



Flex in lower-income roles

Experience of flexible
working amongst people
working in lower-income
roles in Scotland

2022

flexibilityworks›

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Executive Summary

The legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic in reshaping working patterns across the socio-economic spectrum presents challenges in mitigating the risk that those working in lower-income roles are not left behind when it comes to the benefits and opportunities brought by enhanced access to 'new ways of working' including flexible working approaches.

Lower-income roles often have frontline aspects to them and generally less flexibility than higher paid roles. We also know that women working in lower-income roles have the least access to flex.

This qualitative study aims to highlight the experiences of a small group of Scottish workers currently employed in lower-income roles and to share some practical solutions with employers about what could be done to improve work life balance opportunities for people working in such roles.

Eight people (seven of whom were parents of children under 18, and four single parents) working in a range of lower-income roles were interviewed with a view to understanding their current experience of flexible working as we emerge from the pandemic, as well as how they feel this could be best shaped in the future.

Profound implications are apparent with regard to childcare, including both practical and emotional considerations such as parent-child bonding, the impact on family and workplace relationships, mental and physical wellbeing and access to, and retention and progression within, the labour market.

Lessons for organisations include a need to ensure equitability across teams and departments by taking measures to ensure and 'double-check' that approaches

to flexible working are comprehensively understood and equitably implemented across all levels of organisational hierarchies. Line managers need to be supported by way of comprehensive training and shared learning opportunities. Organisational wide policies and guidance must be careful not to lose the informal aspect of flex arrangements.

This all needs to be supported by strong messages from the top of organisations that help foster a culture where flex, within the natural confines of roles, is the norm and people feel comfortable in broaching the subject of attaining a greater degree of flex in their roles. This is true for all roles, but can be particularly crucial for those on lower-incomes and/or people working in frontline roles.

Background and Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted working patterns of employees and organisations across sectors. More than two years since the beginning of the pandemic, its impacts on when, where and how much people work are still evolving, with efforts ongoing to better understand and shape this evolution.

We know that people, especially women, working in roles earning lower than the median salary (£24,000 in 2022) are generally likely to have less access to flexible working approaches, and to perceive greater barriers, such as feeling flexible working isn't appropriate for their role or that their employer simply doesn't allow it, to increasing the level of flexibility available to them in undertaking their roles of employment (Flex for Life 2022)¹. Our Flex for Life 2022 research found that those with the least access to flex were women earning less than £20,000 a year. They were the only gender and income bracket in which less than half had access to flex – just 47%. A total of 45% said they had no access to flex. Parents in households with an income of less than £30,000, and single parents, were less likely to work flexibly too.

Flexibility Works and stakeholders know that if we are to mitigate the potential for changing approaches to working life to exacerbate existing inequalities, including in income and health, it is important to enhance our understanding of the experience of people working in lower-income roles, and render learning gained useful for employers, including through the suite of business support provided by Flexibility Works via our Go Flex Programme, as well as for policymakers with a role in shaping the future of work.

Lower-income workers are more likely to be employed in non-desk based frontline roles. While flex is often naturally more difficult to implement in these roles, this doesn't mean it is impossible to improve the degree to which it is made available, as described in our Flex on the Frontline Report (June 2022)². The generally greater levels of flex available to those in desk-based roles that the pandemic has given rise to, risks a flex divide becoming embedded that disproportionately affects those working in lower-income roles. This paper aims to contribute to efforts to ensure this is mitigated against, and that those working in lower-income roles are not left behind as working life is reshaped post-pandemic.

The experience of those with childcare and other caring responsibilities is of particular interest, given the potential impact of work on capacity to fulfil caring responsibilities together with their work-life balance more generally. There are varied profound implications in getting flex right for this group, including access to the labour market, prospects for career progression and income maximisation, as well the benefits optimal flex can bring for parent-child bonding and family and workplace relationships.

¹ Flex for Life 2022, Flexibility Works see <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-for-life-report-2022>

² Flex on the Frontline, Increasing flexibility and new ways of working for frontline workers, Flexibility Works (2022) see <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-on-the-frontline>

Our key areas of investigation in this qualitative study focused on:

- what people understand flexible working to mean and how they have come to this understanding
- what benefits, if any, it has brought for them to date and would access to greater flexibility be likely to bring them
- negative impacts they experience when flexibility is not in place
- what negative impacts, if any, they may have experienced from working flexibly and/or what worries they may have regarding the prospect of working more flexibly in the future
- how greater or lesser access to flex impacts on their childcare/caring responsibilities and their ability to earn
- barriers to accessing greater flex across roles and sectors
- how/in what ways greater flex could be implemented and made to work for them

This report is accompanied by a literature review which was produced at the outset of the project and helped to inform our enquiry: *The relationships between Flexible Working Arrangements and Gender Inequality, Socioeconomic Status and Overall Well-Being*.³

3 The relationships between Flexible Working Arrangements and Gender Inequality, Socioeconomic Status and Overall Well-Being. A Literature Review. Flexibility Works (2022) see <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/litrev-flex-inequality-wellbeing>



Method and Sample

Interviews were arranged and undertaken with eight individuals working in various roles in Scotland, including those in both frontline roles and desk-based workers.

Seven of the eight individuals interviewed had childcare responsibilities, in that they were parents of children who lived with them. The number of children in each participating household ranged from one to three and across age-groups (pre-school, primary school and high school). Four were 'single-parents' in that they were the sole adult living in their household.

Survey participants were recruited via a range of gatekeeper organisations including some who Flexibility Works have worked with previously, either through the business support services we provide or in other collaborations. In some instances, the gatekeeper organisation was the employer of the participant, in others they were a relevant organisation, for example organisations with a parenting or one-parent families focus.

In an effort to glean insight from a range of job roles and sectors, ages and with a focus on people who were parents, in the recruitment process participants were screened on criteria including; household income, personal income, age group, job and sector, no. of children (by age group: infant/pre-school/primary school/secondary school) and whether or not individuals had other caring responsibilities. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the sample of eight participants interviewed.

Interviews were carried out via Zoom, MS Teams or telephone between November 2021 and February 2022. The interviewer adopted a largely discursive approach

to allow themes to emerge as instigated by the participant, although this was complemented by a semi-structured pro-forma/discussion guide which served as a fall back in the event whereby any of the areas of interest, relevant to the individual participant's circumstances, didn't arise naturally during the interview (Appendix 1).

An incentive in the form of a £20 shopping voucher was provided to each participant subsequent to completion of their interview.

Interviews were recorded and roughly transcribed. All eight transcripts were shared with respondents for respondent validation purposes before an approach in line with grounded theory and discourse analysis was applied in interrogating the data and rendering it amenable to informing this report.

Table 1 Characteristics of interview participants and pseudonyms used in text

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Annual Household Income (approx.)	Salary P/A from main source(s) of employment (approx.)	Employment Role(s) PT/FT	Sector of primary occupation	No. of children (and stage of schooling)	No. of Adults living in household	Other caring responsibilities
Charlotte	26 to 35	Female	<£20,000	<£18,000	Children & Families Support Worker PT (21 hrs/week)	Third Sector	2 (1x High School, 1x Primary School)	1	no
Kevin	26 to 35	Male	<£30,000	£19,000	Assistant Janitor FT	Public Sector	3 (1x Infant, 1x Pre-school, 1x High School)	2	no
Julie	26 to 35	Female	£30,000	£10,000	Cleaner PT (15-21 hrs/week)	Public Sector	2 (1x Infant, 1x Primary School)	2	no
Anna	36 to 45	Female	£15,000	£10,000	Senior Administrator PT (15 hrs/week)	Public Sector	1 (pre-school)	1	no
Joseph	36 to 45	Male	£20,000	£20,000	Janitor (PT – 30 hours) Football Coach (PT – sessional)	Public Sector	No children	1	no
Eilidh	26 to 35	Female	£19,000	£19,000	Front of House Assistant PT (30 hrs/week)	Third Sector	1 (High School)	1	no
Bill	36 to 45	Male	£17,000	£17,000	Retail Supervisor FT	Private Sector	1 (High School)	1	yes
Janine	36 to 45	Female	£33,000	£18,500	Call Centre Customer Service Advisor FT	Private Sector	1 (High school)	2	no

Findings and Discussion

What do people think flexible working is and do they have access to it?

- Flexible working often means relatively minor adjustments that allow home and family commitments to be better or more feasibly managed alongside work
- Access to flex can be variable, not just across roles and organisations but even among people working in the same role for the same organisation
- Some participants have seen flexible working approaches become more commonly available and prominently discussed in their workplace since the pandemic, for others it remains a subject which is rarely broached in regard to their roles

Most participants currently primarily thought of flex as meaning relatively minor adjustments, for example to start and finish times, that enabled them to work around home and family life to some degree, in particular childcare responsibilities, or that the dynamic in their workplace was such that they felt comfortable in getting away for hospital appointments or similar.

Charlotte, Joseph, Anna and Janine currently all had access to at least this minimal level of flex. Charlotte, Anna and Joseph both accessed somewhat greater levels of flex than this and, on the whole, Charlotte and Joseph in particular currently had generally positive experiences of flexible working and work-life balance. Our other four participants, Kevin, Julie, Eilidh and Bill reported that they had no access to even this minimal level of flex, as per the

definition of flex we provided, central to which is having some control over work, see appendix 2. They could all see the benefit of having some level of flex and thought that it would be possible to implement flex in their roles. This chimes with our Flex for Life 2022 research which found that 69% of all Scottish workers currently would like more flex.

Joseph had a bespoke arrangement in place in his main role that allowed him to undertake a second job, delivering sports coaching at different sites to the place of work of his main job. He was able to get away from his main role to deliver these sessions and to make time up to fulfil his contracted hours at times other than his standard shift patterns. This arrangement had been set-up upon the prompting of the head teacher of the school where Joseph works as a Janitor, who recommended Joseph for the coaching role and encouraged him to take it up. Whilst the head teacher was not directly employed through the same department as Joseph, he felt that their influence had been crucial and he benefitted from great support from his direct line managers in his own department.

“It’s an informal relationship with my line manager (rapport) that facilitates this level of flex that I currently get, he trusts me, happy for the work to get done but is relaxed when it gets done as long as gets done...”

Joseph

Charlotte enjoyed access to flex in terms of working part-time and being able to flex her start and finish times around the school run. She was also able to work from

home to complete the parts of her role, such as paperwork, that didn't require an onsite or in-person presence. And since the beginning of the pandemic, a greater proportion of the in-person appointments that formed part of her role, were undertaken by telephone.

"I know Covid has been absolutely crazy but being able to work from home and be flexible with when you get things done sometimes, as it's been the only way, has made me realise how much a little adjustment like that can make a difference. I've never owned a laptop or anything like that but the work giving you that and making it possible to get the work done when you can has made a huge difference."

Anna

Anna had seen vastly increased access to flex since the beginning of the pandemic. She currently worked from home and was able to flex her working hours in response to changing demands of childcare, health and wellbeing and the general demands of enforced home-working, with her organisation now appearing to have taken a more outcomes focused view to productivity. She was hopeful, though currently unclear, as to whether this was likely to remain accessible post-pandemic. Janine, similarly, had been working from home through much of the pandemic period, although was also unclear as to what extent, if at all, this was likely to continue into 2022 and beyond.

Having equipment provided and technology adequately set-up has been crucial for those able to work from home.

The other four participants (Kevin, Julie, Eilidh, and Bill) all thought of flex solely as time based rather than place based, perhaps understandably so given the nature of their respective roles. All four could see how having access to even small amounts of flex could benefit them whilst making no difference to their capacity to fulfil their roles, if not also bring benefits to this. However, a common theme among each of these participants was that there was very little communication around flex in their respective workplaces. Even though they could see benefits that it could bring about, it was simply rarely, if ever, spoken about, and so they themselves were somewhat reticent to bring it up and were not aware of any clear established processes for bringing up the subject within their organisations.,

"I wouldn't be sure about who to speak to, to ask for more flex, it's never been brought up"

Julie

"Up until I read your website, I didn't know you could present that to an employer, I thought you go for an interview and that's it set out what hours you will work, and I don't think a lot of people know you can request to kind of change things up. I've experienced a lot in different roles, you dig your heels in tight and give it a go, but it can be apparent from day one that it's not going to be sustainable (without flex), at the end it's always came down to my mental health and my missing out on the kids"

Eilidh

What benefits are brought by flex, and anticipated benefits of being able to increase access to flex and what negative impacts and concerns are apparent?

- Benefits participants felt, from sometimes even just a small amount of flex, can be profound
- Several people recognise the increased family harmony and positive impacts on relationships that flexible working can contribute to, for example through making it possible to more fairly share fulfilment of childcare and household tasks, enhanced parent-child bonding, reduced stress and being able to work rather than remaining unemployed
- Some people worried that they could be perceived as causing 'hassle' or more work for others in their workplace if requesting greater flex.

Being able to work flexibly, even to a minimal degree, brought varied, sometimes profound benefits for those who were currently able to do so. Furthermore, among those who currently didn't access any approaches to flex, there was a strong belief that being able to do so in the future would be beneficial for them.

For some of those who have children, in particular single parents – among our sample this included Charlotte, Anna, Eilidh and Bill – being able to work flexibly meant that they were able to work at all. It is no exaggeration to say that without flex they would essentially be excluded from the labour market. The current prohibitive costs of childcare for working parents, particularly for those with children under three years old, was mentioned by all parents as being relevant to this.

"It might sound silly but flexible working actually means the ability for me to work. As a single parent having that is huge. Yeah, just the ability to work, because my previous jobs haven't kinda corresponded to the kids, so I've found myself over time having to give up those jobs. So now that I'm in a job with that I can maintain it. And I've nearly been there for three years, might not sound a lot, but to me who's struggled to hold down part-time jobs the fact that I'm still there and still learning is massive. It might not sound like a lot but means a lot to me that I'm still there and still able to put in the hard work. On the flip-side I'm a one woman band, I'm not having to pay for childcare out of my wage, I'm not even having to rely on family members and things like that. I can still be there for the girls. And that in itself I think some people take for granted. And as much as I love my work and it's important, being a mum is an important job too, so the flex means I'm able to do my mum job, feel like I've done that, then it's time to do my job"

Charlotte

"Flexible working currently to me means a wee bit of flexibility with hours like if I had an appointment with the wee one I could play around with my hours, as long as I done what I was meant to in a day then saying I need to get away earlier to pick up from nursery then I could kinda start earlier..."

Adjusting hours on a daily basis just to being a bit more flexible really...

I have childcare (my mum does it all just now) she's not at nursery yet, so my mum has her 5 nights a week... to allow me to work, I take her to mum's and pick her up again after I finish, my mum is doing it all really that's the only way I could work at the minute...

I don't need it so much just now, but when she starts nursery in coming months I'll really need it, as she'll finish nursery at 6 and I finish at 6 so even to start 15 minutes earlier to get away 15 minutes earlier, will save the round trips to Mum's. It would be a lot more beneficial for me...

I've not had this conversation with employer yet, I don't know if that's something they do, whether they would accommodate for that kind of thing, never had that conversation, never been given any info on whether they would, they're just set shifts and can't be adjusted"

Julie

For those who had children and two parents at home, increased flex was recognised as allowing for greater distribution of childcare and household tasks between parents. Kevin strongly recognised this, speaking of the benefits on both his own and his partners mental wellbeing that he felt being to access greater flex would bring about.

"I feel so bad that my wife is stuck at home and has it all to do really with the kids. Even if I could start late some days and get away earlier some others, or when there is downtime be able to get home and do some chores, and make up the time later... it would be a massive stress reliever for my wife..."

She is also looking to get back to work as the kids get older but has no time to apply for things or look into training...

It would really benefit our relationship if had that little bit of flex and could then share the housework more evenly"

Kevin

Janine and Julie agreed with this and recognised that the capacity for greater flex and small adjustments in approaches to flex in enabling a more equitable distribution of general tasks, as well in dealing with the arising situations or emergencies that can occur in parenting young children, could have profoundly positive implications for the mental wellbeing of the partner who is more often 'stuck at home' due to childcare as well as contributing to a reduction in the levels of stress that can be put on relationships.

"Both parents need to be able to have some level of flex really, that way they can both share the childcare tasks rather than one having to do it all. That can lead to resentment. Also it's important for the development of the child and their relationship and attachment with both parents"

Janine

Being able to better manage both mental and physical health were prominent in discussions around the benefits that flex could bring. Joseph felt the current access to flex he enjoyed enabled him to undertake exercise which he felt was vital to his wellbeing, both mental and physical. This included being able to adjust breaks and start-finish times, as well as the dynamic in his workplace meaning he was comfortable to make use of natural periods of downtime in terms of workplace tasks, to jog and engage with other exercise and making use of facilities, including showers in his place of work.

“The fact that I can take time in the day when there are no pressing tasks to go a jog round the village, or use the gym, makes such a huge difference to me, that and being able to get away to do the football coaching has helped me turn my life around, I don’t know here I’d be if I hadn’t been able to work like this”

Joseph

Kevin, who works for the same organisation but at a different site, felt that if he were able to make use of similar it had the potential to bring extremely beneficial impacts for his own wellbeing, which in turn would be likely to facilitate increased productivity in his workplace tasks.

“If I could just get away, for example if my son had a football game, I’d be able to take him there and share that experience with him. Maybe if we had a more linked up team across the other sites that are nearby we could have a wee system where we could provide cover for each other, even just a WhatsApp group could work”

Kevin

Interestingly, in addition to practical benefits, several of the participating parents spoke of the importance of increased time for enhanced bonding with their children that access to flex already brought about, or for those currently with no access to flex, how they envisaged that being able, for example to accompany their children on the school run rather than having to rely on friends and family, especially on occasions where the child had ‘big days’ at school or nursery, could have profound benefits for the security and wellbeing of the child as well as enhancing the parent-child relationship. Taking this time, as facilitated by increased flex, to hold meaningful conversations and enhancing bonding with their children was a highly valued aspect among many of our parent participants who felt that long-term benefits would be realised. It was felt that while these benefits might be tricky to quantify or measure, they were nevertheless important to recognise.

“Being able to take my daughter to school has been massively important. That time when you are walking along with them, you get to chat and find out about things they have going on, make sure they are feeling happy and not worried about anything. This has been especially beneficial at times of transition, like moving up from primary to high school, but at any time is so important and valuable to have these times. In my previous job I wouldn’t have been able to do this and our relationship and my daughter’s development would not have been the same”

Charlotte

Negative impacts of flex among some of our participants who already had access to flex, and all of those who currently didn't, centred on worries that unfavourable perceptions among colleagues with regard to utilisation of and/or a demand for flex, could exist. Concerns predominantly consisted of worries that they could be perceived to be 'being difficult', or not working as hard as or causing more work for others and were held with regard to both those in more senior roles in their organisational hierarchies as well as those they worked with at the same level.

"I'm sorta torn on this one, they might want people who do what they want to do, sometimes they don't want folk with kids n that... it's these last-minute things..."

The more you're asking for things, the more your known for not being flexible to them. I always feel guilty asking for time off.

My son and I have constantly been sick for the past four weeks, it's not that I'm phoning to say I can't do it... just not right now. I can be scared and intimidated sometimes

Would be good for my manger or his manager to have approached me about it... knowing that policy would benefit me someone should approach me about it... would make me feel more comfortable... they could make that move more comfortable..."

Anna

Participants worried about job security and that opportunities for progression/promotion could be hampered. Two participants spoke of looking for new jobs in which they could access greater flexibility, but felt that qualifications and experience limited their scope in this.

What are the barriers to and facilitators of flex (what can help flex flourish or flounder in these roles)?

- Informal arrangements and interpersonal relationships between line managers and direct reports are important facilitators of flex
- While there is work to be done to ensure equitability of flex across organisations, it is crucial to guard against this leading to an over-formalising of arrangements
- When new guidance and policies are produced by organisations, it is important not only to adequately cascade communication of these across organisations but also to double check that the content has been understood clearly and staff at all levels are equipped to implement these as intended
- When flex has not been the norm in organisations in the past, robust efforts need to be made to ensure people feel comfortable in utilising any new arrangements

Each of our participants who could work flexibly largely did so in an informal manner. Relationships with line managers, and the disposition to flex on the part of line managers, was the most important factor in facilitating the flex that people had. Related to this was the wider cultural dynamic in their immediate teams and departments.

This remained true in the case of Charlotte and Anna, for whom the relationship with their direct manager served as the main facilitator of flex, and the conduit by which they each set up their working arrangements, even though their respective organisations did have existing, recently published policies which referred to approaches to flexible working.

"The organisation has been providing updates throughout the pandemic period, but I just sort things out directly with my manager, as long as we both talk about workload and make sure any support is in place that needs to be and that the work gets done, it is easy for us to sort it out amongst ourselves, and so it hasn't mattered so much when things change from on high"

Charlotte

Informal arrangements were important. However, some participants felt they were on something of an unsure footing. It appears that this is at least in part due to flex having hitherto not been the norm across most of the organisations in question. For those who currently don't have access to flex a reticence exists and there are low expectations which are based on experience of 'how it's always been'.

Interestingly, whilst some participants felt that organisational wide guidance and policies could help in terms of people feeling more confident about utilising and asking for flex, some participants were wary of 'over formalising' arrangements. This was due to concerns that ill-thought out organisational wide arrangements could increase bureaucracy and the amount of work involved in establishing each individual's approach to flex, ultimately reducing the level of flex that workers were able to utilise, even if this was the opposite of what was intended.

"I would actually be terrified if things were to get over formalised, if it affected in any way what I have now I would be devastated. I just wonder if someone sitting on high far way up in the boardroom would see my arrangements on paper and just think we can't be doing that. Without knowing how it works in practice or understanding the benefits we get from it"

Joseph

Communication was seen as central to furthering flex across these roles. Given that in most lower income roles flex has traditionally been less than prevalent, participants strongly felt that simple publication of an organisational wide policy was not enough to ensure that people working in roles at their level were fully confident that it was now 'ok to ask' for flex.

Anna expanded on this and cited an example of their line manager's understanding appearing not to concur with her own understanding of what was possible.

"The organisation sent round an updated handbook with a new approach to flexible working in it. When I tried to take advantage of this with my line manager, they didn't seem to know that this was now allowed. Or didn't take it to mean the same as me. It would have been better if they had brought it up and discussed it with me in the first place without me having to bring it up. The organisation just sent this round and expected that to be everything sorted but it doesn't seem to have been the case, everyone is still getting told different things by their managers"

Anna

It was seen as crucial that communications were not only cascaded across organisational hierarchies, but that efforts were made to ensure uniformity of understanding across departments and teams. Simply communicating new approaches or arrangements was not enough to mitigate the potential for confusion to arise and for disparities across teams or departments. It was felt that organisations needed to take measures to 'double-check' that understanding was coherent across everyone working across all levels of an organisation. This is especially crucial at this point in time as organisations

settle on new approaches post-pandemic and try to use some of the learning gained through pandemic influenced ways of working.

“Organisations need to make sure that their staff are on the same page as them, if they listen to their staff and improve what is possible, ultimately they will benefit from getting better workers and more development/less turnover by increasing access to employment and continuity of employment through increasing flexibility and making sure people feel comfortable in bringing it up”

Bill

Line managers are clearly seen as crucial for flex to be implemented successfully, particularly for lower-income roles. In places this might mean quite a culture shift from ways of working that have been long-standing and embedded in organisations. As well the need for a strong message to come from the top of organisations line managers would clearly benefit from support themselves, including comprehensive training and upskilling across various themes including practicalities, motivational theory and inclusion and diversity.

In places participants felt that increased understanding and in particular trust that had been built through pandemic influenced ways of working could be capitalised on, although currently most had a sense that this was only apparent at a local-level, i.e. with regard to relationships with their own line manager or within their own team or department. Much uncertainty and concerns around how organisation wide approaches would be shaped as we move into the future was apparent.

“We need to try to capitalise on the increased trust and understanding of work-life balance that's came about through the covid period”

Eilidh

Participants spoke of organisational cultures, aspects of which transcend flex itself, as being crucial to fostering environments where flex is more likely to flourish. When individuals had a sense that their organisation cared about their wellbeing, work-life balance and their life beyond work, they were more likely to feel comfortable in asking for flex.

“Our organisation gave us time to devote to wellbeing and a voucher to use when things opened back up again after the pandemic. This gave me a sense that they cared about our wider wellbeing. It has now become a regular thing, every few months. It makes me more likely to be feel I'm able to bring up flexible working and ask to explore what might be possible if I feel it's going to have benefits to mental or physical health for me”

Eilidh

Joseph suggested a way to help the organisational management to better understand how flex could work positively would be for a member of senior management to visit and observe how he worked on a given day.

How can organisations more widely and better implement flex for people working in lower-income roles?

- Listen to their staff
- Share learning across and between organisations
- Normalise flex without over formalising
- Nurture their organisational cultures

As discussed above, a crucial area for organisations to navigate is that around ensuring equitability of flex across organisational hierarchies and teams and departments. A key challenge is in developing approaches that ensure flex becomes 'the norm' and that a common understanding is attained among all employees, for whom it is clear what is and isn't available and that they can have confidence in knowing who to speak to when wishing to explore and implement flex in their own roles, whilst avoiding a tendency to overly formalise processes and increase bureaucracy or workload, particularly for line managers.

Informal arrangements and the importance of positive relationships between people who work closely together, including line managers and their direct reports, will always be important in furthering enhanced flex, and it is important that this is not lost in the development of new frameworks, guidance or policies aimed at ensuring a greater equitability of experience across organisations and job levels. The importance of informal, more ad-hoc arrangements, and support for line managers in ensuring confidence in this, was highlighted and most participants felt strongly that this needs to be recognised within the design of any new arrangements.

The example of the vastly differing experiences of Joseph and Kevin, two people working in similar roles in the same local authority, even though both spoke of the profound benefits they either already get (in Joseph's case) or might expect to get (in Kevin's case) from flex, highlights the inequalities that can arise and which care must be taken to reduce.

Three participants thought that increasing opportunities for sharing learning both within and between organisations could enhance the prospects of more equitable approaches to flex being furthered for people working in roles such as theirs. While it was also recognised that every organisation is different and must have the conviction to identify and implement approaches that meet their own specific needs.

"I think if managers could come together and share with each other how they approached it, it could be useful. Also sharing learning between organisations, like good practice guides, it's not going to be the same for everybody but it would still be helpful for more people to know what is possible in certain places"

Janine

Two participants had the idea that banks of hours, for example an allowance of 10 hours per annum could be used for things like hospital visits and childcare emergencies, although they also noted that it was impossible to predict how many of these might occur in any given time period.

Others made the point that needs would be likely to change over time, for example as children grow up or other caring demands arise and so it is necessary for it to be normal for flex arrangements to be able to be reviewed over time.

“On the horizon for me is that my mother has health issues and it looks like her care package is going to be getting cut from next February. So, if I could build up to so I maybe had a couple of hours to, or maybe an hour a day and I could use my dinner break

Even if I could build up 5 hours a week I could use my dinner hours and another hour to cover her at dinner times, I could get her sorted out each day that way and cover her afternoon visits that will stop being provided in the near future”

Bill

According to our participants, the most important step organisations can take, is to listen to staff and comprehensively take on board their thoughts and ideas about how things can best work into the future. A variety of mediums can be used to methodically glean this information and the best approaches for achieving this will vary across organisations depending on structure, size etc. Important in ensuring their workforce has confidence in new approaches will be in ensuring that staff feel sincerely listened to, perhaps by double checking this through anonymous staff surveys. If organisations can robustly demonstrate that they have considered the opinions and ideas of their workforce, people will buy-in to new approaches and be more likely to understand the limitations that will naturally exist in places in terms of access to flex.

“The best way for organisations to find out what will work best is to listen to their staff. To do whatever it takes to make sure they’ve taken the voice of the staff on board and to show us that where possible our ideas have been put in place. We know it won’t be possible to do everything but I think people will understand when it isn’t. If they can make sure people feel listened to they will get the best ideas for each organisation and people will respond better”

Janine

Participants felt that organisations need to pay attention to their organisational cultures and how they communicate this for flex to flourish. If people working in lower-income roles feel that their organisation genuinely cares about them, their wider life and wellbeing, flex is more likely to work well for these members of the workforce.



Recommendations

- When organisations produce new guidance or policies with regard to flexible working, it is crucial that these are followed-up with initiatives that ensure that new approaches are comprehensively understood across all levels of an organisation. As many organisations evolve their approaches in response to experiences since 2020, these often set out fairly fundamental shifts from long-established norms. It therefore cannot be taken for granted that simple publication and dissemination of policies or guidance will lead to these being understood and implemented as intended. It is important that organisations undertake a range of follow-up checks and support activity to allow these to be robustly implemented, organisation wide to ensure equitability for all workers.
- Comprehensive training and support for line managers, including peer-to-peer/ shared learning opportunities, need to be developed and delivered to ensure equitability of flex across and within organisations.
- In designing new approaches and cultures that are amenable to optimal flexible working, the importance of informal aspects, in particular the relationship between line managers and their direct reports, should not be lost.
- Jobs should be designed with consideration of enhancing access to the labour market, job security and retention, including for specific groups of people, such as single parents.
- In recruitment and onboarding, staff need to be assured of what is possible, that 'it is ok to ask' and that channels for raising the subject of flexible working are clear, as well as providing opportunity for new recruits to have needs identified.
- Routinely assess all new roles for the extent of their suitability for different aspects of flex, and in advertising for these roles, prominently include information related to such.
- A strong and clear message from the top of organisations should be complemented by other efforts, including the crucial support and training for line managers, to ensure that an understanding is fostered across workforces that people have different needs.
- Undertaking exercises to better understand the ideas and experiences of workforces will provide rich intelligence for organisations which will be useful in designing optimal flex, within the natural confines of roles, and lead to more productive workforces with less turnover and can lead to profound benefits for individuals and families.
- Demonstrating to staff that their input has been considered in developing new approaches will provide positive gains for workforce morale and motivation.
- Organisations should routinely record and measure uptake of flex alongside indicators such as job satisfaction and work-life harmony across their workforces to ensure understanding and utilisation of opportunities related to flexible working is being realised across all areas of their workforces.
- For more practical advice about how to implement flexible working and / or 'new ways of working' within a frontline work environment, please refer to our Flex on The Frontline report, see <https://www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-on-the-frontline>

Challenges and Limitations

Recruiting participants for this research was time consuming. Perhaps this is somewhat understandable given the demographic of interest, many of whom are 'time-poor'. A further challenge was in tailoring the recruitment material and introductory information in such a way as to provide an understanding that we were interested in people who currently did not have access to flex, as well as those who did, and to attempt to overcome a tendency we know is prevalent among certain groups of workers of 'flex not being relevant to me'. Attention was also paid to our terminology in attempting to mitigate any stigma that could potentially be associated with certain terms when targeting people on the basis of income levels.

A number of different gatekeeper organisations were engaged with in attempting to attain adequate reach. These included workplaces with whom we had an existing relationship and voluntary and community-based organisations, some of whom had a focus on one-parent families.

In screening those who originally contacted us in response to recruitment flyers and emails passed on via the gatekeeper organisations we adopted an iterative approach rather than adhering to hard and fast rules, which would have been unrealistic. Ideally we were keen to have a majority of parents among those we recruited, including some single-parent families. In terms of income levels we asked respondents what their own salary was and aimed to recruit people on a personal salary of no more than £23,000 and household income of less than £33,000. We used these as ballpark guides rather than hard and fast criteria.

We were largely successful in attaining a breadth of participants within our target group but this took a number of months and it was important to communicate well with those who responded but were ultimately screened out. We left no one hanging on for any longer than four weeks before confirming whether or not we wished for them to take part in an interview.

Natural capacity meant that we were only able to include a small number of individuals, and these were difficult to recruit. Flexibility was important with regard to timings of interviews, with some taking place in the evenings, as well as method of interview – a mix of Zoom and telephone calls as per each individual's preference was utilised.

The learning herein relates to a specific point in time, in an area that is a rapidly evolving landscape.

Ideas for Future Research

- Follow-up the same individuals interviewed here to understand how experiences may have evolved at future time intervals.
- Establish peer research group in terms of revisiting ongoing experience i.e. potential for ongoing ethnographic approach as opposed to single point in time snapshot, utilising tools such as field note diary templates. This would take investment, however a passion for the topic was apparent among participants that would indicate this would be feasible.
- Include wider range of sectors/ organisations/individuals in future interviews.
- Undertaking focus groups as well as one-to-one interviews in future research may allow participants to identify and articulate further ideas for overcoming barriers to flex within their own roles.



Appendix 1

Discussion Guide, Flexible Working Interview

1. What does the term flexible working mean to you?
2. Can you think about and tell us about how you manage childcare/caring responsibilities and fit these together with work?

Share SHOWCARD 1

3. Do you have access to flexible working in your current role? Or experience/ awareness of it from elsewhere?
4. Do you think you could or should have access to more flex in your role? Why? Why not?
5. Does your employer talk to you about your working patterns/ flexible working?
6. Given the description of flexible working on the showcard, in what ways do you think it could benefit you, or how does it already benefit you if you have access to it?
7. Can you think a bit about how these aspects could be implemented in your current role?
8. What do you think the challenges would be in doing so?
9. How do you feel about your current level of job security? > follow up prompts – do you think a) this could be improved if there was greater access to flex in the post / b) greater access to flex could put this at risk in any way?
10. Let's talk about potential solutions – what do you think could be done to overcome the barriers to flexible working in your role?
11. How would you persuade an employer to offer fully flexible working to their employees? Can you think of anything that would help enable employers to provide greater flex?
12. What would make flexible working more appealing to people in your type of work?
13. How important do you think it is for employers to mention their flexible working policies when recruiting?
14. What impact would this have on your view of the employer / job?
15. How likely would you be to work flexibly in future? Why / why not?
16. What would be your ideal scenario in terms of flexible working in your job?
17. What types of flexible working appeal?
18. Do you have any further thoughts on flexible working that you'd like to share?
19. Would you be happy for us to contact you in a few months time to see if your thoughts on flexible working, or experiences of it, have changed much? YES/NO

Appendix 2

Definition/description of Flexible Working, Showcard

Flexible working is **having some control over where, when or how long** you work;

- For example, flexible working can include some of the following;
 - **working from home or remotely (another location outside your workplace), or a mix of these and office based (hybrid working), as better suits your life and non-work responsibilities.**
E.g. working from home saves you money and time on commuting
 - **compressed hours – having some control over what hours you will work each day and across each week**
E.g. when this helps you to fit into your week hobbies/activities in life that you enjoy
 - **having control over making small adjustments to your start and finish times**
E.g. when this helps you better fit in picking kids up or dropping them off at school
 - **working term time**
E.g. when this allows you to more manageably fulfil childcare responsibilities
 - **working part time or job share – working part-time whilst another individual works another part of the same job/role**
E.g. when this better suits your lifestyle or commitments outside of work
 - **having input into your rota**
E.g. the ability to swap shifts, change weekly working pattern etc. having enough notice for this to be beneficial and the confidence to ask for this to happen as better suits your life and non-work responsibilities for example dealing with home improvements
- It can be informal or formal (in your contract) or a mix of both.
- Flexibility over which you **have no control**, such as zero hours contracts, is **NOT** flexible working.

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