

THE CITY OF  
GREATER GEELONG

# SUBMISSION TO VICTORIA'S WORKING FROM HOME LEGISLATION

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SEPTEMBER 2025

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# Contents

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<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Submission .....</b>	<b>4</b>
The context for WFH.....	4
What the research says .....	4
Managing the cost impact .....	5
Managing the human impact.....	5
The City of Greater Geelong experience.....	6
Recommendations .....	7
References .....	7

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# Executive summary

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**The City of Greater Geelong (the City) welcomes the Victorian Government's commitment to supporting flexible work arrangements. We recognise the positive impact that working from home (WFH) can have on employee wellbeing, productivity, and regional economic development. However, we believe the proposed legislation must be carefully designed to reflect the diverse needs of regional communities and the businesses that operate within them.**

Internationally, the rollout of WFH policies has varied widely, with many countries introducing permanent legislation following the COVID-19 pandemic. In Australia, WFH adoption surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, with about 36% of Australians working from home regularly as of 2024. The federal government's Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs Better Pay) Act 2022 expanded the right to request flexible work, including WFH. While many workers report improved job satisfaction and productivity, employers' express concerns about collaboration, mentoring, and performance monitoring.

Research shows that WFH has become a deeply embedded feature of the Australian workforce, particularly in professional and administrative roles. However, mandating WFH entitlements presents challenges, including disparities in access to remote work and difficulties justifying in-office attendance. Surveys indicate that employer demands for in-office attendance are declining, with most organisations favouring flexible arrangements.

Managing WFH entitlements involves direct and indirect costs, including increased expenses for employees and investments in cybersecurity, collaboration tools, and performance management systems for employers. Legal compliance adds complexity, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. Clear policies and guidelines, leadership training, and a trust-based culture are essential for successful remote work strategies.

The shift to remote work has impacted commercial property and workplace design, with businesses rethinking their physical footprint and adopting flexible layouts and smart building technologies. While reduced office space can yield substantial savings, it requires upfront investment in IT infrastructure and change management which can be challenging for many businesses.

The City's experience with working from home has been largely positive, though not all roles are suited to remote work, only about a quarter of staff can participate. However, through clear policies, training, and support, the City has seen improved staff satisfaction, productivity, and retention. WFH arrangements have also enabled the City to maintain services during disruptions and foster innovation in digital service delivery and community engagement.

The City recommends a balanced approach to WFH legislation, ensuring workplace safety, clear accountability, and support for small and regional employers. Equity must be a key consideration, recognising that not all roles can be performed remotely.

The following recommendations are made for consideration in development of the proposed legislation:

- **Flexible Frameworks:** Create a flexible framework that enables businesses to tailor WFH arrangements based on operational needs and community service obligations.
- **Clear Definitions and Support:** Provide detailed guidance on what constitutes a role that can "reasonably" be performed from home, and offer resources to assist with implementation.
- **Equity and Inclusion Measures:** Address potential disparities between remote-eligible and non-eligible roles to maintain fairness and morale.
- **Financial Support for Businesses:** Provide access to grant funding for businesses to assist in meeting full implementation of the legislation, including leadership training.

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# Submission

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The City of Greater Geelong (the City) welcomes this consultation and supports efforts by the Victorian Government to modernise workplace legislation. We encourage a balanced, evidence-based approach that reflects the diversity of roles and organisational contexts across Victoria.

The City fosters a diverse and inclusive employee environment, with a workforce of over 2,700 staff delivering more than 130 services to the community. Staff roles span a wide range of areas including community development, arts and leisure, engineering, urban planning, aged care, and parks maintenance.

The City is committed to equal opportunity employment and actively promotes diversity to reflect the community it serves. Employees are spread across a network of locations throughout the region, including central offices in Geelong, suburban service centres in places like Corio, Belmont, Drysdale, Ocean Grove, Lara, and Armstrong Creek, as well as libraries, leisure centres, childcare facilities, and outdoor work sites. This decentralised structure ensures that services are accessible across both urban and rural parts of the municipality.

The City is committed to providing flexible work environments for its employees including the option to work from home (WFH), where appropriate.

The City recognises that remote work is a strategic enabler for fostering a high-performing, inclusive, and resilient organisation. Nevertheless, this model must be aligned with operational needs and the expectations of the community. An adaptable approach remains essential, as uniform solutions may not adequately address diverse requirements.

## THE CONTEXT FOR WFH

Internationally, the rollout of WFH policies has varied widely, with many countries introducing permanent legislation following the COVID-19 pandemic. Nations like Argentina, Belgium, and Brazil have implemented laws that require written telework agreements, reimburse remote work expenses, and protect employees' right to disconnect.

These policies often prioritise access for vulnerable groups such as caregivers and people with disabilities. However, cross-border remote work has introduced legal and tax complexities, especially around compliance with local employment laws and social security systems.

In Australia, WFH adoption surged during the pandemic, with nearly 40% of workers working remotely in 2021. As of 2024, about 36% of Australians continue to work from home regularly, with strong preferences for hybrid arrangements. The federal government's *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs Better Pay) Act 2022* expanded the right to request flexible work, including WFH, and empowered the Fair Work Commission to resolve disputes.

Regional uptake varies, with Victoria showing higher WFH rates than other states. The shift has also influenced internal migration patterns, with more Australians moving away from capital cities in search of lifestyle and affordability supported by a WFH workplace culture. Geelong has seen a nearly 20% increase in the number of people moving to the region from other parts of Australia this year alone.

Care needs to be taken to ensure the cost to monitor and manage the legal compliance of remote work does not negatively impact the supply of workers to regional locations.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Australian research shows that WFH has become a deeply embedded feature of the national workforce, particularly in professional and administrative roles. A joint study by the University of Melbourne and Western Sydney University found that nearly 60% of Australian workers now have access to hybrid arrangements, with most working remotely one to three days per week. While fully remote work remains rare, hybrid models are now the norm, especially in larger organisations. Employees consistently report that flexibility improves productivity, wellbeing, and work-life balance, with those who have caregiving responsibilities valuing it most.

However, mandating WFH entitlements, such as a minimum of two days per week, presents challenges.

Research highlights disparities in access to remote work, particularly for lower-paid or frontline roles, and warns that a one-size-fits-all approach may not suit all sectors. Employers face difficulties in justifying in-office attendance, especially when tasks performed on-site could be done remotely. Furthermore, employees express frustration at commuting to the office only to engage in solitary or virtual work. Additionally, staff who are in the office often shoulder extra responsibilities like mentoring, being the person present, leading to workload imbalances.

Surveys from the Australian HR Institute show that employer demands for in-office attendance are declining, with most organisations now favouring flexible arrangements. Over 80% of HR professionals expect hybrid work to remain stable or increase in the coming years. While benefits such as retention, recruitment, and wellbeing are widely acknowledged, challenges persist around collaboration, performance monitoring, and maintaining workplace culture.

The consensus across research is that flexibility must be tailored to individual and organisational needs, and that rigid mandates risk undermining employee satisfaction and organisational effectiveness.

## **MANAGING THE COST IMPACT**

Australian research and commentary on the rollout of WFH arrangements reveals a complex cost-benefit landscape for businesses, particularly when entitlements are mandated.

Managing WFH entitlements involves both direct and indirect costs. According to McCrindle Research, nearly 50% of Australians that work remotely report increased expenses, including higher electricity bills, greater consumption of household goods, and the need for upgraded office supplies and technology, recognising that these costs can be offset by reduced travel and parking costs. Employers however may bear part of these costs through tech stipends or equipment supplies, internet subsidies, or ergonomic equipment provisions. WFH costs can also be offset through tax benefits to individuals transferring the cost to the Australian Government.

Businesses must also invest in cybersecurity infrastructure, cloud-based collaboration tools, and performance management systems to support and monitor remote teams effectively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Victorian Government introduced a range of financial support programs to help businesses adapt to restrictions, including the shift to working from home (WFH). Funding included grants for businesses to build digital capabilities, such as setting up remote work systems, online sales platforms, digital marketing and to support the adoption of digital tools and technologies. This funding provided the resourcing required to implement and support remote work, such as cloud-based software, e-commerce platforms, and cybersecurity.

These programs collectively supported businesses in maintaining operations, transitioning to remote work, and building long-term digital resilience during the pandemic.

Similarly any regulatory burden placed on businesses through changes that mandate WHF entitlements will require financial support, especially for smaller businesses.

Legal compliance also adds another layer of complexity. Employers must ensure home offices meet workplace health and safety standards, which may include ergonomic assessments and mental health support. Navigating these obligations, especially under evolving employment laws, can be resource-intensive, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Therefore, developing clear policies and guidelines will be essential to establishing consistent expectations for remote and hybrid work under any new legislation.

The shift to remote work since COVID-19 has also had a profound impact on commercial property and workplace design. Demand for office space has declined, with vacancy rates in Melbourne and Sydney CBDs reaching multi-year highs. This has led to a significant drop in the value of office buildings, up to 15% in some superannuation portfolios, and forecasts suggest a potential 20% decline across the sector.

In response, businesses are rethinking their physical footprint. Many are downsizing or redesigning offices to support hybrid work models, focusing on flexible layouts, shared desks, and wellness-oriented features like natural light and green spaces. Smart building technologies are also being adopted to reduce operational costs and enhance productivity.

While reduced office space can yield substantial savings, estimated at thousands of dollars per employee annually, it also requires upfront investment in IT infrastructure and change management. The long-term fiscal impact depends on how effectively businesses balance these savings with the new costs of supporting remote work and the resources available to them during any transition period.

## **MANAGING THE HUMAN IMPACT**

The proposed Victorian legislation presents challenges from a human resource perspective.

For example, Local government, like many complex businesses, encompasses a wide range of roles, from administrative and research functions to community-facing services and infrastructure maintenance. While there are

roles that are well-suited to remote work, others require physical presence.

Mandating WFH for eligible roles may unintentionally create divisions among staff, especially where employees have no option to work remotely. This could impact morale and workplace cohesion.

Implementing and managing WFH entitlements across a large and varied workforce introduces significant planning and administrative overhead.

While investing in leadership training will equip managers with the skills needed to effectively guide remote teams, emphasising effective communication, outcome-based management, and a focus on engagement. Building a trust-based culture is also required, this takes time. A trust-based culture encourages organisational growth, supporting both individual autonomy and collective objectives.

Workplace data will become key to successful implementation, enabling businesses to monitor employee engagement, performance, and wellbeing. Clear guidelines and support will be essential to avoid legal disputes and ensure fair implementation.

A final regional consideration is that Geelong and other regional centres benefit from flexible work arrangements that attract talent to the region. However, regional businesses may face competitive disadvantages if the proposed legislation increases costs or compliance burdens compared to other states.

## **THE CITY OF GREATER GEELONG EXPERIENCE**

The City supports WFH arrangements, however only a quarter of employees are able to take up this option due to the nature of their role.

The City's Flexible Work Management Policy provides options for remote work, supported by comprehensive guidelines, manager training, and employee resources to promote consistency and fairness. Employees may work from home for a portion of their scheduled hours, with the required number of in-office days or hours determined by each employee's role, team needs, and operational requirements.

On average staff who have the capacity to WFH, do so 2 days per week full time equivalent, this has arisen from an expectation on staff to work onsite 60% of the time. Data supports that peak office days are Tuesday and Wednesday, with the third most common day fluctuating

between Monday and Thursday. Friday historically results in low attendance based on RDOs and employee preferences. Identifying data such as this is important for coordinating and managing staff resources onsite.

A flexible approach to managing WFH arrangements has delivered notable outcomes for the City, including enhanced staff satisfaction, measurable productivity gains, and expanded access to a broader talent pool, key factors in effective public sector workforce management. Importantly, flexible work arrangements have contributed to improved work-life balance, significant reductions in commuting time and associated environmental impacts, as well as increased staff retention.

These benefits are supported by staff surveys and retention data, underscoring the value of well-managed flexibility in achieving organisational goals and community service objectives. In our 2025 Employee Experience Survey 81% of respondents favourable that they have the flexibility they need to balance their work and personal responsibilities. This a 4% increase from 2024 (77% favourable).

The shift to WFH has enabled us to maintain service delivery during disruptions for select cohorts. We maintained a sustainable engagement score of 77% in our 2025 Employee Experience Check-In Survey.

This transition required adjustments in team collaboration, space utilisation, and performance management. Additionally, it has driven innovation in digital service delivery and enhanced community engagement.

The City has found that establishing clear policies and guidelines is essential to the success of flexible work arrangements, as these provide consistency and transparency across all departments. Investments in leadership training have also been effective, ensuring that managers are well-equipped to lead remote teams through effective communication, outcome-focused management, and active engagement.

The City's commitment to inclusive practices has ensured that all employees, regardless of whether they work remotely or onsite, have equitable access to opportunities, resources, and professional development. Building a trust-based workplace culture has further supported the transition, fostering accountability, flexibility, and a sense of autonomy among staff.

Additionally, the City's use of workplace data to monitor engagement, performance, and wellbeing has informed

ongoing refinements to their remote work strategies, making them more responsive and effective.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The City recommends consideration for a balanced approach that ensures workplace safety and clear accountability in case of incidents. Legislation should be flexible enough to accommodate the diverse needs of different industries and roles that could interfere with service delivery or safety standards.

It is important to provide specific guidance and support for small and regional employers who may face unique challenges. Additionally, equity must be a key consideration, recognising that not all roles can be performed remotely and ensuring fair treatment for all employees. Recognising that roles that require physical presence for safety, community engagement, or operational continuity (e.g. emergency services, infrastructure maintenance) should be exempt; and exemptions should be clearly defined and justified.

We therefore make the following recommendations for consideration in relation to the proposed legislation:

- **Flexible Frameworks:** Create a flexible framework that enables businesses to tailor WFH arrangements based on operational needs and community service obligations.
- **Clear Definitions and Support:** Provide detailed guidance on what constitutes a role that can “reasonably” be performed from home, and offer resources to assist with implementation.
- **Equity and Inclusion Measures:** Address potential disparities between remote-eligible and non-eligible roles to maintain fairness and morale.
- **Financial Support for Businesses:** Provide access to grant funding for businesses to assist in meeting full implementation of the legislation, including leadership training.

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