

# Hybrid Working in the Black Country: Balancing Innovation and Inclusion

November 2024



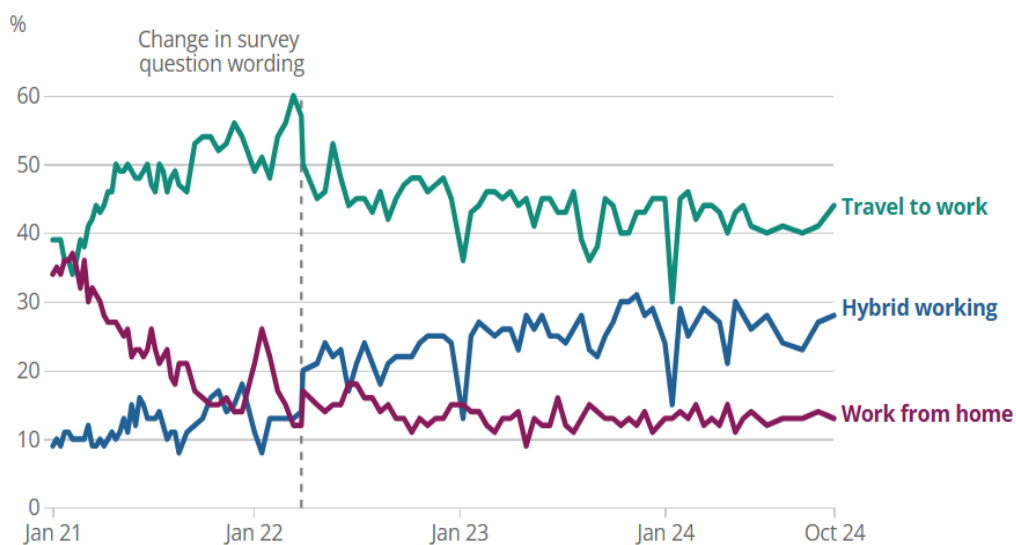
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## The Rise of Hybrid Working

The rise of hybrid working models has reshaped the professional landscape, merging remote and on-site work to offer flexibility and balance in unprecedented ways. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this shift has continued into 2024 as organisations increasingly recognise the benefits of hybrid work for both employee productivity and satisfaction. Not only does hybrid work allow companies to tap into a wider talent pool, but it also meets the modern workforce's demands for greater work-life balance and autonomy, especially among younger generations who prioritise flexibility in job roles. These advantages have led many organisations to formalise hybrid policies, with offices now more frequently utilised for collaborative, team-based activities rather than just routine, individual tasks.

- **ONS data shows that there are now more than a quarter (28%) of working adults in Great Britain are hybrid working.**



Source ONS

## Embracing the Hybrid Workforce

While hybrid work has been beneficial, it also presents unique challenges. Ensuring effective communication, engagement, and a sense of inclusion across dispersed teams has become a priority for leaders. Many companies are investing in technologies like AI-driven collaboration tools to enhance remote communication and bridge geographical divides, while also redesigning physical office spaces to support flexible, adaptable layouts. Security and upskilling have also become focal points, as hybrid models bring specific risks in terms of data privacy and a growing reliance on digital solutions.

As the future of work evolves, organisations that embrace a well-rounded, inclusive hybrid model are likely to have a competitive advantage, fostering innovation and retaining talent more effectively. By focusing on these trends, companies can not only adapt to the shifting workforce dynamics but also create an environment where employees feel empowered, connected, and productive, regardless of location.

## Who are the Hybrid Workers?

A recent report from The Office for National Statistics<sup>1</sup> (ONS) offers an in-depth look into hybrid working patterns across the UK, identifying demographic, economic, and occupational factors that influence the adoption of hybrid work. The data highlights several key trends in hybrid work adoption:

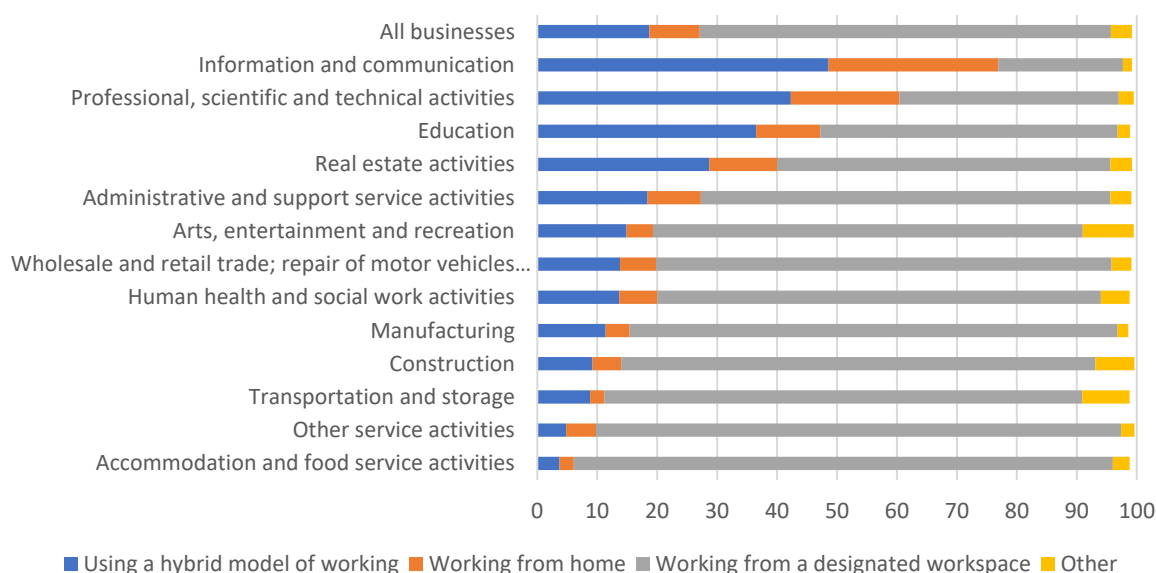
**Demographic Patterns:** Older workers, individuals with dependents, and senior professionals are more likely to work in hybrid arrangements. Those aged 35–54 are the most likely to report hybrid work, as this age group often balances professional responsibilities with family commitments. This pattern is particularly notable among parents, who benefit from the flexibility hybrid work provides for managing childcare and household duties.

- **Although the Black Country has a slightly higher proportion of workers aged 35-54<sup>2</sup> (26.2% compared to the national average of 26.0%), fewer workers in the region have access to flexible working arrangements.**

**Professional and Sectoral Trends:** Hybrid work adoption varies widely across industries, with certain sectors showing a higher affinity for remote flexibility. Workers in information technology, professional services, and roles that rely on digital tools are the most likely to engage in hybrid work. In contrast, sectors such as healthcare, retail, and manufacturing, where physical presence is more integral to job duties, report lower hybrid work participation. Professionals in higher-skilled, knowledge-based roles have the greatest access to hybrid work, while those in less flexible roles experience more barriers.

- **Businesses in the ‘Information and communication’ industry had the highest share of hybrid working at 49%, followed by the ‘Professional, scientific, and technical activities’ industry at 42%.**

Industries most likely to adopt hybrid working



<sup>1</sup> [Who are the hybrid workers? - Office for National Statistics](#)

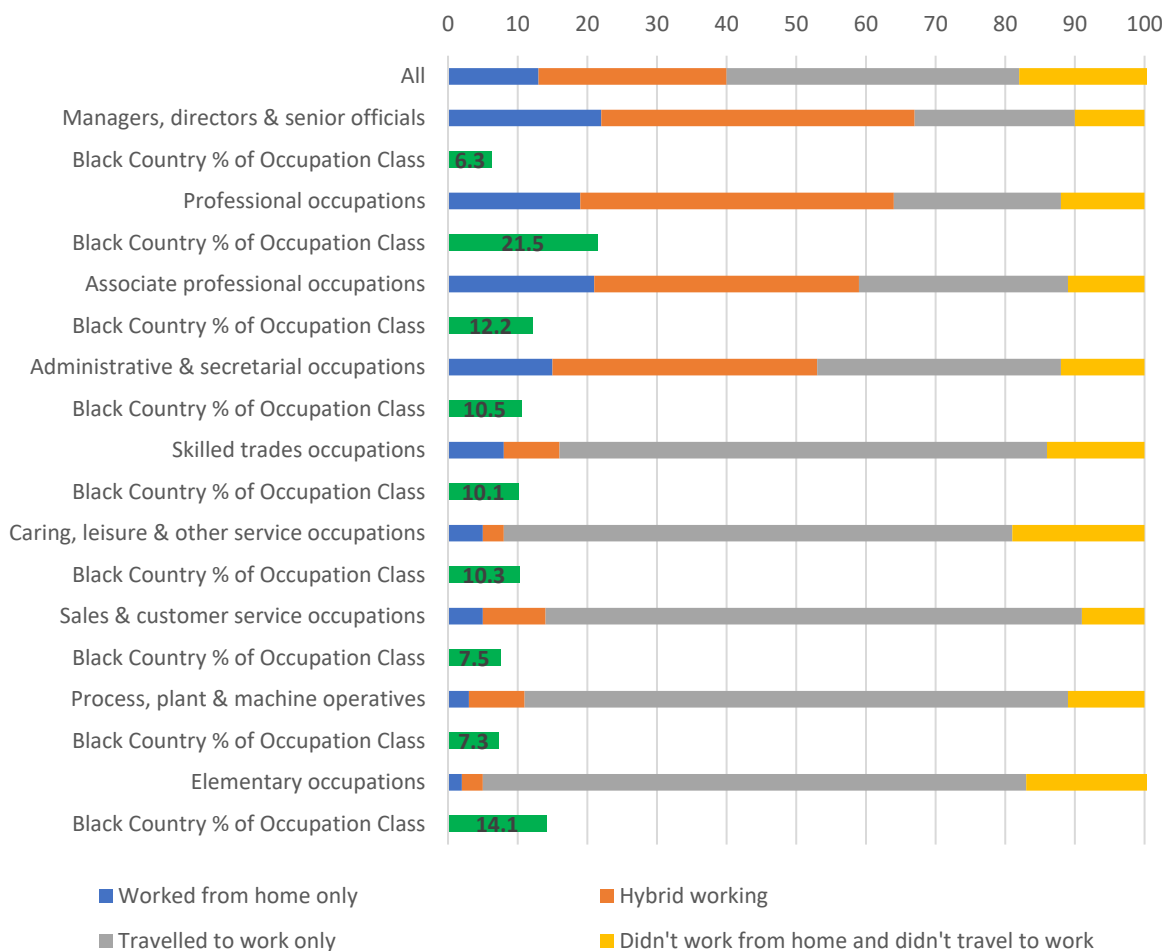
<sup>2</sup> ONS Population Estimates – local authority based 5-year age band 2022

- **In the Black Country, the industries with the highest proportion of hybrid working - 'Information and Communication' and 'Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities' - employ approximately 6,000<sup>3</sup> and 21,000 people, respectively. The 'Information and Communication' sector represents just 1.7% of Black Country jobs, about a quarter of the national average of 4.8%. Similarly, 'Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities' account for 4.7% of jobs, less than half the national figure of 9.7%.**

**Impact of Educational Background:** The report indicates that workers with advanced degrees or higher qualifications are more likely to participate in hybrid work arrangements. This correlation suggests that higher education levels often correlate with roles that are amenable to remote work and offer greater autonomy, contributing to an increased likelihood of hybrid work. Those in managerial and technical roles, who frequently possess such qualifications, are often equipped with the skills and resources to manage flexible schedules.

- **Nationally, close to half (45%) of those in more senior occupations followed a hybrid working model, compared with 27% of all workers. That compares with just 3% of people in 'elementary occupations', such as working on the shop floor in retail or cleaning services, and 3% of people working in 'caring, leisure and other services'.**

**Occupations most likely to hybrid work**



<sup>3</sup> ONS Business Register and Employment Survey 2023

- In the Black Country, only 6.3% of people are employed as 'Managers, directors, and senior officials' and 21.5% in 'Professional occupations,' compared to the national averages of 11.3% and 26.8%, respectively. These roles, which have the highest potential for hybrid working (45% for both categories), are underrepresented. Conversely, 'Elementary occupations' and 'Caring, leisure, and other service occupations,' which have the lowest propensity for hybrid working (3% for both categories), are more prevalent in the Black Country, with employment levels of 14.1% and 10.3%, compared to 8.7% and 8.2% nationally.

**Health and Well-being Benefits:** Hybrid work arrangements have contributed to improved work-life balance, with hybrid workers reporting increased time for well-being activities. Many workers find that commuting less frequently provides time for physical activity, personal projects, and family interactions, leading to higher job satisfaction. This arrangement is particularly beneficial for mental health, with more employees reporting reduced stress and burnout levels. The flexibility of hybrid work also fosters a more balanced work environment, contributing to overall life satisfaction.



Source ONS

**Productivity and Efficiency:** Although some initially questioned hybrid work's impact on productivity, the ONS data suggests that many workers feel more productive. Access to a quieter home environment on remote days can enhance focus, while collaborative days in the office improve team cohesion and problem-solving. Productivity tools and collaboration platforms have enabled seamless workflows, reducing the negative impact of physical distance among teams.

**Office Use and Scheduling:** Hybrid workers tend to favour on-site work mid-week, with peak attendance on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. The flexibility to choose in-office days allows employees to manage workspaces more effectively and minimise travel time. Offices are increasingly adapting to these schedules, shifting toward hot-desking arrangements and open, collaborative areas designed for teamwork rather than individual tasks.

**Challenges and Barriers:** Despite the benefits, hybrid work does have its challenges. Employees in roles with limited autonomy or those in team-dependent functions may find it challenging to work independently or remotely. Additionally, the lack of structured guidelines in some companies can result in ambiguity around expectations, which can affect performance and engagement levels. The report suggests that structured, well-defined hybrid policies can alleviate uncertainties and help create a balanced, productive environment.

## Hybrid Working in the Black Country

Hybrid working remains less common in the Black Country compared to the national average, largely as we've seen earlier in this report due to the economic structure which is heavily centred on traditional, lower-skilled industries and a workforce with lower-than-average qualification levels. The Black Country has a deep-rooted legacy in manufacturing and engineering, particularly in sub-sectors such as metal manufacturing and machinery. These industries typically require in-person, hands-on work, limiting the feasibility of remote or hybrid work formats.

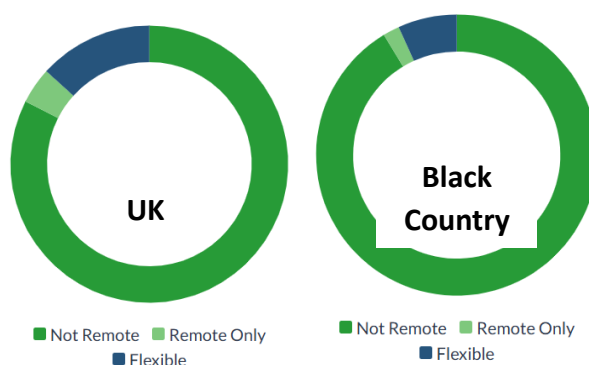
| Industry                                                             | Likelihood of a hybrid model of working* | Total Black Country Jobs |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Information and communication                                        | 48.6                                     | 6,000                    |
| Professional, scientific, and technical activities                   | 42.3                                     | 21,000                   |
| Education                                                            | 36.5                                     | 43,000                   |
| Real estate activities                                               | 28.7                                     | 7,000                    |
| Administrative and support service activities                        | 18.4                                     | 31,000                   |
| Arts, entertainment, and recreation                                  | 14.9                                     | 9,000                    |
| Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles | 13.8                                     | 81,000                   |
| Human health and social work activities                              | 13.7                                     | 73,000                   |
| Manufacturing                                                        | 11.4                                     | 59,000                   |
| Construction                                                         | 9.2                                      | 23,000                   |
| Transportation and storage                                           | 8.8                                      | 31,000                   |
| Other service activities                                             | 4.8                                      | 9,000                    |
| Accommodation and food service activities                            | 3.7                                      | 23,000                   |

\*Based on the ONS national findings

- **Crudely, there are 117,000 Black Country jobs in the top six industries likely to adopt hybrid working compared to 218,000 in the six least likely industries.**

This is further validated by analysing workplace location data in recent job postings<sup>4</sup>. The charts below compare workplace locations over the past 12 months, contrasting national trends with those in the Black Country.

Demand breakdown by workplace model



Source Adzuna Intelligence

<sup>4</sup> [Adzuna Intelligence | Location Intelligence](#)

The charts show that over the past year, 14% of UK job postings offered a flexible work model, which is twice the rate in the Black Country (7%). Likewise, for "Remote Only" positions, national postings reached 4%, while the Black Country posted only 2%. Conversely, the remaining "Not Remote" roles made up 82% of job postings nationally, compared to a higher 91% in the Black Country.

Efforts to address these disparities are underway through initiatives like the Black Country Innovation Manufacturing Organisation<sup>5</sup> (BCIMO), which supports skill development and industrial innovation. However, a significant shift toward hybrid working may be gradual, requiring ongoing investment in digital infrastructure, skill-building, and economic diversification to encourage more knowledge-based industries that naturally support flexible working arrangements.

## Conclusion

The ONS report concludes that, although hybrid work is popular across many demographics, it isn't a universal solution. As organisations adjust policies to meet diverse needs, hybrid models are expected to evolve further. Furthermore, for the Black Country, expanding hybrid work could yield substantial health and well-being benefits by improving work-life balance, reducing commuting stress, and supporting mental health. These enhancements are closely linked to productivity gains, as a more satisfied, less stressed workforce is generally more focused and efficient.

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<sup>5</sup> [Home - BCIMO](#)