

## Appendix 1: P10 Network of rural municipalities (The Netherlands, NC1)

Organising partner:	TU Delft	Innovation 
Practice:	<b>Remote work as a promising practice to attract newcomers to rural areas (Ireland, IE1C)</b>	
Practice context:	<b>Ireland - Predominantly rural</b>	
Confrontation context:	<b>P10 network of rural municipalities NUTS3, Netherlands - Intermediate</b>	
Workshop location:	<b>Online</b>	
Date:	<b>November 18th 2021</b>	

### Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has given a boost to remote work in many European countries. An Irish study into the potential of remote work for rural areas (IE1C) has been conducted during the pandemic. This report confronts the results of this study to the differing context of Dutch rural areas, based on three brainstorm sessions and a focus group with relevant stakeholders. It shows that there are indeed some important differences between the Irish and the Dutch context, which may make remote work more hybrid in the Netherlands and may make Dutch rural communities less welcoming towards incoming remote workers. Nonetheless, remote work is likely to stay and will affect Dutch rural areas in the future. Most stakeholders welcome this situation and see plenty of opportunities to make it successful for both rural areas and remote workers. As remote workers currently lack representation and remote work as such is not promoted in rural areas, the creation of Grow Remote chapters or (a) comparable organisation(s) would reinforce opportunities for remote workers and remote work.

### Context

Since the arrival of Covid-19 in the Netherlands, working remotely has become a reality for many Dutch employees. Moreover, many employers are planning to continue (some forms of) working remotely

even after all Covid restrictions are withdrawn. Working hybrid seems to become the norm for many employees. This means that they will partly work in an office, and partly from home or elsewhere (Rijksoverheid, 2021). Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the effects of and opportunities for remote work in Dutch rural areas. This study reports the results of a confrontation in which Dutch stakeholders from rural areas discuss the results of the Irish report on remote working and Grow Remote (Weir et al., 2021). This report may add knowledge about the potential for remote working in Dutch rural areas, while also revealing the potential and limits of the practices as investigated in the Irish context.

### Similarities

The Irish and Dutch contexts are similar on three topics. A first similarity is that rural areas in both countries have recently experienced a serious growth of remote work and are likely to see this continued after the withdrawal of Covid restrictions. The T5.2 report on Grow Remote in the Irish context (IE1C, Weir et al., 2021) describes how during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, during which remote work in Ireland was investigated, people and businesses increasingly started to work remotely. This also gives opportunities for Irish rural areas, as people can now easily combine a high-skilled job that used to be in an urban context with living in a rural area (IE1C, Weir et al., 2021). In the Netherlands, research during the first wave of Covid-19 suggests that many work and travel habits for Dutch people and businesses may structurally change as well (De Haas et al., 2020). Most workers report positive experiences about working remotely and expect that they may work remote or hybrid in the future (De Haas et al., 2020). Earlier Dutch research already showed that workers tend to live further away from their office when they can work from home more often (De Vos et al., 2019). This could mean that Dutch rural areas, which are always relatively close to urban places, could see an increase of inhabitants.

A second similarity considers the active sense of community which is found in both Irish and Dutch rural areas. The Irish report mentions that organisations like Grow Remote are formed bottom-up and rely on active participation by local citizens. For example, the Town Tasters approach in Dingle, Co. Kerry, relies on active local communities (IE1C, Weir et al., 2021). Dutch rural communities are also known for active citizen engagement (Vermeij, 2015). Almost every village has its own community centre and/or a village council, which is run by volunteers (Landelijke Vereniging Kleine Kernen [LVKK], 2021). This provides ample opportunities for active citizens in Dutch rural areas to improve the local infrastructure for remote work and support integration of new inhabitants who want to work remote if they consider this within the village interest.

A third similarity considers the amount of cooperation between governments on multiple levels with entrepreneurs and civil organisations. The Irish report mentions how the bottom-up organised local chapters of Grow Remote cooperate with local governments and existing local businesses and organisations. It also mentions how the national organisation of Grow Remote cooperates with the national government and businesses who plan to increase remote work (IE1C, Weir et al., 2021). This shows the strong cooperation between different institutions who deal with rural areas and/or remote

work. In the Netherlands, there is also a strong cooperation between such institutions. Active citizens and rural municipalities are used to having continuous communication about how to achieve societal goals in villages (Ubels et al., 2019). This would enable the required cooperative approach of governments and businesses to allow increased support for remote work and remote workers.

### Differences

There are also differences between the Irish and the Dutch context. Three of these are most important. First, the Netherlands is a much more urbanised country than Ireland. The Netherlands has 507 inhabitants per square kilometre. Ireland has 72 inhabitants per square kilometre (Eurostat, 2021a). Of the seven Irish NUTS3 regions, six are predominantly rural and one is predominantly urban. Of the 40 Dutch NUTS3, one is predominantly rural, 17 are intermediate, and 22 are predominantly urban (Eurostat, 2021b). This also has effects on the character of remote work. Dutch rural communities are thus located closer to urban areas. This leads to more opportunities for hybrid work in the Netherlands (De Vos et al., 2019). This contextual difference makes remote work in Ireland of a more permanent character, whereas in the Netherlands it is more likely to be part-time.

A second difference is also related to the level of urbanisation and considers the differing amount of available space. As the Netherlands is much more densely populated, it also seems to have a fiercer competition for space than Ireland. In the Dutch obstacles for the realisation of future rural dreams, the lack of available housing and land to plot it was mentioned regularly. This was not found in Ireland (Kuhmonen et al., 2021). Consequently, there may be less support for welcoming new remote workers in Dutch rural communities that already seem to lack space to allow for housing, infrastructure, nature, and agriculture.

A third difference is that the digital infrastructure in Dutch rural areas is further developed than in Irish rural areas. The OECD (2020) shows that the Netherlands has a higher percentage of rural households with access to fast broadband. This influences the character of remote work in both countries. The Irish report discusses the creation of central buildings in rural communities with strong enough digital connectivity (Weir et al., 2021). In the Netherlands, the level of digital connectivity in rural areas is generally strong enough to allow for working remotely from home (Buitelaar, 2021).

### Why the context was chosen

Like Ireland, the Netherlands experiences growth of remote work in rural areas and has many active rural citizens who are used to cooperating with other stakeholders. This makes it interesting to investigate the potential for remote work in Dutch rural areas. There is no organisation like Grow Remote which actively organizes and represents remote workers. However, the Netherlands lacks NUTS 3 regions which are comparable to West Ireland. Therefore, the research focuses on the P10 network of rural municipalities. This covers 29 of the most rural Dutch municipalities, which are in

different regions, but mostly in the relatively peripheral regions of the country (P10, 2021a; Annex 2). In the 'Countryside agenda' of this organisation, P10 requests more support for rural remote work from the national government (P10, 2021b).

## Results

### Acceptance and interest in implementing the practice

Stakeholders are generally interested in and positive about the practice of increased remote work in Dutch rural areas. They mention a wide variety of positive consequences that would be the result of the implementation of this practice. If current rural citizens could work and/or study remotely, more knowledgeable and highly educated people would be able to stay in the region. Remote work also allows people to combine jobs, to work when it pleases them and to spend more time and money in their own community. This could improve the livability, service levels and economic prospects of rural areas. It may, for example, enable more businesses to relocate to or locate themselves in the countryside. One participant mentioned that this could give new functions to the increased amount of empty farm stables in the Dutch countryside.

An increased number of remote workers also demographically balances the currently ageing rural areas. According to some stakeholders, newcomers from urban contexts could culturally enrich rural areas and reduce the experienced divide between urban and rural life. Furthermore, stakeholders point at the environmental benefits of this practice. If people travel less for work and live more distributedly over the country, traffic jams are likely to reduce. This would have a positive impact on sustainability. Hence, there is quite some interest and enthusiasm among stakeholders about an increase in remote work. They generally also seem to support the idea that it will inevitably lead to more workers who want to live in rural areas. One stakeholder mentioned that this would also help people in urban areas who are desperately looking for a house.

Despite the general enthusiasm, participants also mention some potential disadvantages of this practice. Within organisations, team dynamics may be lost, which would reduce their innovation capacity. Continuous remote work may also cause social isolation of the remote workers. For rural communities, participants also foresee some disadvantages. If remote workers will come to the countryside, they may evict poorer residents from their rural communities, because of the general lack of housing opportunities in Dutch rural areas. This may hurt the livability in socially close-knitted rural communities. If newcomers are not willing to take part in social activities, the social life of certain villages may suffer. Consequently, current inhabitants may get less enthusiastic about further newcomers, which would make it more difficult for them to integrate. Finally, some stakeholders mentioned the possibility that an increase of remote work may not lead to an increase of young and highly skilled workers in rural communities, since it would also enable workers in current rural businesses to stay in an urban area.

### **Identified critical factors related to the implementation of the practice in the context**

Stakeholders mentioned a small number of critical factors that are related to the implementation of more remote work in rural areas. The digital connectivity of rural areas must be on the same level as in urban areas. There must be enough housing available where potentially new inhabitants could live. Collective work locations, as also mentioned in the Irish report (Weir et al., 2021), are also seen as an important contributing factor to people feeling welcome. Finally, stakeholders point to the importance of available childcare, primary schools, and opportunities to socially interact within the community, for example in local sports or cultural associations.

### **Key issues and barriers for implementing the innovative practice in the context**

The issues are described under the critical factors. But stakeholders also mention several potential barriers for the implementation of the practice. In some rural communities, there may be a lack of support among residents, which will make it hard to create a successful integration of newcomer remote workers and existing inhabitants. This integration could also be difficult because the perceived rural 'cooperative' culture may be incompatible with the urban 'individualist' culture in which newcomers are socialized. Moreover, there could be a lack of willingness among newcomers to socially contribute to their new rural area. A poor quality of digital connectivity could also be a barrier, especially since telecom companies often consider it inefficient to invest in improved digital connectivity in rural areas. Many stakeholders also mention the lack of available housing in rural areas, the lack of services and the poor accessibility of many rural areas, which makes it harder to attract remote workers, even if they are willing to live there. Finally, stakeholders point at the lack of a clear representation of remote workers and their interest, and a general lack of clear responsibility for fixing the mentioned barriers. If no one takes this responsibility, the barriers will remain in place.

### **Identified measures and actors that need to be involved to overcome the obstacles and succeed in the implementation of the practice**

A lot of measures have been identified by stakeholders and actors have been indicated which could have a role in implementing these to overcome obstacles and successfully implement remote work in rural areas. Optical fibre could be installed throughout the country, in which the national government has a role. There could be an increase in available housing in rural areas or opportunities to build more, in which provinces and municipalities could have a role. Municipalities could also make sure that young people from villages who may face eviction because of their poor position on the housing market receive preferential treatment in finding a house. The level of services in villages could also be improved, in which entrepreneurs, municipalities and local communities have a role. The accessibility of small villages could also be improved, in which provinces and municipalities have a role. There could also be stronger cooperation between employers, municipalities, and rural communities to promote the integration of newcomers. In general, the national government could have a larger role in planning

policy, allowing for more integrative planning decisions. Employers could also have a role in making sure that remote work is accepted within the organisational culture. On the other hand, everyone has a role in looking out for each other to avoid social isolation of remote workers. To enable a process of increased remote work and social integration of remote workers, there could be stronger cooperation between entrepreneurs, housing associations, sports associations, and churches. There could be a role for educational institutions in teaching digital skills and informing children about the opportunities to work remotely. Village councils, entrepreneurs and municipalities could cooperate to create local or regional centers in which remote workers could use office space. Meetings could be organized with existing inhabitants to discuss the desirability of more newcomers who work remote and with newcomers and current inhabitants to meet each other. Employers' organisations and trade unions have a role in integrating better facilities for remote work in collective labour agreements. There could also be an investigation into how empty farm stables could be re-used to support remote work or remote workers. Finally, an organisation like Grow Remote, which currently does not exist in the Netherlands, could have a huge role in Organising remote workers and promoting remote work.

### **Further innovative ideas to foster rural regeneration and development**

The wide variety of ideas has been reported in the previous section. Some of them overlap with further innovative ideas as they are not just related to the implementation of the practice.

## **Lessons learned and recommendations:**

### **Additional lessons, considerations, and applicability**

There are some additional lessons to be learned about this practice. To understand the position of all relevant stakeholders on the practice, it would be good to have some additional interviews. Some stakeholders, such as national government institutions and some trade unions, were not able to attend the stakeholder session. During the session, stakeholders mentioned roles for some other stakeholders as well, such as housing associations, sports associations, and churches. Furthermore, a representative of the employers' organisation mentioned that it would be wise to directly interview some larger businesses. The views of all these stakeholders could further inform researchers about the applicability of more remote work in rural areas and the opportunities for remote workers.

Furthermore, because of the unclear future of remote work, it is hard to predict how this practice will evolve. As mentioned before, there are currently many employees who work from home. It is not yet clear how many organisations will continue to work remotely or hybrid after Covid restrictions are definitively withdrawn. However, this is of huge importance for the impact that the practice of remote work will have on Dutch rural areas.

The creation and growth of an organisation like Grow Remote seems quite applicable in the Dutch context. Many stakeholders mentioned the importance of bottom-up organisation and the lack of a current representative of remote workers or promotor of remote work. Municipalities, village councils

nor trade unions seem perfectly fit to take up this role themselves. It is therefore imaginable that Dutch chapters of Grow Remote arise or that a comparable organisation will be founded. This also seems necessary to strongly defend the interests of remote workers and to create better facilities for remote work.

Meanwhile, remote work in the Netherlands is likely to be of a much more hybrid character than represented in the Irish report (Weir et al., 2021). The Netherlands is much more densely populated than Ireland and its rural regions are less peripheral. This makes hybrid work a more likely structural situation after Covid restrictions are withdrawn. The remote work as explained in the Irish context will probably not fully replicate. If remote work is to develop further in Dutch rural areas, it will be more hybrid and less concentrated in central centers. Moreover, communities which are suffering under a lack of available housing will be less welcoming towards new remote workers. This means that Dutch chapters of Grow Remote or comparable organisations would have to be willing to also defend the interests of hybrid workers and take these contextual differences into account.

### Next steps and recommendations

To conclude this report, there are five main next steps and recommendations to further support the development of this practice. These are listed beneath:

1. See if Grow Remote chapters or (a) comparable organisation(s) could settle in the Netherlands. Up until that moment, try to take the interests of remote workers into account when making policy decisions or collective labor agreements.
2. Support (digital) infrastructure improvements and the building of more houses in rural areas to accommodate more inhabitants and remote workers.
3. Improve the general level of services in rural areas. Specifically, centers where remote workers could use office space locally could be developed to integrate remote workers and let them make the connection with rural communities.
4. Empower local citizens to cooperate to accommodate remote workers and to develop a strategy for the probable increase of remote work.
5. Keep investigating the developments of remote work and the opportunities for remote workers in the countryside. By doing so, rural areas can flexibly respond to social developments which impact remote workers in their communities.

These next steps require many actors to maintain involved in their implementation: Remote workers, governments on all levels, the P10 network, current local citizens, trade unions, employers, employers' organisations, housing associations, sports associations, village councils, churches, telecom companies, and research institutions all have a role in promoting remote work and facilitating remote workers.

## Contributors

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## Report NC1 annex 2 – Overview of P10 municipalities

Municipality	NUTS 3 region	Urban-rural typology (Eurostat, 2021)	Level of urbanization LAU-2 (Eurostat, 2021)
Weststellingwerf	Zuidoost Friesland	Intermediate	Rural areas
Ooststellingwerf	Zuidoost Friesland	Intermediate	Rural areas
Opsterland	Zuidoost Friesland	Intermediate	Rural areas
De Fryske Marren	Zuidwest Friesland	Intermediate	Rural areas
Noardeast Fryslan	Noord Friesland	Intermediate	Rural areas
Het Hogeland	Overig Groningen	Intermediate	Rural areas
Westerkwartier	Overig Groningen	Intermediate	Rural areas
Aa en Hunze	Noord Drenthe	Intermediate	Rural areas
Midden-Drenthe	Noord Drenthe	Intermediate	Rural areas
Borger-Odoorn	Zuidoost Drenthe	Intermediate	Rural areas
De Wolden	Zuidwest Drenthe	Intermediate	Rural areas
Westerveld	Zuidwest Drenthe	Intermediate	Rural areas
Dinkelland	Twente	Predominantly urban	Rural areas
Tubbergen	Twente	Predominantly urban	Rural areas
Hof van Twente	Twente	Predominantly urban	Towns and suburbs
Twenterand	Twente	Predominantly urban	Towns and suburbs
Berkelland	Achterhoek	Intermediate	Towns and suburbs
Bronckhorst	Achterhoek	Intermediate	Rural areas
West Betuwe	Zuidwest Gelderland	Intermediate	Towns and suburbs
Medemblik	Kop van Noord-Holland	Predominantly urban	Towns and suburbs
Hollands Kroon	Kop van Noord-Holland	Predominantly urban	Rural areas
Goeree-Overflakkee	Groot Rijnmond	Predominantly urban	Rural areas
Peel en Maas	Noord Limburg	Intermediate	Towns and suburbs
Horst aan de Maas	Noord Limburg	Intermediate	Rural areas
Leudal	Midden Limburg	Intermediate	Rural areas
Altena	Midden Noord-Brabant	Predominantly urban	Rural areas
Schouwen-Duiveland	Overig Zeeland	Intermediate	Rural areas
Hulst	Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen	Predominantly rural	Rural areas
Sluis	Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen	Predominantly rural	Rural areas