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Working From Home (WFH) and inequalities between families

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The covid-19 pandemic: the great leveller?

- Development of agriculture 10,000 years ago: proximity to where derive livelihood determines where live
- ICT: loosened relationship between place of work and residence (for some)
- Covid: significant shift in working practices and residential preferences and relationship between home and work?
 - Mass adaptation of remote/hybrid working: largely successful
 - Socially and spatially uneven
 - Most people never WFH

“This virus is the great equaliser,” Andrew Cuomo, Governor of New York.

“The fact that both the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary have contracted the virus is a reminder that the virus does not discriminate,” Michael Gove, UK Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

“It doesn’t care about how rich you are, how famous you are, how funny you are, how smart you are, where you live, how old you are, what amazing stories you can tell. It is the great equalizer and what’s terrible about it is what’s great about it... it’s made us all equal in many ways. We are all in the same boat and if the ship goes down, we’re all going down together.”

Madonna, entertainer.

Privileged (im)mobilities

- Pandemic revalued meaning of mobility?

'In order for us to be still, we require mobility from others'
(Bissell, 2021, 155).

- Social & spatial selectively of WFH
 - Globally, 17 per cent of the workforce is estimated to have WFH during the second quarter of 2020
 - Lowest income households 6 times less likely to WFH than the highest
 - Everyday spatial mobilities declined least in deprived areas during lockdowns

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Research article

Covid geographies of home and work: privileged (im)mobilities?

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Abstract

For hundreds of millions of people globally, the covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally re-ordered the relationship between where one resides and where one's paid work is done. Much ink has justifiably been spilled on the nature, drivers and consequences of these novel geographies of home and work. This analysis, drawing on the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), seeks to generate novel insights into the socially and spatially uneven experiences of work related mobilities during this crisis. The findings illustrate significant differences in the characteristics and circumstances of those who did and did not get to work from home during the peak of the pandemic. These distinct cleavages, it is argued, are emblematic of deeper entrenched inequalities.

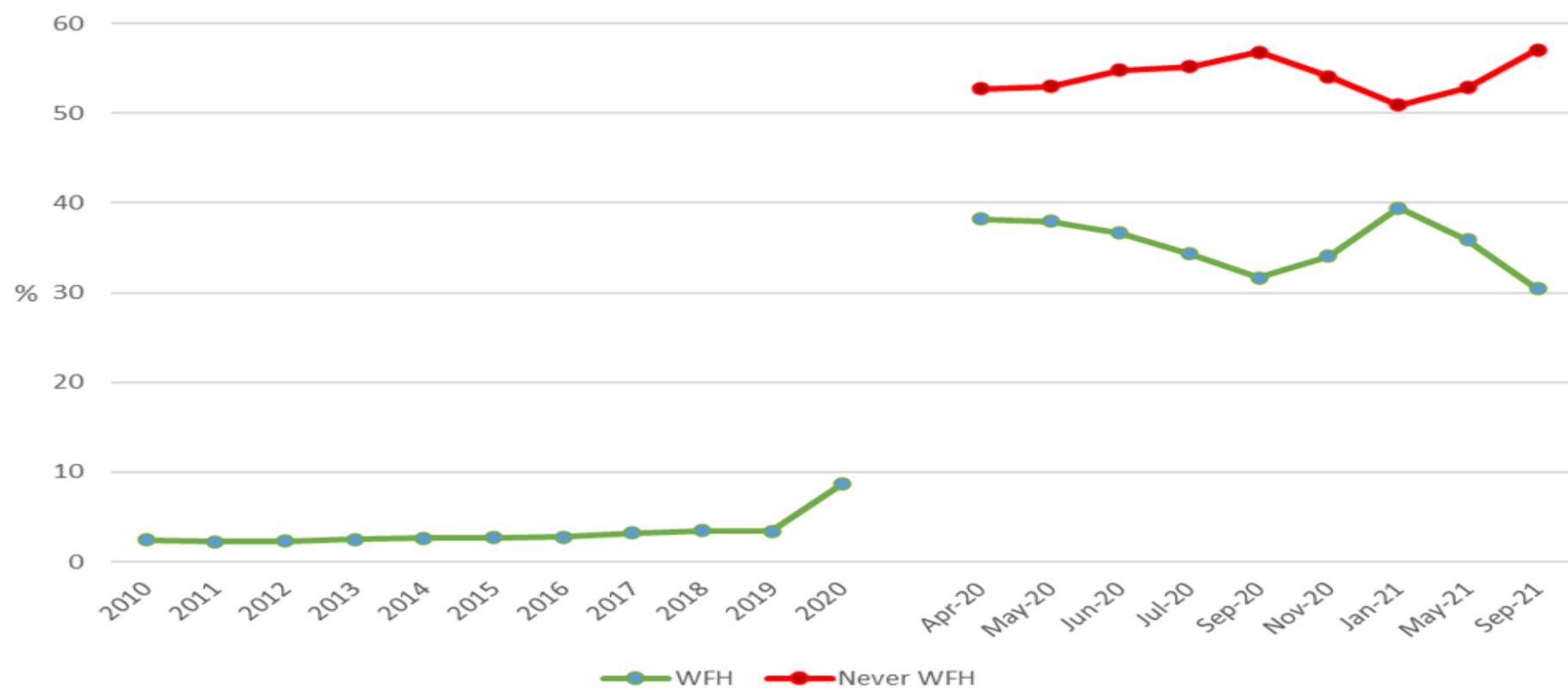
Keywords: covid-19, inequality, mobility, UK Household Longitudinal Study, working from home.

Seeking to understand the 'new normal'

- Analysis of secondary datasets
 - UK Household Longitudinal Study: covid wave cg (January 2021) & wave 13 (from Sept 2021+)
 - Census
 - Annual Population Survey
- Interviews and workshops, 2023: hot & cold spots for WFH
 - Where
 - Hot: Rushcliffe, Bristol, Bath, Warwick
 - Cold: Lincolnshire, Stoke, Hull, Welsh Valleys
 - Dumfries & Galloway, Ayrshire, Argyll & Bute
 - Who
 - Councils, Councillors, Community Councils, think tanks, LEPs...
 - Local residents (new & established), businesses & other stakeholders

Spatial (im)mobility during a health crisis

Figure 1: Share of workforce whose work location was ‘at home’ pre covid (2010-2020) and who ‘always’ or ‘often’ versus ‘never’ worked from home during covid (April 2020 - September 2021).

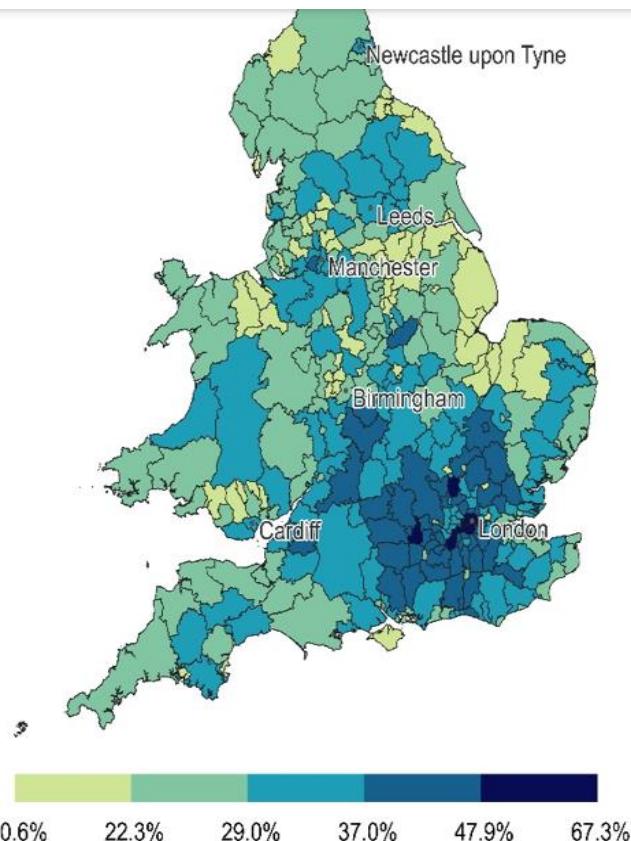


Source: Author’s analysis of UKHLS waves A–K (2010–2020) and covid waves ca–ci (April 2020–September 2021).

56% of workforce never WFH during Q4 of 2022 (ONS, 2023).

Geographical inequalities in work-related immobility

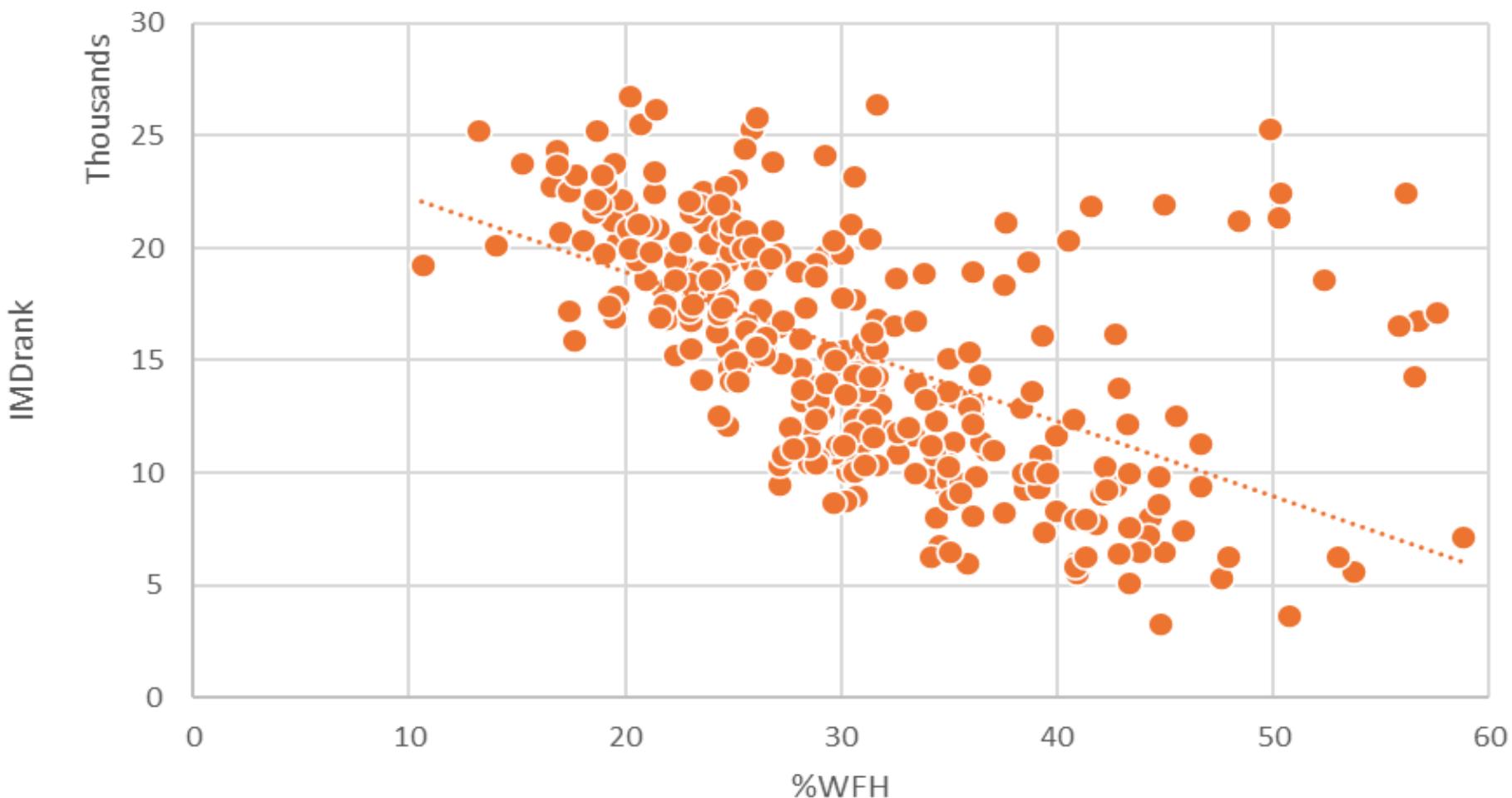
2021 Census: mostly or always WFH



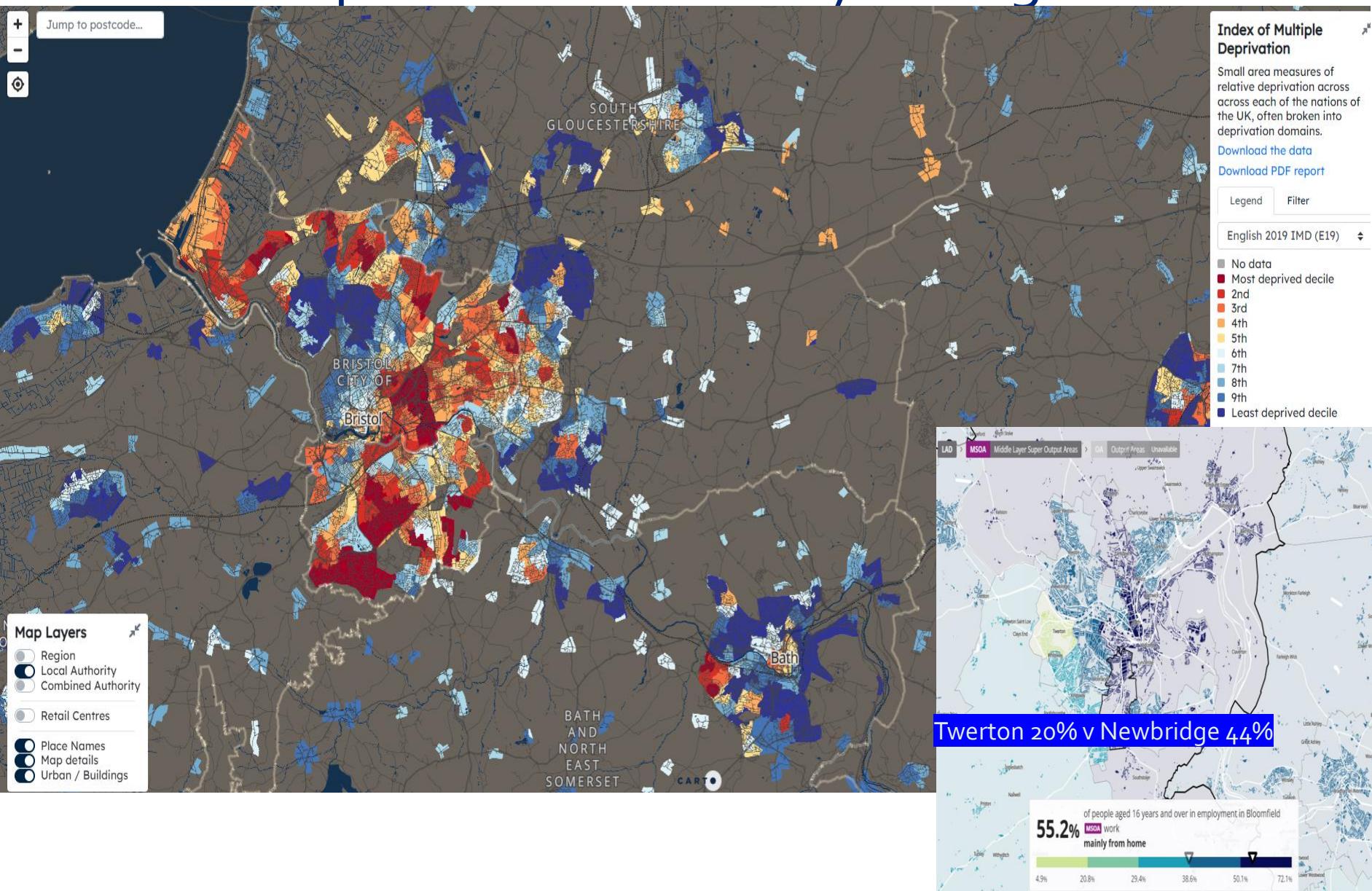
LA	% WFH	LA	% WFH
Boston	10.6	City of London	67.3
Kingston upon Hull	13.2	Richmond upon Thames	58.8
Blaenau Gwent	14.0	Kensington & Chelsea	57.6
NE Lincolnshire	14.0	Camden	56.7
Stoke-on-Trent	15.2	Wandsworth	56.5
Great Yarmouth	16.6	Islington	56.1
Burnley	16.8	Westminster	55.8
Middlesbrough	16.8	Elmbridge	53.7
Mansfield	17.0	St Albans	53
Hartlepool	17.4	Hammersmith & Fulham	52.3

21st March 2021: England: 31.5%, Wales: 25.6% mostly or always WFH

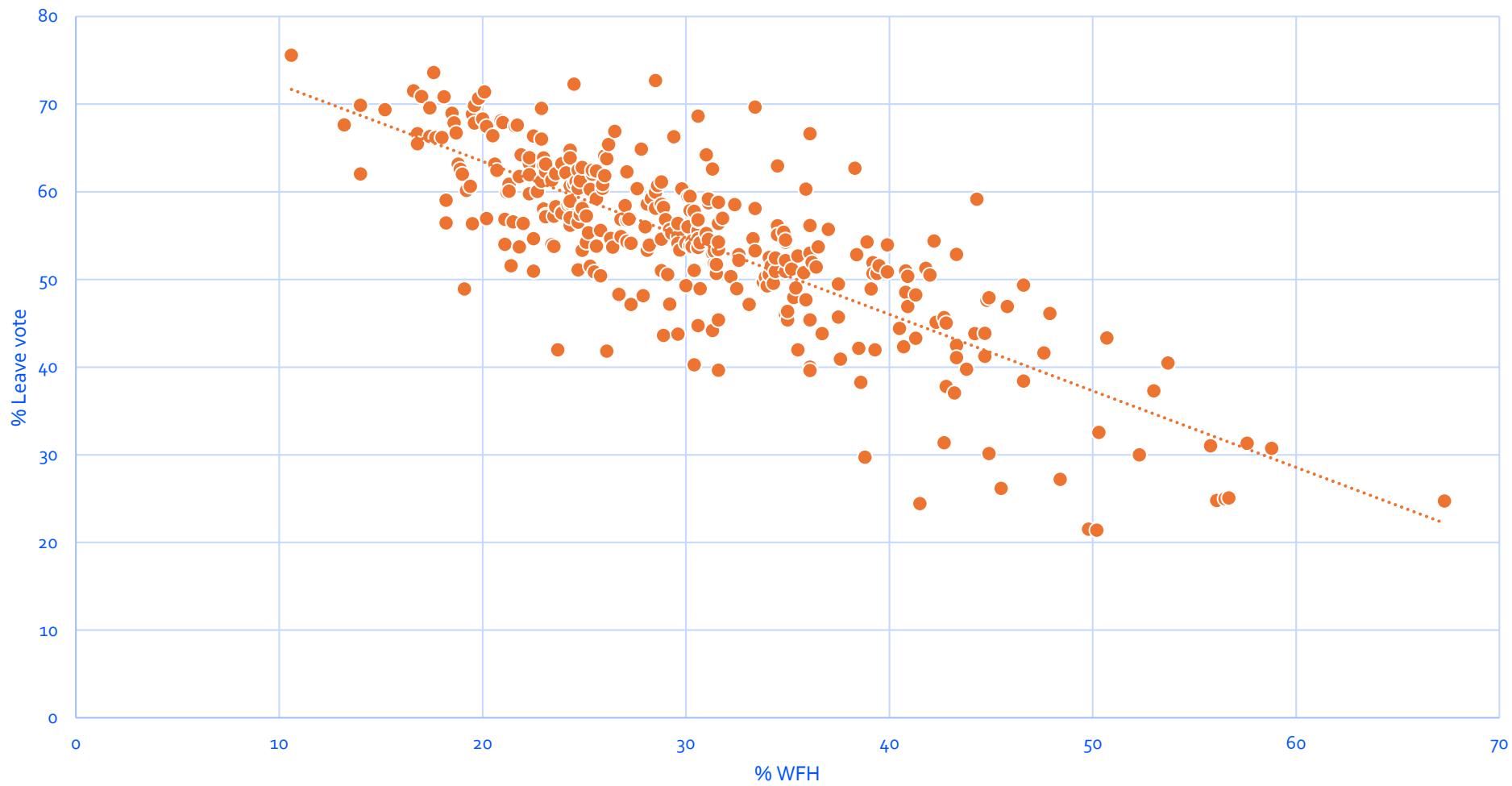
WFH and area deprivation



Area deprivation & mobility during covid



WFH & Brexit vote Leave



Statistical determinants of WFH rate: LA scale

Independent variable	Standardized coefficients & significance
Qualifications Index Score	0.206***
Of those with a NS-SeC, proportion in groups 1 & 2	0.724***
Economic activity: in employment or education	-0.011
Average IMD score	0.165***
Jobs density x 100	0.030
Median gross annual pay	0.159***
Median house prices	0.108***

Individual level demographic profile

Always or often v never WFH

Degree+	41%	16%
NS-SeC 1-3	70%	30%
Managerial duties	32%	16%
Able to vary hours informally	82%	40%
Professional, sci or technical	67%	25%
Finance & insurance	81%	15%
Information & comms	80%	14%
Voted for Brexit	26%	47%

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Covid induced autonomy over work (for some) & (fleeting) occupational prestige

“I don't see much positive change in those jobs where you can't work from home and fair enough, you can't do your job from home, but there remains very, very little flexibility in those jobs where you have to be on site”.

Dorothy, policy analyst, national think-tank

“And in terms of what we saw during COVID, the obvious kind of like winners and losers were the people who had to be on the frontline. So keyworkers and the no choice sort of element. And you know they're there. There's obvious increased exposure to a virus and that very much had a socio-economic dimension to it, whereas if you had more of a sort of an office-based job, you could be at home and in relative safety and comfort... but there is a determination I think from people to move on and create a normal and maybe part of that is like forgetting what happened and who these heroes were. If only there were a way to kind of like engender that sense of support and solidarity in normal times”.

Jane, trade union representative, WFH cold spot

Oversimplicity of a privileged WFH caricature

- Juggling work and caring/home responsibilities
- Blurring of home & work, extended working hours
- Cramped and/or shared accommodation
- Screen fatigue & increased work intensity (e.g. lack of gaps between meetings)
- Heating & electricity costs
- Isolation and lack of comradery & collegiality
- Poor physical as well as mental health
- Younger people
- Introverts

WFH & families: during the pandemic

Source: UKHLS covid wave cg, January 2021

- Always or often v never WFH
- Differences
 - Satisfied with life overall: 66% v 62.2%
 - More women than men: 53.8% v 50.3%
 - Married or in civil partnership: 62.1% v 57.9%
 - Parent of children aged 0-15 in household: 33.8% v 25.1%
- No differences
 - Happiness with relationship: 85% v 84%
 - Closeness of relationship with children: 62.6% v 60.5%
 - Responsibility for childcare: 31.2% v 30.1%

WFH & families: post-pandemic

Source: UKHLS wave 13, September 2021+ (mostly late 2021)

- WFH (v not WFH) =
 - Have children in the household: 36.7% v 32.4%
 - Use childcare: 48.7% v 45.5%
 - Cuddle or hug children very often: 87.5% v 82.8%
 - At least weekly;
 - Talk with children about important matters: 87.6% v 82.4%
 - Spend time together on non-home leisure activities or outings: 30.8% v 28%
 - Quarrel with children at least once a week: 41.8% v 36.8%
 - See children aged 16+ at least weekly: 49.8% v 60.9%
 - Satisfied with;
 - Life: 79.1% v 74.2%
 - Relationship: 86.6% v 85.6%
 - Job: 81.9% v 80.3%

Conclusions: WFH and inequalities

- *Plus ça Change*
 - Significant changes in how and where (paid) work is done
 - Great leveller? Mirror longstanding social and spatial inequalities
- WFH families = distinct from non-WFH families
 - Direct: Specific impacts of WFH on families
 - Indirect: WFH = higher socio-economic status = impacts on families
 - Nature of WFH: fully remote v hybrid, all v some parents/carers, gendered effects, informal social support networks
- Policy considerations
 - WFH: cause v mainly a symptom of wider socio-economic inequalities
 - Working conditions for the majority who cannot WFH
 - Flexibility to better balance WFH and care
 - Dust still settling on the 'new normal'...

"It's like the famous quote where the Chinese politician was asked about whether the French Revolution was a bad thing and he replied 'too early to say'... so many of our assumptions about demographic structures and settlement patterns are based upon preexisting pre-COVID assumptions"

Michael, Director of Policy, business group, WFH hotspot