villages have already developed their own projects linking remote work with rural attractiveness. (Interviewees 1, 2, 3 and 4; Rannanpää and Hovi 2021). Indeed, instead of official strategies and policies, work done to support remote work in Keuruu has been conducted in the form of projects, either on the municipality's own initiative or with external funding (often from EU funds). The target groups of these projects have most often been young people or returnees (people who have lived in Keuruu before and still have ties to the place) (Interviewees 1, 2). It is likely, however, that the regional council of Central Finland will highlight the issue in its next regional development strategy (Interviewee 4).

The municipally-owned business development company Keulink works with projects and campaigns aiming to increase the number of people moving to the

municipality, and to improve the overall quality of life and work in Keuruu to keep people there. In addition, there have been EU-funded projects in the Central Finland region, working under the LEADER groups or the regional association of Central Finland, for example.

Discussion: connecting plans and policies

Existing ways to support remote work

Remote work is regarded as an essential part of developing the industry sector in many municipalities. Therefore, several municipalities of Central Finland have taken action to begin supporting their citizens' remote working opportunities by establishing remote work hubs. The main reason to work at a hub instead of at home is reliable and fast internet connections, but there is also the important benefit of being able to network and build new types of working communities. The Central Finland municipalities of Viitasaari, Äänekoski, Pihtipudas and Jämsä have been leading the way here, and other initiatives are planned elsewhere. In addition to office spaces, some hubs also offer meeting rooms, connect with local educational institutions for collaborations or provide other private services (Interviewee 4).

Compared to its neighbours, Keuruu has not supported remote working hubs to the same extent as a municipality, which demonstrates the existing potential for the public sector to take action. The municipal economic development company Keulink opened a remote workspace in Keuruu in 2021, repurposing their empty offices as workspaces for remote workers or cooperation partners. In 2023, one municipal deputy suggested opening a shared house for small companies to have a proper space available to carry out their operations. The proposal was rejected by the municipal parliament as it considered that a shared space for remote work and education would be more useful (Mertaniemi 15.2. 2023). Currently, a more official municipal remote workspace is missing, which also limits the municipality's potential to attract remote workers. Offering physical spaces for remote work is both an important way to build new communities and to demonstrate that the municipality is committed to supporting this new way of working (Interviewees 1,2).

Municipal campaigns led by the company Keulink have succeeded in increasing the attractiveness of the municipality and adding awareness of its remote work opportunities. The main target group of these campaigns has been people who have lived in Keuruu before and might be inclined to move back. One campaign launched in 2021 was called "Kokovartaloelämä Keuruulla" ("Full-body life in Keuruu"). During the campaign, people were invited to ask for offers from the municipality to help them relocate to Keuruu. The campaign will start again in the autumn of 2023 (Interviewees 1, 2, 3; Munkeuruu.fi).

There are several multilocal education models in place under the Monikampus

Finland initiative that aims to offer a wider range of education options with interregional collaboration. Currently, the only secondary education available in Keuruu is a high school, and by collaborating with other regional educational institutes such as the Jyväskylä Educational Consortium Gradia, it has become possible to offer a degree program in nursing, training programs for recruiting and other education options. The initiative continues to identify the possibilities and interests of local young and unemployed people, as well as to map potential distant working spaces. This work has been done mainly in the framework of pilot projects, and there is a goal to establish a distant learning venue in the future to create a more unified campus for distant learning as well (Monikampus Finland 2023; Antila 2023).

Viable remote connections also attract people who come to the municipality to work or study physically, as a way for them to stay in touch with their home area after leaving. For example, several high school students from countries like Myanmar, Vietnam and Iran are studying in Keuruu and several of them have reported an interest to remain in the area (Interviewees 1, 2, 3).

How remote work could be supported more effectively

The barriers to remote working are very similar across Finnish municipalities. In simple terms, they are related to the digital infrastructure, availability and quality of other municipal services, and how well workplaces have organised their remote work structures (Interviewee 4).

The digital infrastructure of Keuruu, namely the lack of broadband connections, is a major barrier for increasing remote working possibilities in the municipality. Since the situation is much better in neighbouring municipalities like Jämsä, where investments in fibre optic connections have been made, it is difficult for Keuruu to appear more attractive. In Jämsä, it has been noted that apartments with fibre optic connections sell significantly faster than those without. (Interviewees 1,2 and 3). Digital infrastructure can be improved either by investing in fibre optics or by establishing remote working hubs, which is less costly (Interviewee 5).

In addition to services directly linked to supporting remote work, the capacity of the municipality to offer an all-around quality of life is important. Simply put, remote work opportunities do not constitute a reason to move somewhere but they are essential for enabling such a decision (Interviewee 4). Here, the availability and quality of public and private services, recreational opportunities and housing play an important role, as well as the surrounding nature. These characteristics are often well-known by the people already living in the area, therefore marketing and branding could help make them better known to people interested in remote working in Keuruu. It would also be beneficial to lift some barriers such as the difficulties newcomers might face in finding information on public and private services (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4). However, it is likely that people already living in the

area or who own summer houses there will benefit most significantly from remote work opportunities (Interviewees 4, 5).

The experts interviewed agree that the most effective way to increase the attractiveness of the municipality in terms of remote work is to target people who already have a link to the place. In addition to returnees, this can also include summer house or second home owners. Other municipalities in Central Finland have already taken actions to support summer house owners in transforming their summer houses into year-round homes, for example by making zoning adjustments. Another group of people who may consider relocating there, are those who live elsewhere but visit Keuruu as remote workers. Other municipalities are already finding ways to attract these remote workers to the area so that they stay for longer periods and possibly even consider moving there. Remote work can thus affect the future development of a place in two ways, either regarding the people living in Keuruu and working elsewhere or the other way around (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4).

Lessons learned

Remote work impacts a municipality's future development in two ways: either by having people living there and working elsewhere or vice versa. Both ways are important tools for a municipality to improve its vitality and maintain essential services. Enabling people to work elsewhere while living in a rural place like Keuruu helps combat out-migration (especially of people of working age) and maintain public services and recruiting people who will continue to live in urban areas, for example, makes it easier to find workers who possess certain skills.

Remote work can improve the vitality of a municipality both directly and indirectly. An example of a direct improvement is establishing a remote working hub in a municipality as it offers an alternative to working from home for remote workers and benefits from secure internet connections. Whereas an indirect improvement would emerge organically, for example, after several knowledge workers start to form their own communities around municipal remote work hubs. As a result, municipalities have developed new innovation environments, meeting places and improved private services that may continue to attract more remote workers and give birth to new ideas. In some municipalities, remote working hubs have extended to environments that also include educational institutions.

The potential for remote work to keep a skilled workforce in an area is more significant than that of attracting completely new residents. Another important target group is people who already have a link to the municipality, such as summer house owners or possible returnees.

Remote work has become an essential part of modern working culture and something much deeper than a result of the COVID pandemic. In larger cities, its

development is driven by the private sector, but in smaller rural municipalities, the first supportive actions need to come from municipalities. Therefore, remote working opportunities (internet connections and hubs) are becoming such an essential part of rural vitality that they could be considered an essential public service.



Source: Ágúst Bogason

Case 2: Stykkishólmur, Iceland

Stykkishólmur is a municipality located in the western part of Iceland, on the Snæfellsnes peninsula. The municipality covers an area of approximately 1,200 square kilometres and had a population of 1,308 inhabitants in 2023 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2023a). The town of Stykkishólmur is the largest settlement in the municipality and serves as its administrative centre. It is situated on a promontory overlooking Breiðafjörður Bay and is surrounded by mountains and small islands. The town has a long history as a fishing village and was an important trading centre during the 19th century. Today, Stykkishólmur is known for its picturesque beauty, traditional houses and tourism. One of the most popular attractions in the area is the Snæfellsjökull National Park, which is home to a glacier-capped volcano and a variety of birdlife.

Regional characteristics

As a small town, the labour market in Stykkishólmur is relatively limited compared to larger urban areas. The town's economy is essentially based on fishing and tourism, and public sector jobs. Agriculture is also prominent on the outskirts of the town and in the surrounding region. Historically, Stykkishólmur is most known for its fishing industry, which is a major source of income for the local economy and an important provider of jobs. The town has a modern harbour that is home to a number of fishing vessels and also has ferry connections to West Iceland and the Westfjords. In recent years, Stykkishólmur has also participated in some green-energy initiatives. The municipality boasts a range of private services that support

the tourism industry and accommodate the local population's needs, such as shops, restaurants and personal care businesses. Tourist amenities, including leisure and nature exploration facilities, support a thriving hospitality sector (interviews and Stykkishólmur, 2023).

The number of residents in the municipality has been relatively steady since the millennium although a gradual decline can be detected from around 2003 until 2010. Since then, the population has grown slowly but steadily which correlates to the increased influx of international tourists to Iceland during the same time period (Bogason et al, 2021). Stykkishólmur offers comprehensive public services, including healthcare, education and cultural facilities, catering to both residents and the growing number of visitors. Connectivity via road and sea is vital, with transport routes facilitating regional engagement and positioning the area as a maritime and renewable energy hub. Stykkishólmur is a central point for the islands in Breiðafjörður Bay and for connections to the Westfjords. Being located two hours away from the capital of Reykjavík, also makes it a popular area for second homes, summer houses and cottages.

In the nearby region there are some other municipalities e.g. Dalabyggð (with a population of 665), Grundarfjarðarbær (840), Snæfellsbær (1666), Eyja- og Miklaholtshreppur (102) and Borgarbyggð (3868) which is located between Stykkishólmur and the capital of Reykjavík (Hagstofa Íslands, 2023b and Samband, 2022). All these municipalities have public co-working spaces that are intended for those working in the public sector, both state and municipal, while some of the co-working spaces are also available for private partners (Stykkishólmur, 2023 and NýVest, 2023). With its modest population, Stykkishólmur is an example of a community transitioning from historic trade and fishing origins to a more diverse, sustainable economy. It should also be noted that there is a considerable number of second homes in the area, which can increase the total population of the area at certain times of the year (Hagstofa Íslands, 2023a)

Policies and strategies related to remote work

Pre-pandemic, regional development policies, underpinned by the Icelandic government's 2018 charter, had already earmarked remote work as a strategic focus for decentralising the labour market (Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2018). In 2018, the governing charter signed by the Icelandic government included a section dedicated to promoting regional development and equal access to job opportunities. One aspect of this initiative is increasing the number of jobs without a physical placement.

In the current regional plan (2022–2036), the goal is to have 10% of all advertised jobs in ministries and their institutions without a physical location by 2024, ensuring that residence does not affect recruitment. The plan suggests that these jobs can be carried out in establishments where other activities are taking place. Since then,

the new governments charter has developed this goal further, suggesting that all governmental jobs should be advertised without a specific placement, unless strong arguments are raised for the work to be carried out in a specific place (Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2021).

The ongoing regional plan furthers this agenda, envisioning an increase in location-independent roles and proposing that such positions be hosted within communal establishments (Althingi, 2018). The Icelandic Development Institute has compiled information on possible housing options for jobs without a location. Additionally, a five-year action plan includes the implementation of remote workstations between 2022–2026, aiming to distribute government jobs more evenly outside the capital's work area. Stykkishólmur aligns with this vision, featuring various coworking spaces as conduits for remote employment. Co-working spaces have been opening in the different parts of the Vesturland region since 2021 and more are under development. They are located around or in the main towns and villages of the region as well as in the two universities that operate there, The Agricultural University of Iceland (Landbúnaðarháskóli Íslands) and the Bifröst University (LBÍ, 2023; Bifröst, 2023). In Stykkishólmur municipality alone, there are four different co-working spaces intended for remote work (Byggðastofnun, 2023).

Discussion: Connecting policies to regional attractiveness

Stykkishólmur entered the remote work debate before the pandemic, guided by the national aim for balanced labour market opportunities. Goals set forth in the 2018–2024 regional plan earmark an ambitious push for location-independent roles in government institutions – a clear endorsement of the potential of remote work to encourage flexible flexibility across Iceland (Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2018; Althingi, 2018; interviews).

Aligning with this national framework, Stykkishólmur has developed an infrastructure that embraces remote work through the creation of co-working spaces. These spaces not only serve public sector entities but also open doors for private partnerships, illustrating a synergy between remote work initiatives and community development (Byggðastofnun, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend of remote working in Iceland, prompting institutions to advertise jobs that are not tied to a specific place of business. As of 2023, there are more than 126 office centres to accommodate individuals working for the government without a physical location and additional spaces where private individuals, innovators and entrepreneurs can work with good internet connections and good general conditions (Byggðastofnun, 2023).

While the majority of the government's full-time positions are concentrated in the capital area, where most of the country's population resides, it is worth noting that the percentage of government jobs in the capital area (72%) exceeds the percentage of inhabitants living there (64%). This highlights the importance of

initiatives aimed at promoting employment opportunities outside the capital, fostering regional development and creating a more balanced distribution of jobs across the country.

Before the pandemic, there were already efforts to promote remote work in the public and private sectors. The Ministry of Infrastructure is now driving the process of implementing remote work, particularly the initiative called "jobs without a specific location". The Icelandic government sees the trend of increased remote working as an opportunity for rural development and more balanced regional development. It may also ease pressure on urban infrastructure, improve work-life balance and increase productivity (Byggðastofnun, 2023). The government is providing support, incentives and direction to local and regional actors to adapt to these changes (interviews).

The sentiment towards increased remote working in the public and private sectors post-pandemic is generally positive, with more flexibility and openness to remote work. However, there are challenges to address, such as ensuring access to reliable internet connections in rural areas and addressing issues related to municipal taxes for individuals working from second homes or cottages (interviews). Overall, the public sector adapted to promote remote working during the pandemic, and this experience is likely to influence the future structure and ways of working in the ministries. It may lead to changes in office spaces and a greater emphasis on digital meeting spaces and areas for concentration.

Furthermore, the local authorities' collaboration with the SSV (West Iceland Association of Municipalities) and their efforts to develop office centres demonstrate a forward-thinking approach to enhance regional appeal and promote jobs without a fixed location (SSNV, 2021). NýVest, a non-profit organisation founded in April 2022, plays a crucial role in connecting various stakeholders, sharing information and assisting entrepreneurs in the west. As a link between different parties such as working life, academia and research, NýVest provides support in grant applications and serves as a leading source of grant information. It aims to contribute to the local communities by fostering the growth of centres and co-working spaces (NýVest, 2023).

In Vesturland, the innovation network serves as the region's sponsor in matters of innovation and facilitates connections between entrepreneurs and business partners. Through strong cooperation in the west, the region aims to achieve success in fostering new job opportunities, promoting innovation and increasing the number of location-independent jobs.

Remote work emerges as a transformative force for Stykkishólmur, invigorating its allure for potential residents, second-home owners and tourists. Beyond enhancing the local economy, the rising prevalence of remote work propels advancements in community services, private sector growth and the vitality of civil society. The

municipality's engagement with initiatives such as SSV and NýVest (SSV, 2021; Nývest, 2023) further reinforces the commitment to creating an ideal environment for telecommuting and digital connectivity.

Lessons learned

Stykkishólmur hopes to transform its rural economy further through initiatives like the remote work culture. This transformation could see second-home owners and tourists becoming permanent residents, who are empowered by remote work and contribute to the town's growth. The development of remote jobs in official institutions will lead to a more equal distribution of employment, it may also attract new talent and retain the local population. The local authorities in Stykkishólmur are actively running office centres to develop the remote work trend. This is both done in cooperation with private partners and national authorities and institutions, to support private and public employees alike. This forward-thinking approach demonstrates public and private actors' commitment to job diversification and creating opportunities without fixed locations.

Stykkishólmur is an example of a municipality that embraces remote work in its rural development. National initiatives, like the jobs without location programme, show determination to decentralise the workforce and foster digital collaboration. The work with co-working spaces also demonstrates the town's ability to balance tradition and innovation by housing more traditional jobs with new solutions. With further strategies aimed at reinforcing this trend and providing comprehensive support to remote professionals, Stykkishólmur is poised to leverage its unique offerings as an Icelandic paradise and drive regional development.

Naturally, there are certain challenges that may arise. Local taxes can be a concern, as employees working remotely may be residents of other municipalities and therefore pay their local taxes there. Interviewees addressed this as a concern in Iceland that must be solved fairly. Housing can also be a challenge, as remote workers may face difficulties finding affordable and suitable housing options, especially since they are often competing with tourism. Another challenge is digital infrastructure, however, reliable high-speed internet connections are available in nearly all municipalities.

The ongoing evolution of remote work puts Stykkishólmur at the forefront of modern rural development. By embracing digital and location independence, the town is successfully navigating the changing nature of work. The balance between preserving its traditions and capitalising on evolving opportunities places Stykkishólmur as a model for other rural communities seeking to harness the potential of remote work for their own development.



Source: Ágúst Bogason

Jobs without location

In the regional development plan for 2018–2024, an action was implemented to create more equal opportunities and promote remote state jobs. The project objective was for 10% of all advertised positions in ministries and their institutions to be independent of location by 2024, so that place of residence would not have an impact on staffing decisions. It is proposed that such positions be carried out at workstations (i.e. in premises where other activities are conducted), and therefore, it is important to have information about available premises in rural areas. In the current development plan for 2022–2036, this action is further implemented. Non-location-specific employment, which is a continuation of the previous action, is intended to support the establishment of workplace clusters throughout the country and, on the other hand, to address the transaction costs associated with positions located in such clusters or other workplaces outside the greater area of the capital.



Case 3: Orkland, Norway

Orkland municipality is a municipality located in Trøndelag county, Norway. It was established on 1 January 2020, following the merging of four smaller municipalities: Agdenes, Meldal, Orkdal and Snillfjord. It is situated in the traditional district of Orkdalen. The administrative centre of the municipality is the town of Orkanger, which is situated in the Orkdalen valley in Trøndelag county. Orkanger is located on the Orkla River and has a population of approximately 5,000 inhabitants. It is an important industrial centre in the region, with various industries such as engineering, manufacturing and technology (Orkland kommune, 2023). Orkanger is also known for its nature attractions, with the river and surrounding nature providing opportunities for outdoor activities like hiking, fishing and boating. The surrounding region as a whole is characterised by its landscapes, including the mountains, forests and lakes. Orkland is also known for agriculture, dairy farming in particular, which benefits from the fertile soils and abundant natural resources in the valley.

Regional characteristics

The town of Orkanger in Orkland municipality is approximately 37 kilometres south of Trondheim, the third-largest city in Norway, giving it fairly close proximity to one of the major cities in the country. It is well-connected to other parts of Norway and its proximity to Trondheim gives residents easy access to a wider range of services and amenities. The municipality has seen moderate population growth in recent years.

Orkland offers a mixture of public and private sector job opportunities. The public sector is a fairly large employer in the area, especially in the sectors of education, healthcare and local government (interview 2 and technology (Orkland kommune, 2023). The private sector includes manufacturing, services and tourism. The region is also known for agriculture, forestry and fishing. Orkanger is an important industrial centre, with several industrial companies and factories, including a large industrial park. The municipality also benefits from tourism due to its scenic nature and historical sites. The labour market in Orkland and its surrounding areas is relatively stable, but specific job market conditions have varied over time (interview 1).

Orkland and the wider region of Trøndelag generally enjoy a good standard of living. The area has access to quality healthcare facilities, education and public services, and benefits greatly in its proximity to Trondheim in this sense. Orkland has witnessed significant development in recent years, with a focus on modernising infrastructure, promoting sustainable industries and enhancing the quality of life for residents. The municipality aims to attract businesses and more permanent residents, and enhance transportation networks and secure investments to create more job opportunities and ensure long-term growth.

Policies and strategies related to remote work

At a national level, Norway does not have a specific remote work strategy or policy in place. None the less, there are several policies both at national and local level that address related matters. The *Strategy for small towns and larger towns as regional powerhouses* focuses on some key aspects related to regional development, remote work and distance learning (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2021). The government aims to prioritise measures that support the co-location of small and new businesses, fostering collaborations between companies and knowledge environments. This is viewed as a way to enhance regional growth and create opportunities for innovation and economic development in smaller communities. In the same strategy, the government also recognises the potential of remote work and the importance of involving businesses early on in the process. It emphasises the need for smart procurement and contract strategies, allowing employers to make better use of the workforce nationwide. This flexible approach is also seen as a way to help create opportunities for individuals to work from anywhere, reducing geographical constraints and supporting regional development (interview 3).

Additionally, the government encourages the exploration of remote workspaces and shared office spaces. It urges municipalities and county municipalities to collaborate with private sector stakeholders to maximise the potential of local infrastructure and create workspaces for entrepreneurs and remote workers. By utilising existing buildings and establishing shared office spaces for government

employees, it aims to promote regional development and provide opportunities for remote and distance work. To ensure connectivity and accessibility, the government plans to invest in roads, expanding residential and labour markets and linking them more closely to small towns and larger urban areas. This investment will improve transportation infrastructure, making it easier for individuals to commute to work or access services, ultimately enabling more flexible remote work arrangements (interview 2).

Digital infrastructure plans also highlight the use of technology to provide smart solutions for transportation in rural areas, improve connectivity and enable remote work opportunities in these regions. A plan to deliver national 5G coverage will support remote work by providing reliable, high-speed internet access to remote and rural areas. In addition, the government aims to ensure that every household and business in Norway has access to minimum download and upload speeds of 100 Mbit/s and 10 Mbit/s, respectively, by the end of 2025. This commitment to improving digital infrastructure will enable seamless remote work opportunities and ensure that individuals can effectively participate in the digital economy from any location in the country (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet, 2021).

The local policies of Orkland municipality are in harmony with national policies. Their specific plans, e.g. attracting more residents and creating more meaningful opportunities, as well as their participatory developed plan, all recognise remote work opportunities as important. While these plans focus on rural development, attracting new residents and remote work opportunities in Orkland municipality, they all refer back to the goal of strengthening the settlement base. This is mainly discussed in terms of improving municipal services, promoting economic development, creating attractive residential environments and targeting specific groups through strategic marketing (Orkland kommune, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2021c and interviews).

Orkland's policies also highlights the importance of collaboration with businesses, organisations and cultural institutions to provide employment opportunities and a sense of community. The municipality recognises the need for skilled workers and skill development to meet future demands, ensure job diversification and provide quality services. To attract and retain people, factors such as meaningful work, good working conditions and opportunities for personal and professional growth are highlighted. Lastly, the reputation of the municipality's brand and overall attractiveness are prioritised for it to become an appealing place to live and work (interviews).

Discussion: Harnessing remote work for comprehensive regional development

The landscape of remote work and migration efforts is a complex one as

highlighted by interviewees in Orkland municipality. The municipality aims to promote sustainable and productive work environments while also seeking to increase migration and strengthen its settlement base. Remote work is identified as a significant aspect of work arrangements in Orkland municipality. Remote work is discussed internally and adopted to existing policies but mainly it is viewed as one of the features that can make the municipality an attractive place to live.

Many employees that have the possibility to do so, have already adopted hybrid work arrangements since the pandemic. Those working in planning in Orkland see the possibilities to utilise remote work opportunities as a regional development tool. Discussions mainly highlight the positive perception of job design and leadership among remote workers in hybrid work arrangements, but they are also aware of possible negative aspects of full-time remote work such as work-life balance and health (Olafsen et al, 2023).

In terms of migration efforts, the municipality recognises that overall economic development is the strongest influencing factor for population growth. However, they also seek to influence migration by creating conditions that enhance the settlement base, focusing on quality municipal services, economic development, attractive residential environments and strategic marketing. Repeatedly interviewees emphasise the importance of collaboration with businesses, organisations, voluntary groups and cultural institutions to provide employment opportunities and a welcoming local community for new residents. The most important factor is the general attractiveness of the municipality as a place to live. Therefore, the municipality's efforts also extend to marketing their strengths, qualities and opportunities. They also acknowledge the need to develop new residential areas to create attractiveness for housing, business, culture and tourism. Moreover, digital infrastructure needs to be in place. Volunteerism and collaboration are key components of the community's history, and both play a crucial role in its success (Ingelsrud et al, 2022 and interviews).

The focus on co-working spaces in this relation is also prominent in Orkland. Such facilities are viewed as having benefits for remote workers in various ways. They provide well-equipped workspaces, fostering productivity and focus. They also encourage collaboration and networking among individuals from different industries. It is also highlighted that they are cost-effective alternatives to traditional office spaces and are often subsidised by authorities. Moreover, they help maintain a healthy work-life balance by creating a clear separation between work and personal life, and are therefore viewed as an optimal environment for innovation to thrive and to attract possible new remote workers (interviews).

Attracting new residents, creating a more diverse job market, securing skilled labour and strengthening the economic foundations of the municipality are clear priorities. Challenges faced by the municipality are discussed openly, including climate change, the green transition and living conditions. The municipality

expresses its need to develop sustainably, socially, economically and environmentally in line with national and global frameworks, and attracting new people is seen as absolute key in this transition. Digitalisation, remote work and providing more distance education are often mentioned by interviewees when addressing this. It is also highlighted that this requires close collaboration with various stakeholders, including state authorities, businesses, voluntary organisations and the residents themselves. Challenges related to demographics and increased demands for services in Orkland municipality play a vital role in the prioritised policies. The municipality recognises the need for strategic staffing and competence development to meet changing needs and provide high-quality municipal services. They aim to professionalise recruitment efforts, harmonise common practices and increase the number of apprenticeships available in the region. Additionally, they emphasise the importance of reducing social exclusion and promoting an inclusive community in their efforts to promote themselves as an attractive place to live, and to work.

Lessons learned

In conclusion, our case study of Orkland municipality sheds a light on the complexity of remote work, migration efforts and the challenges faced by Orkland municipality. While striving to create sustainable work environments, promote migration and address demographic challenges, the municipality is confronted with several obstacles. One of the challenges is attracting and retaining employees. Despite focusing on factors such as meaningful work, good working conditions and opportunities for development, the municipality needs to continuously adapt and improve what it has to offer to remain competitive in the labour market. The municipality acknowledges the importance of its brand, reputation, and overall attractiveness as an employer and as a place to establish a business. However, enhancing these aspects poses ongoing challenges.

Remote work is seen as one of the puzzles of attracting more residents to the region. However, the main focus of the municipality is on the overall attractiveness of Orkland for residents, and the quality of life it can offer. This includes a clean and safe environment, access to good basic necessities such as healthcare and education, and a sense of community. Also to be viewed as a place with opportunities for personal growth, career advancement and a healthy work-life balance. The beautiful natural surroundings are also seen as contributing to the attractiveness of Orkland, by providing opportunities for recreation and relaxation. Additionally, the availability of infrastructure, including transportation options, good connectivity and affordable housing, are things that Orkland highlights, with remote work possibilities being seen as one element in this large equation.

Additionally, the government's approach recognises the need for regional development and the adoption of remote work opportunities. In conclusion,

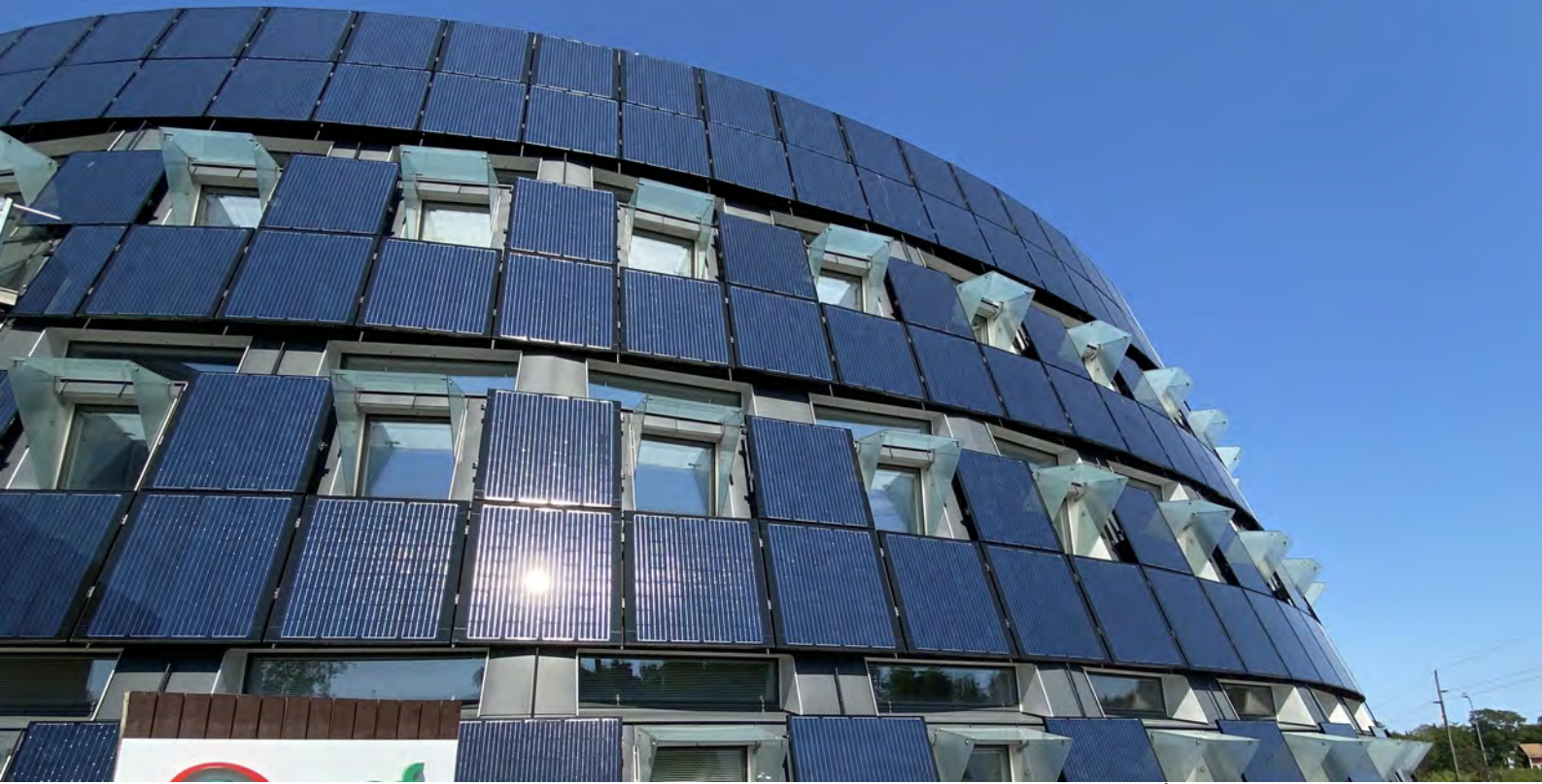
Orkland municipality is committed to addressing these challenges and capitalising on the opportunities presented by remote work and possible migration. By continuously adapting its strategies, investing in digital infrastructure, and fostering inclusive and sustainable work environments, the municipality aims to overcome these hurdles and create thriving communities that offer equal opportunities for all.

Statens Hus in Norway

The pilot initiative "Statens Hus" (State House) was launched in the municipalities of Stad, Orkland, Narvik and Lyngdal in 2021, and will continue until 2024. The collaboration involves the municipal and state agencies located in the pilot municipalities, county municipality and state administration. The municipality acts as the local project leader.

The goal of the "Statens Hus" pilot is to strengthen collaboration in competence clusters and potentially co-locate smaller units of state agencies in the same residential and labour market region. The aim is to strengthen the overall professional, public competence environment in the region and make it easier to retain and recruit expertise in the state agencies located in the pilot areas. The pilot initiative is intended to provide knowledge for the further development of localisation policies for smaller places.

The individual pilot projects have specified their local sub-goals. Some of the prioritised topics include service innovation and development, collaboration in preventive efforts focused on youth, measures to reduce digital exclusion, analytical collaboration, collaboration in competence development, recruitment, and co-location. The pilot initiative is being evaluated by Oxford Research AS to facilitate ongoing learning and assess the results of the pilot work based on national and local objectives.



Source: Ágúst Bogason

Case 4: Åland Islands, Finland

Åland is constituted of 6,757 islands, of which around 60 are inhabited, making up an archipelago situated midway between Sweden and Finland. Åland is part of the Republic of Finland but has an autonomous status, with its own self-governing parliament (*Ålands Lagting*) and government (*Ålands Landskapsregering*) (Info Norden, n.d.). Åland's total land area is 1,553 km² and, as of 2021, Åland had a population of around 30,344 people (ÅSUB, 2022a).

Åland faces some challenges, with a worsening pattern of youth out-migration and brain drain (i.e. the departure of highly educated people). Particularly, it is the archipelago municipalities of Åland where depopulation is most pronounced. Proactive efforts to make Åland a more attractive place to work and live are needed to increase migration and population growth. Remote work is seen as an opportunity to attract a larger workforce, both in terms of labour coming from outside of Åland, but also to make Ålanders want to return (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023). This case study explores how Åland responds to and approaches the development of remote work, looking more closely into the archipelago municipalities in Åland.

Remote work is prevalent in Åland, but not to the same extent as in the surrounding Nordic regions (ÅSUB, 2022b). Relocating to the archipelago or other rural areas is often a choice based on quality of life, and if remote work can be a way for people to support themselves in these areas, then there is the potential for remote work opportunities to increase migration. Therefore, remote work has been seen as a strategy for the development of the archipelago municipalities to increase

migration, with proactive actions and projects being implemented since as early as 2006 (Skärgårdskommunerna, 2006).

Regional characteristics

Demographic development

Åland's demographic composition presents significant contrasts, with its largest town, Mariehamn, mirroring urban dynamics, and smaller municipalities like Sottunga facing population scarcity (105 residents in 2021). There is therefore a large difference in terms of population size between the municipalities, especially between Åland's largest municipality and only city, Mariehamn, and other municipalities (ÅSUB, 2022a). An aging demographic further complicates matters, with projections indicating a 25% elderly population by 2030 (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023). Swedish is the official language of Åland, with the majority of Ålanders having Swedish as their native language (86%), and the rest having Finnish (4.6%) and other languages (9.4%) (ÅSUB, 2022a).

Åland, and especially Mariehamn, has seen a positive population growth over the last two decades (Info Norden, n.d.). However, the growth of the population with its migration surplus is not evenly spread across the municipalities in Åland, where some are showing a trend of out-migration. This trend is especially visible in the archipelago municipalities, which have seen a negative trend with a declining population and uneven demographic pyramids, resulting in increased strain on their economies (Företagsam Skärgård, 2019a). As mentioned above, there are 2,055 permanent residents in the archipelago municipalities, but during the summer the population increases significantly due to summer residents and other visitors. Over 30% (2,642 holiday homes) of approximately 8,550 Åland holiday homes are located in the archipelago (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023).

Economic landscape

The workforce in Åland is diverse, yet centralised, with most employment opportunities in Mariehamn. A healthy employment rate surpasses national Finnish and Swedish figures, with the public sector leading in terms of job provision. The private sector, heavily reliant on tourism and seafaring, complements the economic diversity, enriching the local cultural fabric (ÅSUB, 2021; Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023). According to a labour market barometer in 2022, the need for recruitment is expected to increase, especially for service and sales personnel, and specialists (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023).

Åland's economy is complex, with industries such as shipping retaining historical and cultural value, and contributing substantially to GDP and employment. The pandemic posed significant setbacks for tourism, but recovery is in sight, set against a backdrop of a high number of holiday homes spread across the islands (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023).

Remote work opportunities vary across industries. Many occupational categories are essentially workplace-bound, such as primary production and service. Therefore, regions where these sectors are over-represented in the economy, theoretically have a lower percentage of remote workers (ÅSUB, 2022b). Remote work exists in Åland, but it is not as widespread as other regions in the Nordic countries. This may be connected to Åland's local labour market. It is dominantly made up of sectors where remote work opportunities are limited (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2019). In theory, there is a 32% possibility of remote work in Åland (based on occupational classifications), which is lower than in neighbouring countries (ÅSUB, 2022b).

Service accessibility and infrastructure

Mariehamn enjoys robust services, which is in stark contrast to some of the rural and archipelago municipalities where public and commercial amenities are faltering. There are growing concerns over urban centralisation, with predictions of potential decreases in rural services and tax revenue bases, especially in the archipelago. Innovative solutions are needed to bring these communities back to life (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023).

There is no university in Åland, which means that many Ålanders choose to leave Åland to continue their studies in Sweden or Finland (Lokalkraft Leader Åland, 2023). Åland has a unique set up when it comes to housing and voting, known as the right of domicile (*hembygdsrätt*), a local citizenship (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2023).

Access to fast, reliable internet is a prerequisite for remote work. The infrastructural conditions for remote work are good in Åland, thanks to excellent fixed broadband and mobile network coverage. In 2021 in Åland, there was 96% access to fixed broadband at the speed of at least 100 Mbit/s, while mobile network coverage for 4G 100 Mbit/s was 76 (ÅSUB, 2022b). Early on, the archipelago municipalities identified the need for high-speed internet and the advantages it could have for the future development of the municipalities. As such, efforts to strengthen its digital connectivity were already made around two decades ago, with projects launched to build up a fibre network with stable internet connection for all archipelago municipalities (Interviewee 1).

Policies and strategies related to remote work

In the Government of Åland's strategic plan for opening up Åland again after the pandemic, remote work is perceived as an important factor in making Åland more attractive (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2021). Already in 2005, there were discussions on the need to draw up a strategy to promote remote work in the administration as soon as possible (Ålands Lagting, 2005). Although Åland has a policy goal of supporting remote work and has conducted several studies on the issue, there is no specific remote work-focused strategy yet in place by the

Government of Åland. There are a lot of discussions going on, but there are few concrete measures in place linked to remote work.

Remote work has long been promoted as a potential development opportunity for the archipelago municipalities. Remote work is seen as an opportunity for attracting new people and businesses, changing the trend of out-migration and providing more work opportunities for the residents, where many are multi-skilled workers (Interviewee 1). Already in 2006, the archipelago municipalities of Åland developed strategies and actively worked on promoting remote work, as well as the possibilities to work and live in the archipelago. The six municipalities conducted a project on municipal cooperation with regard to stimulating remote work. The aim was to develop and highlight the remote work opportunities in the area, hoping to attract more people to live and spend time there. The project resulted in a brochure on flexible working models, a framework with recommendations and a checklist for a good remote work environment (Skärgårdskommunerna, 2006). The archipelago municipalities have continued to develop and promote remote work opportunities. Remote work is mentioned in the archipelago municipalities' strategies and policies, with several projects aimed to develop the archipelago. One activity highlighted in the strategy for a thriving archipelago is stimulating and strengthening the conditions for remote work opportunities (Företagsam Skärgård, 2019a).

Discussion: Connecting remote work plans and policies to regional attractiveness and development

Existing ways to support remote work: increased knowledge and help with relocation

Åland wants to grow, in terms of more inhabitants, workplaces, businesses and annual overnight visitors. Therefore, the Ålandic government and several municipalities have taken action to support new residents wanting to relocate to Åland. Remote work is regarded as an important part of this development, but other supporting actions are also in place. The Åland Labour Market and Student Service Authority (*Arbetsmarknads- och studieservicemyndighet, Ams*) runs "Åland Living", a website where you can find all the information you need to move to and study or work in Åland. In addition, they have developed a guide that contains tips and advice for those who want to work remotely from Åland, where it is possible to read more about taxation, qualification certificates and social security benefits, and to find an office hotel/coworking space (Åland Living, n.d.a).

Increased knowledge about remote work trends, mobility patterns and migration flows are important to draw up strategies for remote work and regional development. ÅSUB has studied and gathered information on the remote work situation in Åland. From a survey on the experiences of remote work during the pandemic, it was seen that most remote workers felt satisfied with the experience and would like to continue working remotely in some form in the future, with more

flexibility in terms of when and where they work. However, most employers wanted their staff to work on site. The survey shows both increased interest and readiness for remote work in Åland (ÅSUB, 2022b).

Existing ways to support remote work: Projects promoting Åland and remote work

There are initiatives to support remote work by both the Government of Åland, municipalities and the private sector. The Government of Åland strives to be an attractive workplace, where people in all municipalities can work. One example is the long-term effort to refine the government's administration as a workplace. As part of this effort, employees who wish to do so, and have a job where it is possible, will be able to continue working remotely post-pandemic. Remote working creates new opportunities for government employees to work from rural and archipelago areas (Henriksson, 2021; Ålands Landskapsregering, 2021).

Företagsam Skärgård, an association formed by the six archipelago municipalities, provides support to new businesses and workers relocating to Åland. Företagsam Skärgård aims to strengthen the conditions to work in the archipelago, by, for example, promoting remote work opportunities. It highlights that digital opportunities have brought new ways of working and remote work has become a possibility for rural municipalities to attract more people and businesses. There are year-round connections to mainland Åland and mainland Finland, fast internet connections, advice and start-up support for entrepreneurs, and support investments for businesses (Företagsam Skärgård, 2019b; Interviewee 1). At present, a few remote workplaces are established, but there is an awareness of this growing need. The archipelago has good conditions to establish coworking spaces, as there are existing premises with fast broadband (Interviewee 1; ÅSUB, 2022b).

Associations such as Företagsam Skärgård have already developed their own projects linking remote work with rural attractiveness and development. Attempts to support remote work in the archipelago municipalities have been made in the form of projects, often with external funding (e.g. EU funds) and through cooperation and co-founding with the Government of Åland. It is through projects that activities and actions are implemented, and several projects include the promotion of remote work, even though the projects do not solely focus on this topic. One example is "The archipelago in my heart" (*Skärgården i mitt hjärta*), a project with the aim of promoting Åland, which ended in 2022. Part of the project was to attract more people to the archipelago, promoting Åland as attractive for tourists, new residents and returnees where remote work was one of the highlighted strategies. Other projects and campaigns have also been launched with the aim of increasing move-in to the municipalities and improving the attractiveness of the places (Interviewee 2).

Workcation implies working remotely during a vacation and is one major remote work trend. Opportunities to attract digital nomads and promote workcation as a

regional development strategy existed before the pandemic. With Åland's excellent digital infrastructure, remote work is a good way for visitors to extend their stay in Åland, combining the experience with work. Visit Åland promotes remote work in the archipelago and provides a list of accommodation suitable for remote work on their website (Visit Åland, n.d.). The archipelago municipalities have seen an increase in workcation, but mostly related to people who already had some kind of connection to the place. This includes people with relatives living in the area, or summer guests with second homes/cottages deciding to extend their vacation and work remotely. Therefore, holiday home owners, with an existing connection to the archipelago, are seen as the target group with the most potential regarding workcation (Interviewee 2).

Challenges and ways to support remote work

Remote work has both advantages and disadvantages. If people move to Åland but keep their job and work remotely, it does not directly create jobs in Åland. In addition, it is still unclear whether people who kept their jobs but moved to Åland during the pandemic will continue to work remotely, or if they will move back to where they lived pre-pandemic. It is thus too early to see if remote work and immigration are long-term trends or just short-term fluctuations. Nonetheless, more data on remote workers and trends are needed, especially in the archipelago. It is assumed that remote workers in the archipelago municipalities have existed for quite some time and have steadily increased in number over the past several years. However, how much remote work has increased is unclear, as there are no detailed data. This makes it more difficult to follow trends and make predictions. For example, there is currently no data on how many new houses are needed for people to move to the archipelago municipalities. It would be beneficial to collect data on remote workers for future development (Interviewee 1 and 2).

From one perspective, it may be perceived as unfair when professional groups do not have the option of working remotely. Some occupations require physical presence at work, such as fishery or production, whereas IT or administration are often place-independent making remote work possible. A large share of professional groups in Åland, and especially in the archipelago municipalities, is made up of occupations requiring physical presence (Bärkraft, 2020). This results in limited remote work possibilities. However, as a large share are also multi-skilled workers with several occupations, remote work can function as one channel for employment. Combining occupations that require physical presence with part time remote work can be a strategy for these people (Interviewee 1).

Due to their peripheral location and low populations, the archipelago municipalities need to make special efforts to maintain good living conditions for the resident population, where a certain volume of people is needed to run local services (Ålands Landskapsregering, 2019). Remote work that leads to an increase in the population could improve services in the archipelago municipalities (Interviewee 1). The Ålandic

government intends to work together with the archipelago municipalities to create increased migration and more jobs. In addition, there is now a rapid development of remote services in both education and healthcare, which can create flexibility and better accessibility to services in the future (Bärkraft, 2020). Åland Living is already working today to increase interest in Åland as an attractive place to live. Developing and putting more resources into Åland Living in close cooperation with the business community and the labour market would be a step in the right direction (Bärkraft, 2022).

It is important to keep track of the rules that apply if you live in Åland and work remotely for a foreign employer. In addition to the rules related to remote work, issues related to tax legislation across borders were raised in connection to the pandemic and sudden increase in people working remotely for foreign employers (Sjöblom, 2022). Åland has a large share of second homes/holiday homes, and there was an influx of people from other countries during the pandemic, mostly Swedes, who went to Åland and worked remotely from their holiday homes. For those living in one country and working in another, it becomes problematic when work is suddenly carried out at home, remotely from the workplace. Determining which country's taxation applies to remote work is an issue that was seen as a border barrier in the Nordic countries. If remote work is to become the new normal, this is an issue that needs to be further investigated and resolved (Harald, 2022; Ålands Landskapsregering, 2022). On Åland Living's website, there are guides and information about the rules on taxation and social security benefits for remote work (Åland Living, n.d.b.).

Lessons learned

Åland wants to grow, both in terms of more inhabitants, workplaces, businesses and annual overnight visitors. Remote work has the potential of both increasing the number of people relocating to Åland and making Ålanders want to stay there. Being able to work remotely with businesses outside Åland could be a way for people to develop their skills and progress in their career without having to move away from the area. In addition, remote work opportunities may also attract new people wanting to combine a stimulating job with a certain lifestyle. Åland has excellent conditions for remote work (in terms of broadband coverage) but has a lower proportion of remote work opportunities than other Nordic countries. This may be connected to the local labour market, which is mostly made up of sectors where remote work opportunities are limited. This is especially visible in the archipelago where many occupations require physical presence. Although, it is common in the archipelago for people to have multiple occupations and, as such, remote work can be one channel of employment. In addition, the archipelago municipalities face different challenges to those of more urban settlements, largely connected to depopulation and lack of services. Remote work has the potential to

enable a living archipelago, creating an inflow of much-needed skills in key areas and maintaining public services. In Åland, and especially in the archipelago, the group with the largest potential for workcation are second home owners. It is an easy group to target as there is an existing link to the area.

Working out how to attract the skills needed and what can make Åland more attractive as a place to live and work are questions that should be further explored. There is a need to speed up coordination between the various elements that attract migration and new businesses. Some of the actions already in place can be further strengthened, but more are needed. More data and knowledge on migration numbers and trends are needed to better plan for the future. It is too early to say whether or not the people who relocated to Åland during the pandemic are there to stay long-term. Yet making all the settlements in Åland attractive could make it easier for people to stay and for new people to come to the area. This includes improving the accessibility and quality of services. Remote work can function as one channel and strategy of development, but it is not enough on its own for regional development. There are remote work opportunities in the archipelago, but actions are needed to strengthen the development. Therefore, continuing to develop remote work opportunities is a potential way to increase migration and regional development.



Case 5: Jämtland Härjedalen, Sweden

The Region of Jämtland Härjedalen is located on the west side of the country, bordering Norway, and is situated within Norrland. The region is made up of eight municipalities, which together span across an area of nearly 50,000 km² (i.e. 12% of the total area of Sweden) with a total population of approximately 132,000 inhabitants in 2022 (Regionfakta, 2023). The Region of Jämtland Härjedalen is located in Jämtland County, and thus the region and county are often used interchangeably with each other [5]. Jämtland Härjedalen has been experiencing a trend of positive migration flows in recent years, and increased remote work opportunities. This case study explores how the Region of Jämtland Härjedalen responds to and approaches the development of remote work.

Jämtland Härjedalen is known for its nature and has many nature-based activities and outdoor life opportunities. Lifestyle migration is something that characterises virtually all migration to the region. The region offers a lifestyle that has become more attractive in recent years, and together with the growing opportunity for remote work, there is a great interest in relocating there (Business Region MidSweden, 2023). It is a region with high multilocality, both regarding business and education, but especially due to tourism, with its several ski resorts (Jämtland Härjedalen Turism, 2022).

There is potential to link the region's long-term development goals to remote work, such as spreading in-migration over all municipalities and attracting more workers with high competences and skills. Efforts from both public and private actors are being taken to promote remote work opportunities for regional development (Tillväxtanalys, 2022), and there is also a political ambition to develop remote work

opportunities (Interviewee 1). Several regional strategies and plans have been put in place alongside this trend, and coworking operations have been established in the region. One example is the work hubs (*arbetshubbar*), which offer workplaces for people and companies who are working remotely (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020).

Character of the region

Demographic development, second homes and local business life

The eight municipalities Berg, Bräcke, Härjedalen, Krokom, Ragunda, Strömsund, Åre and Östersund make up Jämtland Härjedalen (i.e. Jämtland County). The city of Östersund is the county's capital city. Half of the population lives in the municipality of Östersund, the rest is dispersed in the other six municipalities with a large share in rural areas. The county is one of the most sparsely populated counties in Sweden and density levels vary greatly between the eight municipalities, ranging from 0.9 to 28.9 people per square kilometre (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021a). Jämtland Härjedalen is a region where it is very popular to have a second home (holiday homes or cottages), both among Swedes and Norwegians as the region borders with Norway (Jämtland Härjedalen Turism, 2022). In 2019, there were around 32,000 second homes in the region (SCB, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in changes in migration flows. In Jämtland Härjedalen, a prior migration deficit turned into a migration surplus (Tillväxtverket, 2023a). 2020 saw the highest number of in-migration to the region from the rest of the country over the previous 20 years, with a net domestic migration of +264 people (Persson and Kemppainen, 2021). However, this population increase has not affected all municipalities equally, as the county has also been affected by the megatrend of urbanisation with migration to larger cities. It is the municipalities that have the highest population increase today that are also expected to account for the increase in population in 2030 (i.e. Östersund and Åre) (Kemppainen and Persson, 2021).

The local economy is dominated by small businesses, it has few large companies compared to other counties and the regional labour market is centred around Östersund city (Kemppainen and Persson, 2021). The unemployment rate of 4.8% in 2022 is among the lowest in the country (Tillväxtverket, 2023b). Important economic sectors are travel and tourism, services and green sectors. There are also some fairly new sectors that are important for the local economy and labour market. The IT sector grew by around 20% in 2019, with predicted further growth, and there are companies in the region that are at the forefront of e-health. Another growing employer is government authorities, with many offices in Östersund (Business Region MidSweden, 2021). Jämtland Härjedalen has a long history of tourism, where the travel and tourism sectors are of great importance for the economic development of the county (Jämtland Härjedalen Turism, 2022).

It is a low-density economy, characterised by low population density, a small local tax base and small labour force, high-cost pressures on the public sector, and markets that offer a limited supply of goods and services (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020). The large distances create challenges regarding higher costs of, and limited access to, different services for the residents (Regionfakta, 2022).

A well-functioning digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for increased remote work. However, access to high-speed internet is not evenly distributed across the country (Tillväxtverket, 2023a). Jämtland county's sparsity and the large proportion of the population outside urban areas make it difficult for broadband infrastructure to reach everyone (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020 and Svenska Stadsnättsföreningen, 2023).

Policies and strategies related to remote work

Jämtland Härjedalen regional management office saw already in 2015 that the phenomenon of remote work and coworking operations was an emerging trend, one which could be beneficial for regional development. The issue of a low supply of skills was a reason why remote work opportunities started to be developed, which is a problem the region has been dealing with for several years (Interviewee 1). Several of the regional development strategies and plans focus on the development of digitalisation and remote/hybrid work (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021b). Region Jämtland Härjedalen, in collaboration with both municipalities, and private actors and businesses, is working to establish new coworking environments throughout the county. Much focus is on developing work hubs, as these are expected to facilitate migration and the establishment of new businesses, both of which are prioritised in the regional development strategy (Interviewee 1).

In 2021, the Region of Jämtland Härjedalen adopted a plan for the development of remote and hybrid work to support the establishment of regional work hubs (*arbetshubbar*) for people employed by the region. A plan for remote independent working methods was drawn up to create the conditions for new public collaboration hubs in places where they are currently lacking, where the aim was for the region to have a physical presence in all the region's municipalities. The objective was to set up a strategy to partly develop abilities around remote work and then put the strategy into a system, to see if added value could be created through this way of working (Interviewee 1; Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021c).

In addition to the regional management office, the municipalities in the region can also develop their own strategies and plans for the development of remote work and work hubs. The municipality offices can be helpful in the establishment phase of creating coworking operations by, for example, providing financial support to private coworking initiatives wanting to establish themselves in the municipality. Such is the case for Gomorrön, a coworking operation in Östersund offering coworking areas, networks and guidance on how to relocate to the area.

Operations like these are seen by Östersund municipality as a springboard for business establishment. Further, the municipality can also have their own staff stationed in the coworking environment, getting closer to entrepreneurs and other actors relevant for local development (Tillväxtanalys, 2022).

Discussion: connecting policies of remote work and coworking operations to regional development and service provision

Existing ways to support remote work: increased knowledge and help with relocation

Jämtland Härjedalen is a leading region in Sweden in supporting remote work, focusing on measures such as increasing the knowledge base of remote work trends and data, and offering guidance for someone wanting to relocate to the region (Tillväxtanalys, 2022). The region of Jämtland Härjedalen aims to increase knowledge on remote work and gather statistics about commuting patterns, recruitment needs and migration trends, etc., connected to hybrid/remote work in the region. This is to provide the conditions for implementation of hybrid or remote working methods and the establishment of regional work hubs. One initiative for this was the partner agreement with Remote Lab that was signed in autumn 2020 (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021c). Remote Lab is a knowledge and development hub for distance-independent working life of the future. It was launched in 2020 by the coworking actor Gomorron Östersund, with the aim to stimulate collaboration, increase knowledge about remote work and provide management support (Remote Lab, 2020). Through cooperation with Remote Lab, the region aims to increase its ability to monitor trends and make informed decisions regarding the development of remote work in the region (Region of Jämtland Härjedalen, 2021c).

There are initiatives to stimulate residents outside the county, but with the many holiday homes in the county, there are also initiatives for people to move permanently to the area. The magazine and website "Take the step" (*Ta steget*), initiated by the Region of Jämtland Härjedalen, aim to do just that. The mission is to, through cooperation between the county's municipalities and employers, make it easier for people who want to move to Jämtland Härjedalen. "Take the step" is part of the "An attractive region" (*En attraktiv region*) project. A move can raise many questions, but with the initiative, future residents can receive practical support on matters connected to moving to the county, individual contacts and finding a way into the local network (Ta steget, n.d.).

Existing ways to support remote work: Initiatives and coworking operations

There are several initiatives and projects related to supporting remote work in Jämtland Härjedalen, most of them are different types of coworking spaces, such as office hotels and work hubs, and each has its own niche. Often, coworking operations are private initiatives and outside existing regional policy instruments.

However, they still function as a regional policy resource, and are important tools for a region to attract and keep workers (Tillväxtanalys, 2023). Moreover, these hubs can be seen as innovation environments, and functioning as clusters where business community, public sector, academia and civil society can meet and collaborate (Interviewee 1). Coworking spaces create opportunities for social networking and introducing newcomers to the region. Coworking spaces can also contribute to local development in several ways. For example, coworking operations can be used as initial establishment points for businesses wanting to establish themselves in a new location. Further, coworking spaces in attractive, rural environments can be used as a component to attract and recruit sought-after skills and broaden the geographical recruitment base of the business (Tillväxtanalys, 2022).

Jämtland Härjedalen is Sweden's densest coworking region, with the most coworking environments in Sweden per capita (Region of Jämtland Härjedalen, 2023). Coworking spaces have existed in the area since before the pandemic, however, several have been opened in different parts of Jämtland Härjedalen from 2021–2023, and more are under development (Interviewee 1). In Jämtland county alone there are around 30 different co-working spaces intended for remote work (Region of Jämtland Härjedalen, 2023). They are often located around or in the main towns within the region. Establishments such as House Be, Mountain Hub (*Fjällhuben*), Gomorron Östersund, N1 and Peak Region Science Park, to mention a few, are all established in the region and designed to bring remote workers together and accommodate their needs (Business Region MidSweden, 2021).

Challenges to be addressed

Adequate digital infrastructure is a critical requirement for remote work to be made possible. Fast and reliable broadband is available in the larger urban areas. However, the more rural and sparsely populated areas in the region have a larger proportion without a fast and reliable internet connection (Svenska Stadsnätsföreningen, 2023). Therefore, the situation is not ideal to carry out remote work in all municipalities in the region. Without connectivity, remote work opportunities are limited.

Furthermore, the trend of increased immigration is not spread out evenly across the municipalities in the region. The municipalities with mountain resorts and a large number of holiday homes are able to attract people, a trend further expanded by the possibility of working remotely (Kemppainen and Persson, 2021). However, in municipalities where ski resorts or other attractions are not naturally present, there is nothing to say that digitalisation and remote work itself will make these places grow and people want to move there.

“It will be a tug-of-war between all cities and municipalities in Sweden to attract new residents. There may be the naïve belief that if we become digital and have tools to work remotely, then people will automatically choose to relocate to these rural areas.”

(Interviewee 1)

Connected to the attractiveness of a municipality is the question of access to services. Culture, entertainment and remote work opportunities can make a municipality attractive to someone about to relocate. However, the basic requirements, such as health care, education and access to supplies, are other important deciding factors. As mentioned before, Jämtland Härjedalen has experienced challenges with providing access to services, due to the large distances between communities and sparsely populated areas. The region has had issues with recruiting some critical professions, such as doctors or teachers. If a municipality cannot get a doctor or teacher on site in certain sparsely populated areas, they could be recruited by offering them the opportunity of working remotely. The staff are not then obliged to relocate to the region. The lack of staff in critical professions can thus be solved digitally, with digital doctor appointments and online teaching. However, one aspect to consider is whether or not this is a desirable solution for the residents (Interviewee 1).

The current legislation will in many respects be challenged by coworking operations, especially the tax system. In a situation where an employee is employed by a company in one municipality, coworks part of the week in another municipality, has a holiday home in a third municipality where he/she works remotely some of the time, and has a permanent address in a fourth municipality, it is not so obvious where that employer should pay tax in the long run (Tillväxtanalys, 2022). This is also a downside to remote work as it can create a counterproductive effect, at worst. This issue is important, as regional development concerns, to a large extent, increasing the tax base, through the people who live and work in a region and pay taxes (Interviewee 1).

Ways to support remote work

Increased knowledge on remote work is needed, such as statistics and data about the number of remote workers, their moving patterns, but also on the number of coworking operations. This would enable the regions and municipalities to create good strategies and policies connected to the future effort and development of remote work. It would also be beneficial for both municipalities and coworking operations to have better knowledge about each other's needs and activities. Both share a common interest, that is, both want to attract more people and strengthen

the local/regional entrepreneurial environments. For a long time now, public actors (i.e. the region or municipality) have played a critical role in supporting and streamlining the environments and bringing together different actors. Now, with coworking operations, new arenas for networking have been created, bringing together and supporting remote workers. Therefore, it is important to continue working with the development of coworking operations (Tillväxtanalys, 2023).

Adequate connectivity is a prerequisite for remote work. Therefore, fast and reliable broadband needs to be a higher priority in the places where it is currently lacking, these places also need support so they can invest in broadband establishment (Region Jämtland Härjedalen, 2020). The current legislation is not adapted to the flexibility that coworking operations need. An inquiry to examine the legal challenges faced by coworking operations would be beneficial so that policies can be put in place to support and promote the growth of the coworking sector and the further development of remote work (Tillväxtanalys, 2022).

Lessons learned

Increased remote work opportunities can influence a region in different ways, either through people living in the region and working elsewhere, or vice versa. Both ways can have an impact on regional development, and each presents its own advantages and challenges. The Region of Jämtland Härjedalen has underlined remote work as an important factor for further regional development and has several strategies and initiatives in place to support remote work. One challenge to be investigated is if digitalisation and remote work can break the megatrend of urbanisation, and make people move permanently to more sparsely populated areas. It is not yet clear whether the trend of remote work is driving increased urbanisation, or if it can contribute to reduce urbanisation and a strengthened local community across the country.

In Jämtland Härjedalen, supportive actions for remote work often come from the public sector. The Region of Jämtland Härjedalen has established a structure on how to promote remote work opportunities, forms of cooperation with different coworking operations, and systems for knowledge and data gathering to better follow trends. However, the private sector has proved to play an important role in establishing coworking spaces as well. Developing remote work opportunities and coworking spaces are important ways to both create new clusters of people in a place and demonstrate that the region is committed to supporting new flexible working methods, thereby attracting more people to the region.

The positive development seen in the region as a whole with in-migration and remote work opportunities, is not true for all municipalities in the region. Allowing people to work remotely while living in a rural area can help with combating out-migration. However, remote work is not in itself enough to attract people and make them want to relocate to a region or municipality. It is becoming an important

deciding factor and can enable such a decision, but factors such as access to services, a vibrant community, and surrounding nature and housing, all still need to be in place for a region to appear attractive, both for locals and new residents. Some parts of the region are unable to offer remote work opportunities due to, for example, inadequate digital infrastructure and an uneven spread of coworking spaces. Efforts are still needed to ensure regional development where all municipalities can take advantage of the opportunities remote work can bring.

[5] In this case study, the Region of Jämtland Härjedalen will be used when describing the work of the regional management office, and Jämtland Härjedalen or Jämtland County when describing the local context, situation, and for statistics. For example, statistics and data are found for the county rather than the region.



Source: Ágúst Bogason

Case 6: Cross-border - Bornholm, Denmark

Bornholm is a Danish island located in the Baltic Sea, situated to the east of the rest of Denmark, to the south of Sweden, north-east of Germany and north of Poland. The island covers an area of about 588 square kilometres and is home to some 40,000 people (Statistics Denmark, 2023). The largest town on Bornholm is Rønne, which serves as the administrative centre of the island with a population of roughly 13,000. Nexø is home to some 3,500 people, Aakirkeby to around 2,000, while other settlements such as Allinge-Sandvig, Hasle, Svaneke, Gudhjem and other towns, have populations ranging from around 700 to 1,500. Around two-thirds of Bornholm's population live in towns, while the rest is spread across the more rural areas.

Bornholm has a unique geographical location, which has shaped its economy, demography and development throughout the years. The main industrial activities have historically been fishing, agriculture and farming, and machinery industries, along with a rise in arts and crafts in recent years. The most important industry is tourism, which today is Bornholm's largest source of income (Bornholm, 2023a). In recent years, Bornholm has also been exploring renewable energy sources to strengthen its economy. The island is known for its efforts in green energy, particularly wind power (Ferieøen Bornholm, 2023). Bornholm aims to become carbon-neutral and has been involved in various projects related to sustainable energy and smart grid technology.

The Danish Baltic island is not your typical cross-border region since it's a fairly remote island and is only accessible by air or sea. Despite transport disadvantages,

Bornholm sees itself as a fairly strategic location, with a central position between other regions and different countries. The island therefore sees its geographical location as an opportunity, especially within the growing maritime industry and offshore wind power production sector, as well as a 'central' hub between different countries in the Baltic. Bornholm has therefore tried to attract a more remote labour force that is only partially bound to any of the nearby regions through improved digital infrastructure and remote work opportunities (interviews).

It should be noted that from a remote work and digital distance work perspective, any region could be defined as a cross-border region. Since Bornholm has actively highlighted remote work possibilities on the island since before the COVID-19 pandemic and is located between different countries which it wants to create stronger ties with, Bornholm was viewed as an interesting cross-border case study area.

Regional characteristics

Local businesses on Bornholm rely on a few important sectors that drive the economy. Bornholm's economy faced disruption after the collapse of the Baltic sea fisheries in the early 1990s which required a restructuring of economic activities and the labour market. Despite these challenges, the island proved to be resilient and quickly recovered as other industries absorbed the available labour force. However, the population and number of jobs on Bornholm have decreased over time, with some people moving away and many native residents retiring. Additionally, the lack of qualified labour has contributed to the decrease in employment, partly due to low levels of education. As a result, Bornholm is experiencing a shortage of various skills, and the demand for specialised skills is expected to increase in the future. The municipality and local businesses are working together to establish more cooperation to improve the situation.

The tourism industry is a major contributor to the local economy, attracting visitors mainly during the summer months. Agriculture and food production also play a significant role, with high-quality dairy products, grains, vegetables and fruits being produced on the island. Renewable energy is a growing sector on Bornholm, as the region aims to be carbon-neutral by 2025 and fossil-free by 2040. To achieve this, the island will focus on increasing green electricity production through new offshore wind farms and additional solar panels, supporting the establishment of a 100 MW offshore wind farm as a priority measure to move closer to a fully green energy supply (Bornholm, 2021).

The technology and IT sector has also seen advancements, with the island hosting a few IT companies and startups that leverage its digital infrastructure and skilled workforce. Manufacturing industries also play a vital role, and there is also a vibrant art scene. Bornholm produces niche products such as ceramics, glassware and furniture, with craftsmanship and design being of great importance, at least when

it comes to the image of the island. The fishing industry, although small, utilises the island's coastal access to fish stocks in the Baltic Sea, supporting local fishing and seafood processing.

Investment in further labour market development is challenging for Bornholm due to perceived risks, especially in comparison to other regions. The interviewees for the case study agreed that traditional jobs in industries such as agriculture and fishing would not return and therefore more emphasis has been placed on supporting and expanding existing industries such as machinery manufacturing and tourism (interviews). There have been few direct initiatives to create new large-scale workplaces or industries, while the aim has been to support and foster related fields that can provide services to the existing industries.

In addition, since before the pandemic, Bornholm has actively tried to become a suitable place for more specialised jobs, IT work and other occupations that do not require a specific placement (interviews). The need for improved digital infrastructure has been high on the local agenda as part of this ongoing initiative. Good digital connections are naturally vital for Bornholm to be able to take the next steps in developing itself as a remote working hub. This is something the local authorities want to build on since they have already had some success marketing the island as a green and innovative place, with its unique natural environment, rich history and culture, renewable energy resources and bioeconomy.

Policies and strategies related to remote work

Denmark as such does not have a specific remote work policy although there substantial research has been done on it, e.g. by the labour market and public institutions. As such, remote work is integrated into many sectoral policies. The same can be said for the local level. In Bornholm, remote work has been on the agenda for a longer time and such discussions only accelerated during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bright Green Island concept has been the central vision for creating a more sustainable society on Bornholm for about 15 years. This overarching vision guides all policies and actions within the municipality, putting sustainability at the forefront of everything the municipality does. Bornholm aims to rebrand itself as a sustainable destination while also enhancing its attractiveness to visitors and businesses (Visit Bornholm, 2023).

The core objective of the Bright Green Island vision is to achieve a 100% sustainable and CO₂-free society. It strives to create sustainable and environmentally friendly solutions that benefit both residents and guests while promoting growth and attracting new businesses. This ambitious goal aims to demonstrate to the world how a small island can address pressing global challenges such as resource scarcity and climate change in a sustainable manner. Bornholm aims to achieve this while considering the needs of its residents, businesses, infrastructure and visitors, with the hope of attracting some visitors to become permanent residents.

The Bright Green Island vision focuses on four main interconnected topics: sustainable business, the good life, green technology and Bornholm as a natural destination. The aim is to involve all sectors of the economy and society to forge a new identity for the island. The Bright Green Island vision influences all other policies on Bornholm, and its goals permeate all areas of decision-making. This includes the business development strategy, which is formulated every four years by Bornholm's Growth Forum, as well as the development plan, regional development plan, municipal strategy and Local Agenda 21 strategy. These plans are regularly reviewed, and annual plans outline concrete tasks and initiatives needed to implement the Bright Green Island concept. The concentration on sustainability has garnered attention for Bornholm, attracting more visitors and even new permanent residents. In order to achieve the municipality's goals for development, all stakeholders, such as businesses, educational institutions, social partners and the local council, collaborate to define objectives and priorities. This collaborative approach ensures that policies complement each other and contribute to the overall vision of the Bright Green Island concept.

Discussion: Remote work has great potential for rural development

Future potential

Analysis on remote work in Denmark, conducted and published by HBC Economics in 2023, indicates that telecommuting has seen a significant increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is now more common across many industries. In Denmark, over one-third of employees regularly work from home at least one day a week, and almost 30% of workers wish to have more telecommuting opportunities than currently offered by their employers. The extent of telecommuting varies based on job types and industries, with six out of ten knowledge workers working from home at least one day a week, compared to only 15% of employees in social and physical jobs. Telecommuting is most prevalent in the Capital Region, attributed to differences in the structure of the labour market, including job types and industry structures (HBC Economics, 2023).

The distribution of people telecommuting across different regions in Denmark is of relevance due to the regional variations in settlement and job seeking patterns (interviews). While the current extent of telecommuting in the Danish labour market may not fully reflect its future potential, there is a great potential for increased telecommuting in the future. Many employees would like more telecommuting opportunities than their employers currently permit, with nearly 3 out of 10 employees in the entire labour market expressing this desire. Unlike in the past, there are no significant differences across job types in terms of employees' desire for more telecommuting, suggesting that this is not solely due to tasks that cannot be performed remotely (HBC Economics, 2023). These findings indicate that

employees in the Danish labour market are generally satisfied with telecommuting and wish to have more opportunities for it. The interviewees for this study agree with this assessment. Therefore, companies should consider the importance of telecommuting in supporting employee retention and recruitment. It is also worth noting that telecommuting can become a competitive factor for attracting and retaining employees, as indicated by job advertisements. As a result, telecommuting is expected to become more widespread in the future labour market than it currently is according to the interviewees in Bornholm (interviews).

While the full effects of remote work on rural development, mobility and job transitions are still unknown, remote work has shown to have positive implications for work-life balance, mental well-being and job satisfaction (HBC Economics, 2023). Aspects like these are often highlighted by those working with the subject in Bornholm, who further point out that employees perceive improved efficiency and quality of work with remote work, and that it can promote a performance-based culture and enhance company agility. However, there are also challenges mentioned in terms of collaboration and development tasks in hybrid work environments. Different workers may have varying perspectives on the benefits and challenges of remote work (interviews).

Exploring cross-border collaboration and digital cooperation

Being an island in the Baltic Sea, Bornholm has limited traditional cross-border possibilities. However, there are still some cross-border opportunities that exist for the island, leveraging its unique geographical location. Bornholm benefits from ferry connections with neighbouring countries like Germany, Sweden and Poland. These connections provide avenues for cross-border travel and the transportation of goods, fostering economic cooperation and cultural exchange. The island's attractiveness as a tourist destination further facilitates cross-border interaction, with visitors coming from neighbouring regions.

In addition to tourism, Bornholm's economy revolves around agriculture. This presents opportunities for cross-border trade, be it exporting agricultural and food products, or importing goods required by the local market. Moreover, Bornholm's location and geographical characteristics offer possibilities for cross-border research and collaboration. Partnerships with universities, research institutions and businesses from neighbouring countries, have been discussed as possible fields to explore. Especially when addressing environmental, energy and sustainable development challenges and solutions, which have been associated with Bornholm's image in previous years.

While the physical constraints of Bornholm's location may limit its cross-border possibilities, there is potential for the island to focus on digital cooperation. Bornholm can actively foster partnerships in areas like technology, research and entrepreneurship. Through cross-border e-commerce, data sharing, innovation hubs

and joint research projects, Bornholm can promote digital collaboration, exchange knowledge and support the growth of digital startups and initiatives. Bornholm's unique geographical location also provides avenues for collaboration in renewable energy and sustainability. This has in fact been a field Bornholm has advanced in, as it tries to establish itself as a hub for servicing new and planned wind power plants in the Baltic sea. With access to wind, sun and sea resources, Bornholm could further develop joint projects to harness renewable energy and implement sustainable practices.

Bornholm faces certain challenges in terms of cross-border cooperation and utilising its geographical location. Being an island, physical connectivity can pose logistical difficulties for the movement of goods and people. The limited transportation infrastructure, compared to land-border regions or areas with extensive air connectivity, requires efforts to improve links and foster cultural understanding. But as a digital cross-border area, with certain advantages as a centrally located island in the middle of many different countries in the Baltic sea, possibilities do exist. This is something the authorities in Bornholm realise and are actively working towards. This however demands both resources and commitment at the national level, as well as from established businesses in both Denmark and neighbouring countries. The allocation of resources, both financial and human, is therefore a challenge since sufficient resources are required to support cross-border cooperation efforts, such as funding joint projects and personnel dedicated to facilitating collaboration. Differences in regulatory frameworks, language barriers and disparities between digital infrastructure and internet connectivity can complicate such cross-border initiatives. Therefore, coordination, alignment of regulations and policies, and addressing such disparities become crucial steps to streamline activities and ensure compliance. Despite the challenges, proactive efforts and strategic planning would help Bornholm overcome these obstacles and maximise the possible benefits of cross-border cooperation. By capitalising on its unique geographical location, the island can foster economic growth, become a hub for digital innovation and sustainability, and enhance its position in the region.

The importance of co-working spaces

Something highlighted by the interviewees in Bornholm is the importance of well-functioning co-working spaces. On Bornholm, there are said to be valuable opportunities for entrepreneurship, networking and collaboration among professionals (interviews). These spaces act as platforms for knowledge sharing and innovation, fostering the growth of new businesses and contributing to economic development on the island. However, there are challenges in terms of the availability of infrastructure, resource accessibility, and attracting a diverse and vibrant community of professionals. Effective management and government support are crucial to ensuring the long-term viability of co-working spaces, enabling them to continue fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. The

municipality of Bornholm has supported such initiatives and continues to do so. As a result, connectivity is steadily being increased on the island as part of the strategy and policy to secure more equal access.

Job initiatives

Public job initiatives play a pivotal role in generating employment opportunities in rural areas like Bornholm. In recent years, many public sector jobs have been actively moved to more rural regions and now, in the aftermath of the pandemic, remote work options are being considered for public positions. These initiatives also aim to attract more people and enhance the employability of residents. The Danish authorities acknowledge that they can successfully stimulate sustainable economic development and job creation through financial incentives, training programs and infrastructure support. Challenges do however arise in aligning job initiatives with specific regional needs, ensuring equal access to opportunities, and developing institutional capacities for effective implementation. Collaboration between government bodies, private organisations and local communities is necessary to overcome these challenges and maximise the potential benefits of job initiatives. This is something both the local and national authorities aim to coordinate.

Development of tourism

Bornholm's attractiveness stems from its natural and cultural resources, which offer tremendous potential for the development of tourism. However, Bornholm faces challenges related to seasonality, limited infrastructure and the delicate balance between promoting tourism and preserving local environments and communities. Sustainable tourism practices, community involvement and strategic planning are key to maintaining Bornholm's attractiveness while mitigating associated challenges. This is something Bornholm has actively addressed and taken into account when developing their Bright Green Island plan, where public participation in the policy process is encouraged. This has partly been done to try and adopt sustainable tourism practices and ensure the long-term viability of its tourism industry while preserving its natural and cultural heritage.

Infrastructure and housing

The availability of robust physical and digital infrastructure is crucial for overall regional development (Bornholm, 2023 and interviews). A well-connected transport network, including roads, ports and airports, ensures easy accessibility, trade opportunities and connectivity with the mainland. High-speed internet and digital services enable remote work, knowledge sharing and e-commerce. Challenges exist in ensuring equitable access to infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, enhancing transmission capabilities and fostering digital inclusion. Moreover, the housing sector plays a critical role in rural development by addressing local and second-home needs. Challenges include housing affordability, limited availability for local residents and ensuring social sustainability amid rising second-home ownership.

One of the main challenges in Bornholm is related to housing, since a large share of the houses are second homes, and many houses are old and do not meet today's standards (interviews). Even though Bornholm has quite a lot of empty houses, many are often too big, meaning there is a lack of smaller apartments to accommodate individuals and some families. Collaboration between government bodies, private developers and community organisations is crucial to finding viable solutions.

Lessons learned

Bornholm, with its unique blend of natural beauty, cultural heritage and geographic advantages, holds immense potential for cross-border collaboration, sustainable rural development and economic growth. By prioritising digital cooperation and leveraging its favourable location, the island can explore and expand cross-border opportunities in domains such as tourism, trade, research and cultural exchange.

To fully harness this potential, Bornholm must address challenges through coordinated efforts, resource allocation and alignment of regulations. By fostering strategic planning, community engagement and collaboration, the island can unlock its potential for sustainable rural development, creating inclusive and resilient communities.

Bornholm's traditional industries of fishing, agriculture and tourism have laid a strong foundation for its economy. However, it is crucial to diversify the economy, reducing reliance on these sectors while fostering new economic opportunities. Embracing green and renewable energy initiatives can play a vital role in propelling the island towards a more sustainable and environmentally friendly future.

Attracting remote workers and digital nomads by investing in digital infrastructure and promoting co-working spaces can further boost Bornholm's economy. The island's serene and nature-centric lifestyle, coupled with its small size and close-knit community, offers a unique work environment for remote workers to engage with local businesses and participate in community activities.

To foster sustainable tourism, Bornholm should highlight its natural landscapes, cultural heritage and environmentally conscious practices. By becoming a responsible travel destination, the island can attract tourists seeking authentic and eco-friendly experiences. Supporting local businesses, entrepreneurship and innovation will also play a crucial role in stimulating economic growth and countering depopulation trends.

In conclusion, Bornholm has the opportunity to embrace its cross-border potential, promote sustainable practices, and create a vibrant and resilient economy. By focusing on digital cooperation, sustainable rural development and harnessing the advantages of its location, Bornholm can position itself as an attractive destination for remote workers, while preserving its unique natural landscapes, cultural heritage and quality of life for its residents.

Discussion - results analysis

This report aimed to provide an understanding of how remote work can contribute to resilient municipalities and regions. This was mainly done by a policy review as well as interviewing planners and practitioners in rural and remote municipalities and regions in the Nordic area to see how they are utilising remote work for rural development.

Based on the results of the case studies it is revealed that the municipalities in the Nordic regions tend to follow general trends when it comes to remote work. Hybrid work is accepted as a new standard way of working, but only for certain categories of employment. The standard practice is for employees to work some days a week remotely in a hybrid format.

Interestingly, the study notes that there are no official remote work policies in place. Instead, each workplace or manager is usually responsible for tailoring a model that suits their respective working group. This approach may lead to different policies for similar work tasks, highlighting the influence of managers' and employees' perceptions of hybrid work. The interviews conducted for the study also shed light on several important considerations.

Remote work opportunities are seen as a crucial factor in recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff, especially in smaller towns that are facing recruitment difficulties or high personnel turnover. Hybrid work arrangements are often tailored to the personal wishes and needs of employees, displaying a focus on employee satisfaction and work-life balance. There is also the impression that remote work is a new norm and widely accepted by employers and employees in both the public and private sector.

Furthermore, the municipalities in the study recognise remote work as an opportunity to retain current populations, attract new inhabitants and cater to seasonal populations. This is particularly relevant for "returners" – individuals who grew up in a town or area but later moved away. Remote work is also seen as a way to recruit highly qualified personnel and facilitate employment for the partners of potential employees, thus enabling smoother relocations. The study also emphasises that there is the political ambition to develop remote work opportunities across the Nordic region. The benefits and possibilities of remote work were recognised even before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic accelerated the development of remote work as it demonstrated how it was a feasible way of working.

Remote work opportunities vary across sectors, with regional and rural areas maintaining more on-site jobs. This is mainly because more "traditional" jobs are

found in the remotest areas. Nevertheless, efforts are being made to provide suitable conditions for remote work so that it is possible in all areas. The public and private sectors are both promoting remote and hybrid work opportunities. Co-working spaces have been established in many regions and municipalities, often as private initiatives, but are recognised as vital to attracting the remote labour force.

The availability of improved digital infrastructure is key to expanding remote work opportunities. It is acknowledged that without proper connectivity, these opportunities are limited. Remote work hubs not only facilitate remote work but also foster innovation environments where various stakeholders can collaborate.

Although there are discussions about part-time dwellers and second home owners working remotely, few initiatives specifically target this group. The overall focus of regions and municipalities is to enhance attractiveness, which includes factors such as access to services, vibrant communities, nature and housing options. Remote work is viewed as a positive regional development tool, but it is not the sole factor driving decisions to relocate.

Ireland's national strategy for hybrid work

In Ireland, a unified national strategy for hybrid work has been developed to ensure that remote work becomes a permanent feature of Irish workplaces, maximising economic, social and environmental benefits. The strategy focuses on establishing the necessary legal framework to safeguard employees' rights in relation to hybrid work, while acknowledging that it may not be feasible for all types of work environments. Additionally, the strategy includes various measures such as increased investments in coworking spaces, provision of guidance and training on the required skills for hybrid work, improved broadband coverage, and a commitment from the public sector to lead by example by aiming to have 20% of their work conducted remotely.

The Irish strategy encompasses several key areas that we also highlight in this chapter. It can serve as an inspirational model for developing a similar strategy in Denmark. The Ministry of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in Ireland directed the development of the strategy, collaborating with other ministries, public authorities, employers' associations, trade unions and business development organisations. These stakeholders, which we also identify as crucial in this chapter, came together to create a comprehensive strategy that caters to the needs and aspirations of both employees and employers in embracing hybrid work arrangements.

(Government of Ireland, 2021)



Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this study shed light on the remote work policies and opportunities in municipalities across the Nordic rural regions and municipalities. The stories of Keuruu, Stykkishólmur, Orkland, Åland, Jämtland Härjedalen and Bornholm exemplify different approaches to remote work and regional development. These cases emphasise the need for coordinated efforts between public and private actors, continuous adaptation and improvement, and strategic planning.

The study shows that hybrid work has become the new normal, but its implementation varies across municipalities at the discretion of individual businesses and managers. Remote work is recognised as a means to recruit and retain highly qualified staff, attract new inhabitants and enable the transfer of businesses to more affordable locations.

There is political ambition to develop remote work opportunities, and both public and private actors play a role in promoting remote and hybrid work. Co-working spaces and improved digital infrastructure contribute to facilitating remote work. Through their spread and embeddedness in local networks and markets, many people believe co-working spaces are central for rural development as they can have positive effects on the surrounding areas (Rex and Westlund, 2024).

Remote work has the potential to impact on both urban and rural areas. It can help rural municipalities combat out-migration, while also providing opportunities for skilled individuals to work elsewhere without relocating. Remote work has evolved into a fundamental part of modern working culture, extending beyond a phenomenon triggered solely by the COVID-19 pandemic. The supportive actions needed to promote remote work often start with municipalities in rural areas and contribute to their overall vitality.

However, challenges remain in securing qualified personnel for on-site services and adapting legislation to accommodate the flexibility of remote work. Also, the challenges related to legislation, connectivity, taxation and the provision and funding of quality public services in remote areas need to be addressed to fully leverage the benefits of remote work.

The study highlights the significance of the overall appeal of an area in attracting

new inhabitants and remote workers. Access to services, vibrant communities and the surrounding nature all contribute to a region's allure. Digital infrastructure, availability of housing and fair taxation are also important considerations. Remote work is viewed as one of many features that makes a region attractive, and it is not sufficient on its own. Therefore, it is essential to focus on broader regional development strategies to enhance vitality and maintain essential services.

In conclusion, remote work policies and opportunities offer the municipalities in the Nordic regions significant opportunities for future development. It is a way of combatting out-migration, attracting new residents and contributing to essential public services. Municipalities play a critical role in the establishment of remote working hubs and the provision of necessary infrastructure. The direct impact of remote work is evident in the establishment of alternative workspaces, improved services and the formation of knowledge worker communities. This contributes to the potential to attract and retain highly qualified staff, enhance regional development, maintain public services and create innovation environments.

To fully harness the potential of remote work, invest must be made in digital infrastructure, different levels of authority must create supportive work environments and foster collaboration. By leveraging the advantages of remote work while addressing the challenges, municipalities can better create thriving communities and vibrant economies. Remote work, when integrated into comprehensive strategies, can in this way contribute to a more sustainable regional development, attract migration and promote equal opportunities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of interviewees

Bornholm, Denmark

The experts interviewed represented the following stakeholders:

Interviewee 1: Municipal business development agency

Interviewee 2: Regional and cross-border project leader work on multilocality

Interviewee 3: Recruitment officer

Interviewee 4: Municipal employee focusing on new inhabitants

Interviewee 5: Labour union representative

Keuruu, Finland

The experts interviewed represented the following stakeholders:

Interviewees 1, 2 & 3 (interviewed together): Municipal business development in Keuruu

Interviewee 4: Regional project work on multilocality

Interviewee 5: The regional council of Central Finland

Stykkishólmur, Iceland

The experts interviewed represented the following stakeholders:

Interviewee 1: Elected official

Interviewee 2 & 3: Regional municipality association

Interviewee 4: Labour union representative

Interviewee 5: Employee of the national regional planning agency

Orkland, Norway

The experts interviewed represented the following stakeholders:

Interviewee 1: Municipal planner

Interviewee 2: Business development agency

Interviewee 3: Recruitment officer

Åland

The experts interviewed represented the following stakeholders:

Interviewee 1 & 2: Chair and executive director of Association of Åland's archipelago municipalities

Interviewee 3 & 4: Municipal planner & a project manager

Jämtland Härjedalen, Sverige

The experts interviewed represented the following stakeholders:

Interviewee 1: Municipal planner

Interviewee 2: Business development agency

Interviewee 3: Regional and cross-border association

Appendix 2: Interview questions

Section 1

- Do you think opportunities to work remotely has or could have an impact on the attraction and/or retention of population in (*name of town*)?
- Do you regard remote work as an important or a marginal phenomenon in relation to rural/regional development?
- What remote work patterns do you expect to prevail long-term?
Differences between sectors?
- Do you think opportunities of distance learning could have an impact on population retention or attraction? (*If yes, please relate also to distance learning in the questions below, however keeping the focus on remote work in mind.*)

§ If yes, go to section 2. If no, why?

Section 2

- What effects of remote work have you seen so far in relation to migration patterns? What types of "in-movers"? In which sectors do they work? How important in relation to other "in-movers"?
- Have remote work opportunities had an impact on the present population e.g. in terms of where they work (within the town or commuting patterns)? Is remote work an opportunity to retain population that might otherwise have moved away permanently? If yes, in what sectors do they work?

Section 3

- What are the main opportunities for your town/region/municipality of in-migration of permanent residents and/or higher levels of non-resident population (second home users and tourists)?

- What opportunities do you see related to retained or new population based on remote work opportunities? Is there a difference between permanent population and temporary (multilocal)?
- What measures might have to be taken to ensure a good outcome in relation to these opportunities?

Section 4

- What features of the town/region/municipality do you deem to be important to attract or retain population in general? What factors do you think could make your town/region/municipality attractive to remote workers? What factors might be less attractive to remote workers?

Section 5

- What challenges do you see related to population growth? Differences between permanent and temporary (multilocal) population? How might these challenges be addressed? What solutions are implemented or discussed?

Section 6

- Is the public sector responding to the trend of increased remote working? If yes, how?
- What functions of the municipality are involved in remote work-related issues? Are there municipal strategies and allocated resources related to remote work opportunities?
- Has the municipality taken steps to encourage remote work or to discourage action that could lead to negative effects thereof?
- Is there any support to the public or private sector to facilitate remote work?
- Does the municipality get support/incentives/directives for remote work initiatives (e.g. from the state or region)?
- Are there legal or administrative barriers to remote work? Taxation? Working environment? Other?

Section 7

- What have been the main planning challenges experienced during the pandemic (and after)? In relation to remote work going forward?
- What specific rural/regional development considerations are raised? How has rural/regional planning responded (new initiatives/strategies/planning tools)? What issues have been brought up on the agenda for the future? What might be related to remote work opportunities?

Section 8

- Is there anything else you would like to share about the (potential) effects of increased remote work in your town/regional/municipality?

Section 9

- Is there anyone else in the municipality/region that you would recommend us to talk to?
- Are there any (municipal/regional) documents that would be beneficial for us to read? Studies or statistics you find useful?

About this publication

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