

FLEX24 **FOR** **LIFE**20

How flexible working helps reduce poverty

**Insights and recommendations for policy
makers and influencers in Scotland**

March 2024

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About Flexibility Works

Flexibility Works is a boutique consultancy and training organisation that provides practical tools, support and resources to help employers create a successful flexible working culture.

Founded by Scotland's leading flexible working experts Lisa Gallagher and Nikki Slowey, Flexibility Works is proudly a social business with a purpose to enrich people's lives by transforming the way we work.

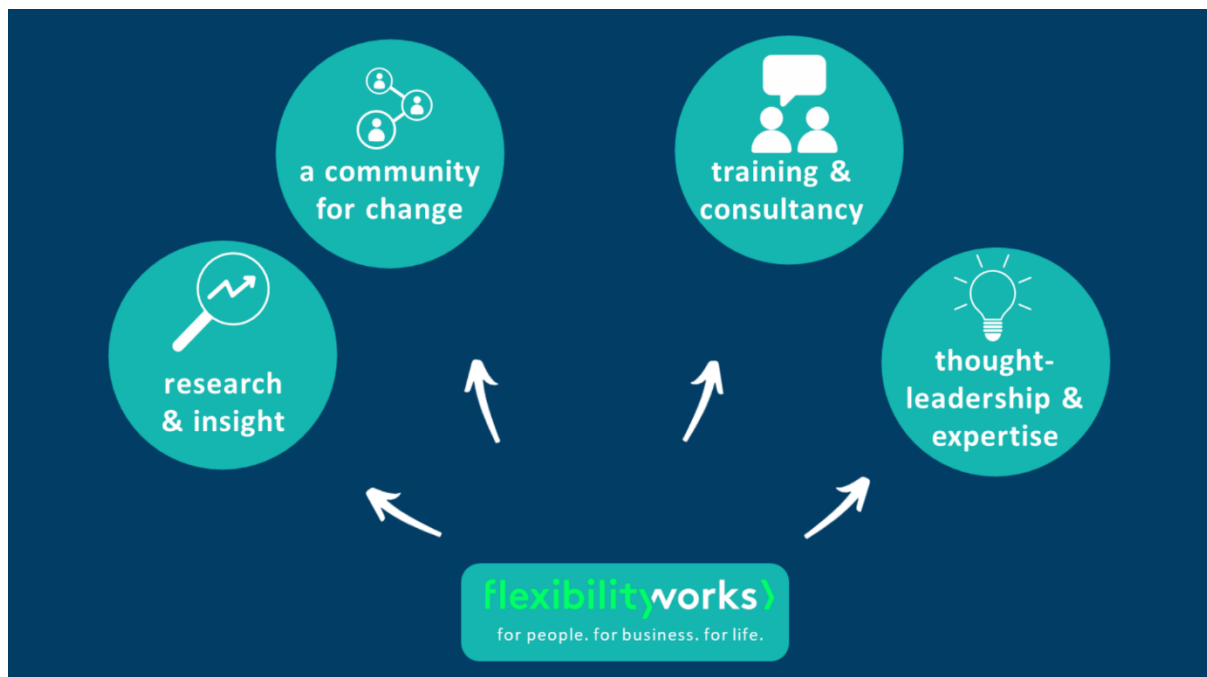
We've seen first-hand that it's possible to run a productive and profitable business and at the same time support the work life harmony of people who work. Our vision is simple – a working culture that truly values work life harmony, enabling all people and businesses to thrive.

We bring a depth of knowledge and insight about flexible working, and years of practical experience to help businesses and individuals thrive. And we work closely with the Scottish Government and policy makers to drive forward the flexible working agenda.

Everything we do links to our mission, which is to accelerate the adoption of flexible and new ways of working in Scotland, by sharing advice, insight and best practice, which improves business success, employee engagement and wellbeing.

An important strand of our work includes research and projects with lower income workers and unemployed adults looking for work, as we explore and evidence how flexible working can play a role in reducing poverty in Scotland.

Thank you to the Scottish Government for making this research possible.



Supported by
 Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Greater role for flex in tackling poverty

More than a million people in Scotland live in poverty, including 250,000 children¹. Two thirds of the children living in poverty are in working households². We know that flexible working is a key enabling factor to help people enter work, stay in work and progress at work, all of which can help improve finances for individuals and families, and play a part in their route out of poverty.

Of course, flex is no silver bullet when it comes to escaping poverty. Low pay, issues with social security benefits, housing, transport and childcare must also be addressed. But our knowledge and expertise are around flexible working, and we know it can and should play a greater role than it does currently in alleviating poverty in Scotland.

This short report and dataset share our recent research findings with 216 unemployed Scottish adults looking for work, as well as the experiences of 215 workers in low earning households (workers with household earnings [not including benefits] of £30,000 or less, with adults who live alone removed because of challenges identifying who qualified as 'low earning'). After consultation with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Scotland, we consider this group of workers in low earning households and unemployed adults as most likely to be living in poverty.

Flex, or lack of flex, is a particular issue for these groups because people are likely to work, or seek work, in low paid roles, where flexible working is more scarce. Our data clearly shows the less you earn, the less likely you are to work flexibly. What's more, workers in low earning households, especially women, are the most likely to drop out of the workforce if they can't work flexibly. Their attachment to employment is the most fragile.

We conclude this report with recommendations on how the Scottish Government can use its funds and influence to encourage and support more employers, especially those with low paid workers, to create more flexible working, advertise roles as flexible and create a more positive culture around flex.

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, October 2023, *Poverty in Scotland 2023*.

[Poverty in Scotland 2023 | Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(jrf.org.uk\)](https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Poverty-Inequality-Commission-Good-jobs-in-Scotland-report.pdf)

² Learning and Work Institute, January 2022, *Good Jobs for Scotland*.

[chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Poverty-Inequality-Commission-Good-jobs-in-Scotland-report.pdf](https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Poverty-Inequality-Commission-Good-jobs-in-Scotland-report.pdf)

About our data

This is a sister publication to our *Flex for Life 2024* report for Scottish employers. It focuses on specific groups within our wider *Flex for Life* data.

All figures, unless stated otherwise, were commissioned by Flexibility Works in the form of online surveys carried out by global research firm Panelbase between 6/11/23 and 20/11/23.

For this report, we focus on findings from:

- **216 unemployed Scottish adults** who are looking for work, of whom 56 are parents. This group is likely to be living in poverty.
- **215 Scottish workers in low earning households** (total annual household earned income [not including benefits] of £30,000 or less, with adults who live alone removed because of challenges identifying who qualified as 'low earning'). Among this group, 96 people are parents. This group is likely to be living in poverty.

Sometimes we compare data to workers in other household income brackets:

- 195 workers in **middle earning** households (total annual household earned income of £50,000 - £75,000).
- 204 workers in **high earning** households (total annual household earned income of £75,000+).

All worker data comes from our general dataset of **1016 Scottish workers**. Our general figures are representative across age, gender, industries, income, and those with children, including single parent households.

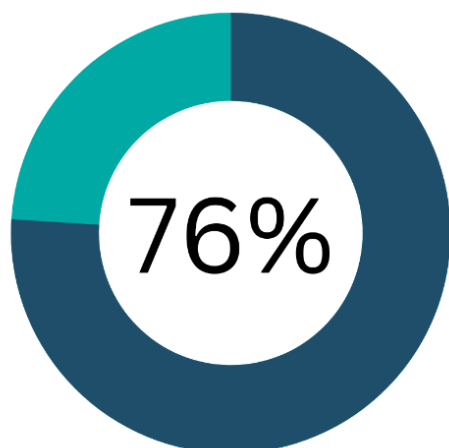
Our thanks go to Aaliyah Evans and Dr Joanna Wilson from the Q-Step Centre at Manchester Metropolitan University for additional data analysis.

We fully acknowledge some of our data samples are small. But we are sharing our findings because they suggest flexible working could be better utilised in alleviating poverty, and we hope our small dataset will prompt greater research and activity in this area. We are always happy to discuss our data and if you need more information, such as sample sizes for specific questions, please contact us via hello@flexibilityworks.org

How flex helps people get into work

This section focuses on our data from 216 unemployed Scottish adults who are actively looking for work.

Flexible working is a key factor in enabling people to work at all. But too often flexible working is not available, or visible in job adverts, and people remain unemployed as a result.



Three quarters (**76%**) of unemployed adults looking for work in our research sample have turned down a previous job offer because it lacked flexible working.

Nearly seven in 10 (68%) say it's been difficult to get information about flexible working for most jobs they've considered.

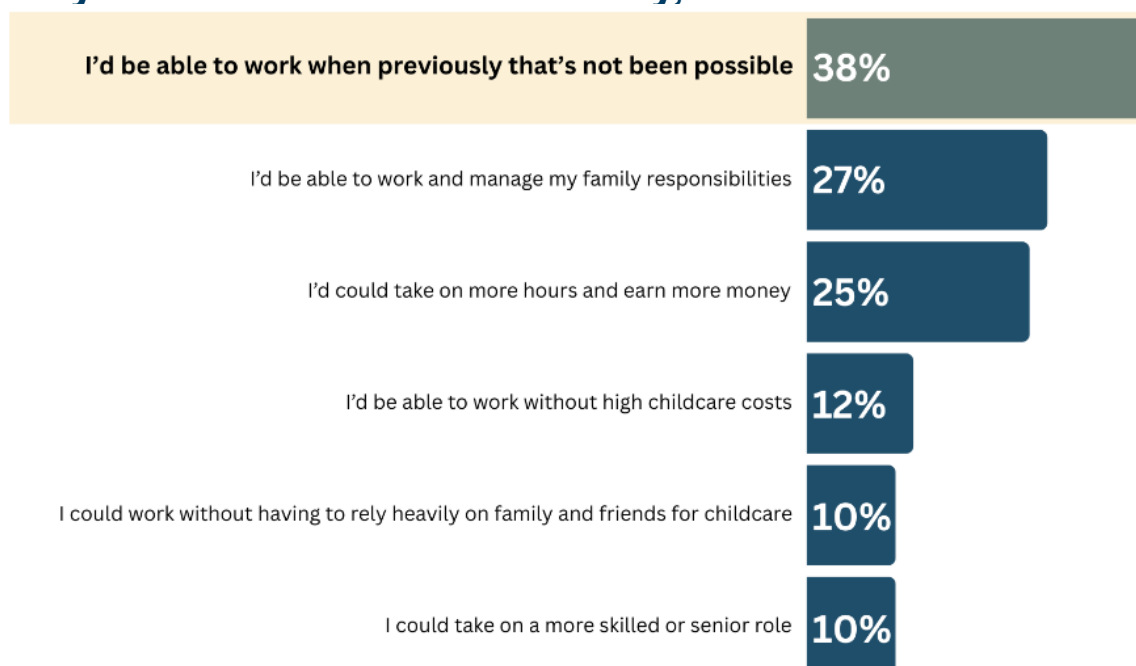
Positive impacts of flex

Nearly four in ten (38%) say that if they could work flexibly, they'd be able to work when previously that's not been possible.

One in four (25%) say working flexibly would mean they could take on more hours and earn more money, and one in ten (10%) could take on a more skilled or senior role.

More than one in four (27%) say flex would mean they could work and manage family responsibilities.

If you were able to work flexibly, what would it mean?



Lack of flex is a barrier to work

Similarly, when we asked unemployed adults looking for work what was stopping them from working, lack of job flexibility was a common response and for several reasons:

One in four (25%) said a lack of flex to help them manage their mental health was stopping them from working. More than one in five (22%) said it was a lack of flex to manage a disability or long-term health condition. Almost one in five (18%) said a lack of flex needed around children was stopping them from working. This figure increased to 30% for women.

Almost 1 in 3 women say lack of flex they need around their children is stopping them from working.



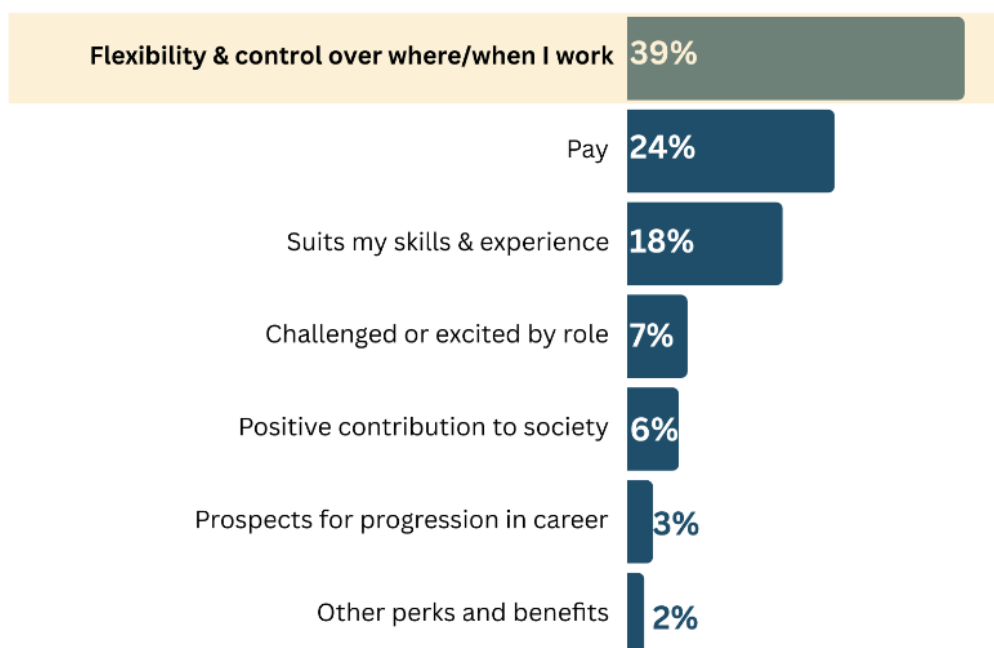
Are any of the following stopping you from working?



Flex more important than pay in job searches

When it comes to deciding whether to accept a new role, flexibility is significantly more important than pay for many people. A total of 39% of our cohort say flexible working is the 'single most important factor' compared with 24% who say it's pay. Among women, 52% say flex is the single most important factor, and among parents it's 63%. This again illustrates the critical nature of flexible working for particular groups.

Most important factor in new position

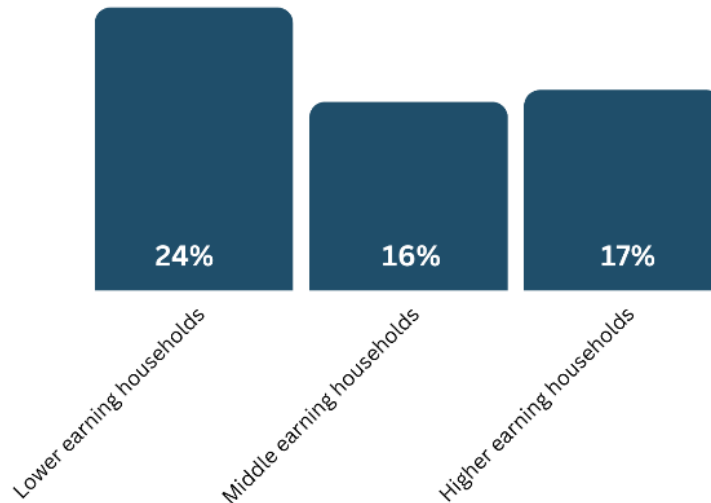


Our data clearly shows a lack of flexible working is preventing many people from entering the workforce, and that if more jobs were offered with flex, and advertised as flexible, this could have a positive impact on the number of unemployed adults who could accept jobs.

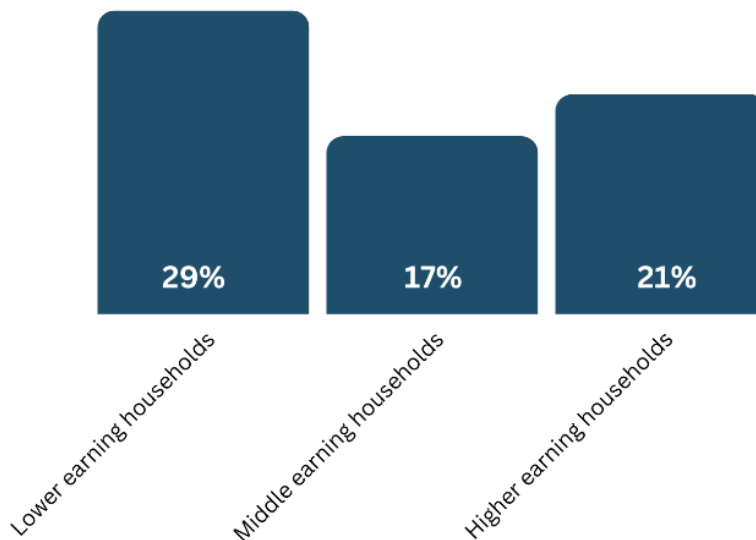
How flex helps people stay in work

The ability to work flexibly means many people, especially those in lower earning households, are able to stay in work. In this section, we look at the experiences of our cohort of 215 workers in low earning households and compare them with workers in higher household earning brackets.

A quarter (24%) of workers in lower earning households who work flexibly say flex means they can work when previously that's not been possible. This compares with 16% of workers in middle earning households and 17% of workers in higher earning households.



Three in ten (29%) workers in lower earning households say flex means they can work more hours to earn more money, compared with 17% of workers in middle income households and 21% of workers in higher income households.



Flexible working has a positive impact on workers across all household earning brackets in terms of mental health, balancing work and family responsibilities and reducing childcare costs or the need to rely on family and friends for childcare. But the difference flex makes on whether or not people can work, or work more hours, is more prominent among workers in low earning households.

See Appendix for table showing positive impacts of flex on workers.

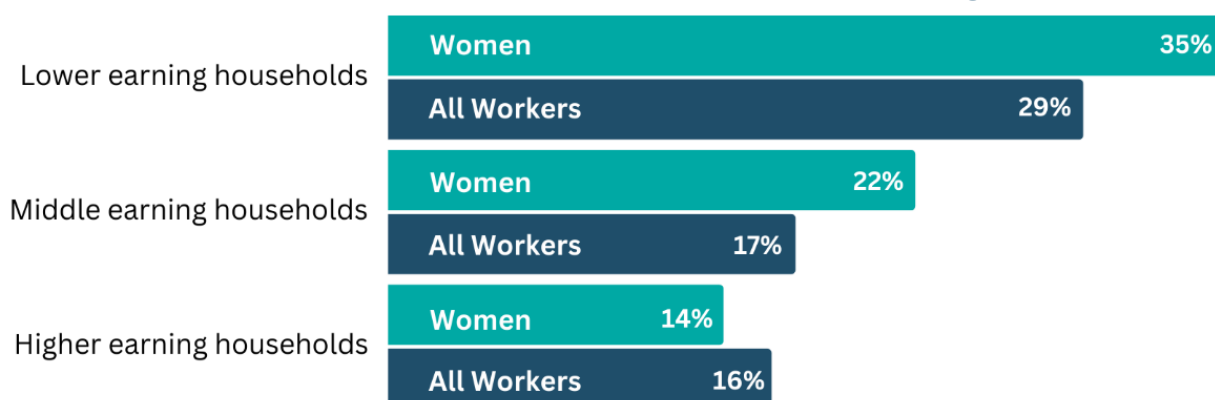
Impact of losing flex

We asked flexible workers what would happen if their flex was taken away. The differences between household earning brackets were most distinct around the potential impact on care costs and people's ability to work at all.

Workers in low earning households were significantly more likely to say that if they couldn't work flexibly, they'd have no choice but to stop working. The impact on women in low earning households is the greatest.

A total of 35% of women in low earning households, and 29% of all workers in low earning households say they'd have no choice but to stop working if they couldn't work flexibly. This compares with 22% of women and 17% of all workers in middle earning households, and 14% of women and 16% of all workers in higher earning households.

I'd have no choice but to stop working



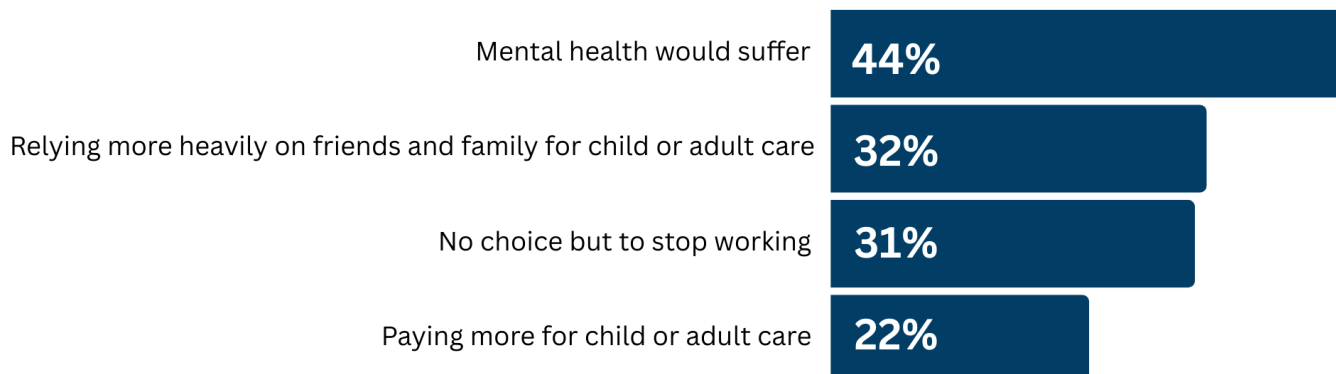
Workers in middle and higher earning households (28% in each bracket) were more likely than those in low earning households (22%) to say they'd have to pay more for child or adult care if their flex was withdrawn.

Our data suggests many workers in low earning households simply don't have the money to pay for additional child or adult care, and any loss of flex marks a tipping point away from employment altogether – especially for women.

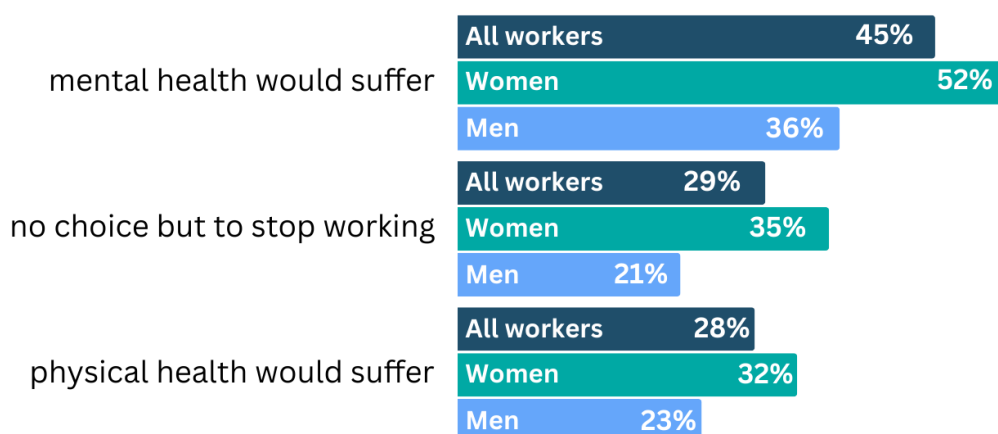
The table below shows the impacts on parents in low earning households if they couldn't work flexibly.

Parents with flex in low earning households say that if they couldn't work flexibly, it would mean...

The table below shows the impact on all parents in low earning households if they couldn't work flexibly.



All workers with flex in low earning households say that if they couldn't work flexibly, it would mean...



NB more data is available in the Appendix on the impact of flex being taken away.

Working more hours to earn more money

In our survey, we asked all workers if they'd like to work more hours, and to assume it was a hypothetical situation in which they had no constraints such as needing additional childcare. Almost two thirds (64%) of workers in low earning households said they would like to work more hours, compared with 62% of workers in middle earning households and 55% of workers in high earning households.

We should point out this is different to 'underemployment' which, according to the Learning and Work Institute and Joseph Rowntree Foundation Scotland applies to around 11-12%³ of

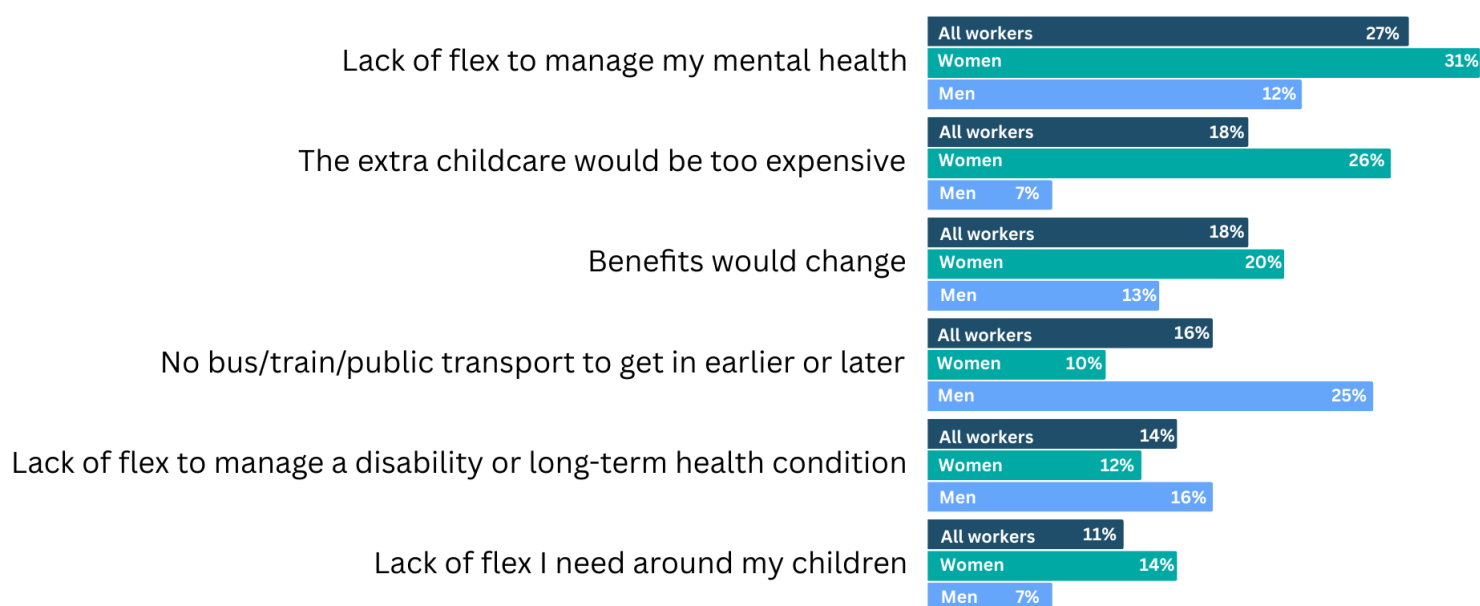
³ Ibid – Learning and Work Institute

Also, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, August 2023, [Glasgow communities of colour failed by employability services and workplace racism](#)

all Scottish workers. Underemployment figures show very specifically people who are willing and *able* to work more hours, but who just can't find the extra work. Our data includes these people *as well* as people who would like more work in theory but are *not able* to take on more hours in practice.

Lack of flexible working was a key reason for workers not being able to take on extra hours, whether to help manage mental health, a disability or long-term health condition or around children. The cost of childcare and changes to benefits were also common reasons for not taking on extra hours. The graph on the next page shows all the reasons stopping workers in low earning households from working more hours.

What's preventing you working more hours (low earning households)



A note on childcare

While this report focuses on flexible working, we know many workers, especially women, need flex AND quality, flexible and affordable childcare in order to get into work, and stay in work.

In addition to the stats peppered through this report about childcare, we'd like to draw your attention to these:

- 18% of unemployed adults looking for work have turned down a job offer because they couldn't afford childcare.
- 68% of Scottish employers say a lack of affordable, quality childcare affects their ability to recruit and retain staff.

A lack of quality, affordable childcare is preventing some people (mainly women) across all household earning brackets from taking on more hours. However, the financial impact of this on families will be more keenly felt in low earning households, and for parents of children aged under three, who don't yet qualify for free childcare hours.

Nearly one in five (18%) unemployed women looking for work said childcare was too expensive and prevented them from working at all. And we'll remind you that 35% of women

in low earning households are likely to drop out of work if their flexible working is taken away, the highest of any group. We didn't ask if leaving work was directly linked to childcare challenges but the rest of our data suggests this is very likely.

How flex helps people progress at work

We know that flexible working can enable people to progress to higher skilled and higher paid roles.

Yet too often we see a lack of visible flexible working holding people back from progressing. From our data with all Scottish workers who are currently considering changing jobs, 50% say they feel 'stuck' in their current role because they can't see the flex they need elsewhere to progress.

Our sample of workers from low earning households is too small to cut by those currently considering changing job, so we don't know how much a lack of flex is stopping them from getting promotions and better jobs. It's an area we'd like to explore more fully.

But the fact so many workers across our entire sample feel 'stuck' is surely a compelling argument for a greater focus on boosting flexible working in the jobs market at all levels. This would help all workers progress, which would be good for them and our wider economy. But the impact on workers and families in the lowest earning households could be much more profound, especially in terms of reducing poverty.

Low pay, low flex trap

Many people who are living in poverty are in work, in low paid roles. Our data shows a total of 53% of workers in low earning households have a personal salary of less than £20,000.

Our data on all Scottish workers shows that the lower someone's salary, the less likely they are to work flexibly.

Who works flexibly?



Women in low earning households have the least flexibility of all groups, with 43% who don't work flexibly. This is followed closely by 41% of all workers who earn less than £20,000 a year. Both figures are significantly higher than our overall survey average showing 31% of all Scottish workers don't work flexibly.

More than two thirds (69%) of workers in low earning households who don't work flex would like flex. This is highest among women at 75%.

43% of women in low earning households don't work flexibly but 75% would like to

This matters because we've already shown how flex enables many workers to stay in work, especially parents who need to manage work around their children. And we've shown that reducing flex would push many people, especially women, in low earning households out of work. Flexible working strengthens everyone's ability to work. Yet for those whose attachment to work is most fragile, it's least available.

Limitations of frontline roles

Our data on all Scottish workers shows two thirds (66%) of workers in low paid jobs (less than £20K a year) are in frontline roles where we know some forms of flexibility, such as remote and hybrid working are not possible or are much less possible.

It's not surprising then that workers in lower earning households are more likely to be frontline workers, and they are less likely to work hybrid or fully remote, than workers in other household earning brackets. However, we'll point out there's an 11 percentage point difference in the number of frontline workers in the highest and lowest earning households, and yet a much larger 19 percentage point difference in who can work hybrid or fully remote. Being in a frontline role alone doesn't explain the lack of flex. Salary and seniority still make a difference too.

Who's in a frontline role?

- 68%** of workers in low earning households
- 51%** of workers in middle earning households
- 57%** of workers in high earning households

Who can work hybrid or fully remote?

- 41%** of workers in low earning households
- 67%** of workers in middle earning households
- 60%** of workers in high earning households

This matters when it comes to alleviating poverty because working from home generally saves people money through reduced travel costs and less need for childcare. Of course, it would be ridiculous to ask for all frontline jobs to be done at home. But we need to recognise that workers likely to be living in poverty can face additional financial costs that wealthier workers don't, even when they're both working in frontline roles.

We'll add in here that 15% of our unemployed cohort said one of their barriers to work was the fact they usually work in frontline roles or shift work, which lack flexibility and are hard to make work around home and caring responsibilities.

We need to be asking employers to explore what flex is possible in frontline roles. Perhaps some specific tasks could be done at home, perhaps shift patterns could change, allowing people to travel off peak when fares are lower. These are small changes, but they could make a big difference.

Conclusion and recommendations

We'll reiterate that we know reducing poverty is complex, and that there are many factors at play. But we hope this short report illustrates the positive impact flexible working has on helping people get into work, stay in work, and progress at work.

Despite these positive impacts, not enough flexible working is available, especially in low paid jobs likely to be carried out by workers in the lowest earning households. And flexible working isn't visible enough in job adverts and during recruitment to help unemployed people find a job they can do, or help workers progress to higher skilled and higher paid roles. Addressing these issues should be part of wider policies to reduce poverty in Scotland.

Recommendations

Our recommendations below are for the Scottish Government. Recommendations for employers can be found in our *Flex for Life 2024* sister report for employers.

We appreciate there are limitations on the Scottish Government's devolved powers when it comes to business and employment policy. But we feel the suggestions below are within its capabilities and would make a positive impact on increasing flexible working, which could play a greater part in reducing poverty in Scotland.

1. Spearhead a campaign in Scotland to raise awareness of the benefits of flexible working, and the sorts of flexible working that are possible in low paid and frontline roles. This would also support employers to embrace the new UK flexible working legislation enacted in April 2024, which among other measures gives employees a 'day one' right to request flexible working.
2. Operationalise Fair Work to a much greater degree, with less 'report writing' and more 'boots on the ground' support for employers to successfully embed Fair Work. Also, to take more tangible and proactive action on the Fair Work First commitment to 'offer flexible and family friendly working practices for all workers from day one of employment'. For example, make it a measurable requirement for procurement and grant giving, potentially through a recognition or accreditation scheme for employers, and by supporting employers to achieve this.
3. Set the expectation that all employers in the public sector offer their workers some form of flexible working, whatever their role, making flexible working the default way to work. This should include undertaking an employee-led review of Scottish Government working practices, designing and advertising all jobs as open to flexible working, and influencing other public bodies to do the same.
4. Champion the benefits of flexible working to the Scottish economy at the Scottish Government's '[New Deal for Business](#)' group and focus on a wellbeing economy. Be proactive in communicating with, and seeking feedback from, private sector employers, especially SMEs, to find out what help and support they need to implement greater flexible and family friendly working. This should specifically include employers with non-office staff and workers in low paid roles.
5. Provide specific financial support and guidance for employers to help them embed flexible and friendly working, including manager training. This should include specific guidance for employers on how to support workers on benefits who want to increase their working hours.

6. Reframe the employability space so the focus is not solely on making people 'fit' the existing jobs market. This isn't working. Many people need flexible working yet it's not available or visible to them during their search for employment including in job adverts. This is particularly important for parents who have a higher need for flexible working and who we know are under-represented in current employability programmes. Scottish Government, as a funder of employability programmes, should also fund activities that make the jobs market itself a better 'fit', by encouraging and supporting employers to design and advertise more flexible roles.
7. Continue funding 'Women Returner' programmes, which include helping women understand more about the types of flexible working available to them, and how to find and apply for a flexible role.
8. Use some of the funding allocated for the proposed private and public sector four-day working week pilots to scope and trial other specific forms of flexible working. This should include the creation of flexible opportunities for frontline workers in sectors such as social care, retail and hospitality.

Contact us

If you'd like more information about this report, we're very happy to help.

Please contact us:

- hello@flexibilityworks.org
- 0141 378 8330

Appendix

Benefits of working flexibly by household earned income, gender and parents

LEH - Low earning households (n = 215)
MEH - Middle earning households (n = 195)
HEH - High earning households (n = 204)
Figures shown are percentages.

You said you work flexibly, which of these applies to you?

	All workers in LEH	Women in LEH	Men in LEH	Parents in LEH	All workers in MEH	Women in MEH	Men in MEH	Parents in MEH	All workers in HEH	Women in HEH	Men in HEH	Parents in HEH
I can work when previously that's not been possible	24	23	25	24	16	12	20	22	17	17	17	18
I can work more hours to earn more money	29	32	25	19	17	16	17	17	21	19	23	20
I can work and manage family/caring responsibilities	35	41	29	51	41	52	31	59	45	55	38	59
I can work without relying too heavily on friends and family for childcare	13	16	9	20	13	18	8	25	19	20	18	26
I can work without childcare costing too much	7	6	9	15	9	10	8	19	16	14	17	19
I can work without spending too much on travel	33	32	34	25	35	35	34	22	36	55	24	32
Flex improves my mental health	38	35	41	32	39	41	37	28	36	51	27	29
Flex improves my physical health	23	22	23	22	26	24	29	12	23	23	22	19
I can work and manage a disability or long term health condition	14	16	13	12	12	16	8	9	9	3	13	8

Benefits of working flexibly by household earned income, gender and parents

LEH - Low earning households (n = 215)
MEH - Middle earning households (n = 195)
HEH - High earning households (n = 204)
Figures shown are percentages.

If you were unable to continue working flexibly, which of the following would apply to you?

	All workers in LEH	Women in LEH	Men in LEH	Parents in LEH	All workers in MEH	Women in MEH	Men in MEH	Parents in MEH	All workers in HEH	Women in HEH	Men in HEH	Parents in HEH
No choice but to stop working	29	35	21	31	17	22	12	25	16	14	17	16
Pay more for child or adult care	12	16	7	22	14	18	11	28	20	19	20	28
Rely more heavily on family and friends for childcare	19	22	16	32	21	27	15	43	25	26	24	37
Mental health would suffer	45	52	36	44	41	52	31	31	38	43	35	39
Physical health would suffer	28	32	23	24	23	27	19	14	20	6	28	16

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Thank you

www.flexibilityworks.org
hello@flexibilityworks.org

