

flexibilityworks>

FLEX **FOR LIFE** 2025

Are we nearly there yet?!

Analysis of Scottish parents' experiences
of working flexibly and their efforts to
find flexible jobs

Contents

Setting the scene	3
About our data	6
Flex helps parents get into work.....	7
Flex helps parents stay in work.....	18
Flex can help – but sometimes hinders – career progression.....	29
Cultural support for parents and flex still lacking	35
Conclusion	40
Recommendations.....	41

Thanks to our funders and supporters



Arnold Clark



Setting the scene

Are we nearly there yet?! It's an all-too-familiar question for families on long journeys. It feels apt as the title of this report too, because the journey towards greater flexible working for parents (and other workers) has also been long. For some parents, the right to request flexible working has been available for more than two decades. After all this time, are we nearly there yet in terms of embedding successful flexible working for parents?

Two quick points before we get started:

- **This report looks specifically at Scottish parents' experiences of working flexibly and their efforts to find flexible jobs, and is intended to support policymakers, employability providers, charities and anyone involved in parental employment, especially as a means to reduce child poverty.**
- **This is a sister paper to our annual [Flex for Life research report](#), which looks at flexible working for all Scottish workers and unemployed adults looking for work, not just parents. Our wider report also analyses data from Scottish employers. If you're interested in flexible working more generally, you may prefer our main Flex for Life report.**

What our data shows

On first glance, flexible working looks good for parents in Scotland, with three quarters saying they work flexibly, which is significantly higher than the average for all Scottish workers at 67%.

But this belies more nuanced problems.

For starters, a lack of flexible working is still preventing too many parents from getting into work. Nearly half of unemployed parents are not applying for roles they're interested in because flexible working isn't mentioned, and a third have turned down job offers because of a lack of flex.

And too many working parents are 'stuck' or stagnating because they can't see the flex they need elsewhere to progress - 46% of mothers who say they're working below their skillset say this is directly because they can't find the flexibility they need to work at a higher level.

Flexible working often makes the biggest difference to parents in poverty, when it comes to needing flex to get into work and stay in work. Yet they are often the least likely to be able to work flexibly (only 68% of working parents living in poverty work flexibly, compared with 75% of all working parents), highlighting the need for more flex in lower paid roles.

Our current patchwork of flexible working in Scottish workplaces also fails to address entrenched bias that prevents fathers from working in the way they'd prefer for family life; and keeps mothers working below their skill level and earning less than they could.

How to improve flexible working for parents

1. Two-pronged approach needed to part time work

We need a two-pronged approach to increase the number and quality of part time roles (not just jobs at the bottom of the salary spectrum) AND to normalise part time working for men in the same way it's now considered acceptable for men to compress their hours, or work from home, or we'll never truly address the gender pay gap.

2. Scottish Government should better promote flexible working via its Fair Work agenda

The benefits of flexible working for parents and their families run far beyond the financial. But on the financial benefits alone - and especially in line with the Scottish Government's 'number one priority' to eradicate child poverty - Scottish Government should take action, and more strenuously promote flexible working as part of its Fair Work agenda.

3. Employability providers have a greater role to play

Employability providers should ensure all their staff understand what flexible working is and can help people find the flexibility they need, as well as working more closely and strategically with employers, influencing their wider approach to flexible working.

4. Support needed for employers ahead of 2026 legislation changes

The business case for flexible working is strong and well established. But all too often employers are struggling with other day-to-day issues and don't have the time, or headspace, to think about how to work differently. Flexible working remains a 'nice to have' to be tackled when more pressing matters are settled. However, when changes to flexible working legislation are afoot, flexible working bounces back up the business agenda, at least briefly, as employers seek to make sure they remain legally compliant.

We currently have a short window in which to influence employers ahead of the UK Government's Employment Rights Bill, which is due to be implemented in 2026, when it will become harder for employers to unreasonably refuse flexible working. Scottish Government and local authorities can help deliver specific support to employers to prepare for the new legislation, while also raising broader awareness of what flexible working can look like in different roles, and how to design and advertise flexible roles that deliver much wider benefits to workers and employers than just legal compliance.

Increased flexible working, implemented successfully, is good for businesses and our economy at large. It's also a lifeline for many parents, who simply cannot work without it, especially those living in poverty. While flexible working exists for many parents, the journey is not over. We are not there yet.

NB – We know flexible working is only one element of support that can help parents manage work and family life. Clearly a decent salary, access to affordable, quality childcare, good parental leave and having a supportive line manager are also crucial for parents to succeed at work. But our expertise is around flexible working, and that's the focus of this report.

“

“I work full time but flexibly and it makes such a difference. It's mostly just small changes that I need, like being able to pick up my son from school if he's ill and work from home. Or to take a little bit of time in the day to go to a school event and make up the time later. I keep my manager informed and my diary up to date. But it's honestly such a relief to know that if I need to do something for my son, I can and it's not a big deal. It makes single parent life a lot easier.”

Iain Greig, Accounts Junior, MHA

”

“

“At Quorum, flexible working is ingrained in our culture. Alongside structured arrangements, we support ad-hoc flexibility, massively improving work-life balance. We also challenge the norms often seen elsewhere: men work part-time, and career progression isn't limited by working patterns.

Our senior leaders set the tone by working flexibly themselves, and we foster a culture where it's always ok to ask for flexibility, whether or not you're a parent. Enabling parents and all staff to work flexibly means our people are happier and healthier, and we – and our clients – get more from them. It's a win-win situation.”

Andrew Watson, Managing Director, Quorum

”

About our data

All figures, unless stated otherwise, were commissioned by Flexibility Works in the form of online surveys carried out by global research firm Norstat between 8/10/24 and 15/11/24.

- **852 Scottish working parents** were surveyed, of whom 254 are living in poverty (we've defined poverty with help from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as families with one or two children and a household income of less than £2,500 a month, or families with three or more children and a household income of less than £3,000 a month). Our data included 438 working fathers and 407 working mothers. It also includes 224 parents from minority ethnic families.
- **318 unemployed Scottish parents** who are looking for work. This includes 170 who are living in poverty. Our data included 176 unemployed mothers and 65 unemployed fathers. We also had responses from 36 unemployed parents who preferred to self-describe and 41 who preferred not to share their gender. Due to the small sample sizes, we were only able to analyse differences between respondents who identified as male or female.

Additional analysis was carried out by Dominic Lo, PhD Researcher, and Dr Nina Teasdale, Director, both at WiSE Centre for Economic Justice, Glasgow Caledonian University.

And special thanks to parents from the *Flexible Working Scotland* Facebook community group, many of whom completed our survey.

We're 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

**Flex helps
parents get
into work**



Kaylee's long search for a flexible job



Kaylee Smith, who lives with her six-year-old son in Glenrothes, Fife, spent nearly two years searching for a flexible job.

She said: "So many job adverts just don't mention flexible working at all, and even when they do, lots of it still won't work for me. I'm a single parent. I can't work shifts at all hours of the day and night, because childcare is so limited and expensive. My son has some learning difficulties, which makes things more complicated too.

"I need the flexibility to be able to work from home if my son is unwell. There isn't anyone else who can look after him. I need an employer that I can talk to openly about my responsibilities outside work without fear of being reprimanded or fired."

Kaylee recently started a full time role with Fife Council, which includes up to four days a week working from home.

She said: "I'm absolutely delighted. I was desperate to find a job. I was feeling so down and isolated. And despite what some people think, my son and I were definitely not living the high life on benefits. We just about scraped by. Now I feel like we are finally moving forward."



Positive impact of flex

Unemployed parents looking for work feel a flexible job could unlock lots of benefits for them and their family. Nearly three in ten (28%) say a flexible job would mean they could work when previously that's not been possible, a quarter (24%) say it would increase how much work they could do by enabling them to work more hours and therefore earn more money (for example working full time flexibly rather than part time), and one in seven (14%) say a flexible job would mean they could take on a higher skilled or senior role. The impact was often greater for mothers than fathers.

For unemployed parents in Scotland, flex means:

- 31%** I'd be able to work and manage my family/caring responsibilities
- 28%** I could work when previously that's not been possible
- 24%** I could take on more hours and earn more money
- 25%** I could work without having to rely heavily on family and friends for childcare
- 20%** I could work without having to spend too much on childcare
- 14%** I could take on a higher skilled or senior role

The positive impact is often greater for mothers:

-  More than one in three (**37%**) say a flexible job would mean they could work when previously that's not been possible
-  More than two in five (**42%**) say flexible working would enable them to work and manage their family/caring responsibilities

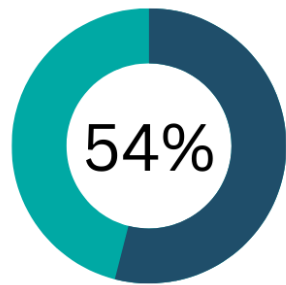
So what?

Our data clearly shows that greater flexible working could make a significant difference in helping unemployed people into work, boosting household incomes and wellbeing in the process. Flex could also enable unemployed parents to take on a role with a larger number of weekly hours than they could manage without any flexibility. Or enable them to work in a higher skilled or more senior role. These are all good for their family finances and our economy at large.

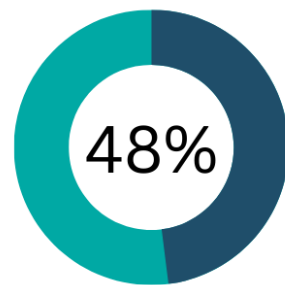
Lack of flex is a barrier to work

Just as a flexible job could help unemployed parents **into** work, a lack of flexible working often locks parents **out** of the workforce and denies them access to paid work. The biggest barrier to work reported by 42% of all unemployed parents in our survey, is a lack of work flexibility around their children. The figures were highest for unemployed parents with a child under five, those living in poverty and lone parents. Expensive childcare was the next biggest barrier.

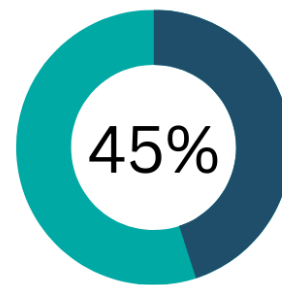
Lack of flex around children is biggest barrier to work



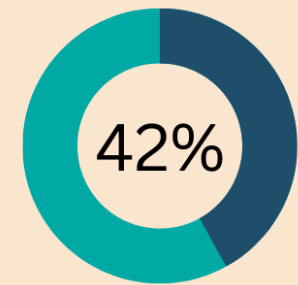
Unemployed parents
with a child aged under
five



Unemployed parents
living in poverty

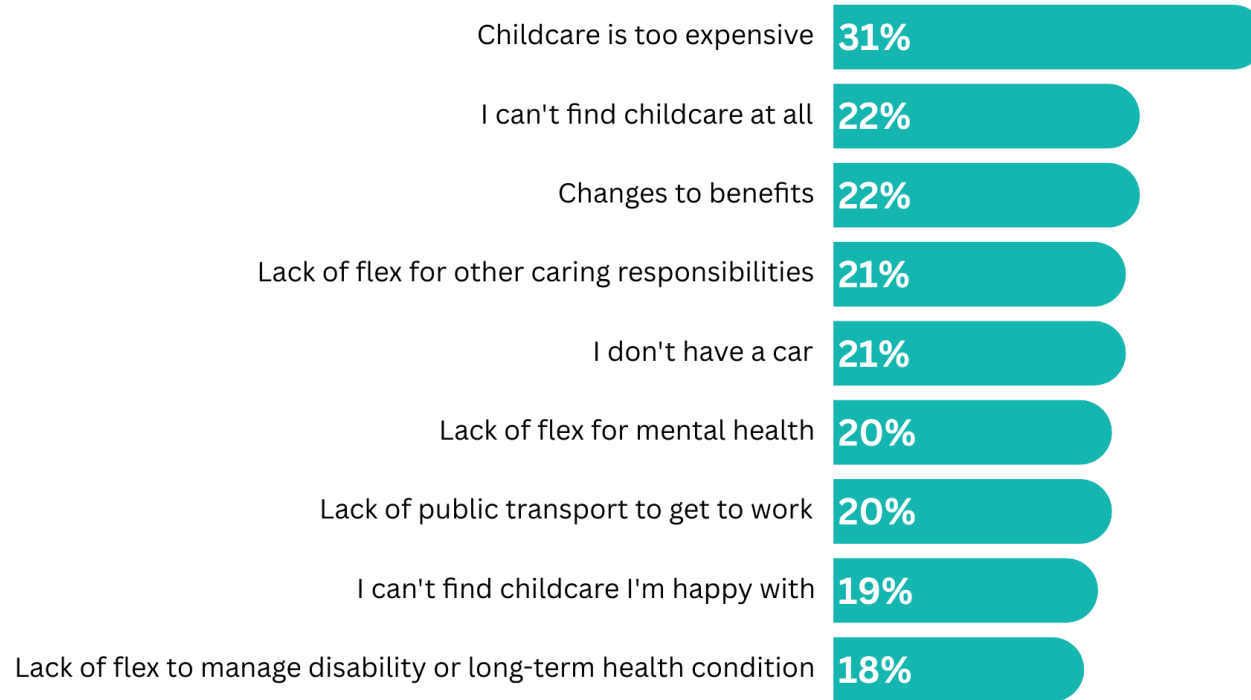


Unemployed lone
parents



All unemployed
parents looking for
work

Other key barriers to work



So what?

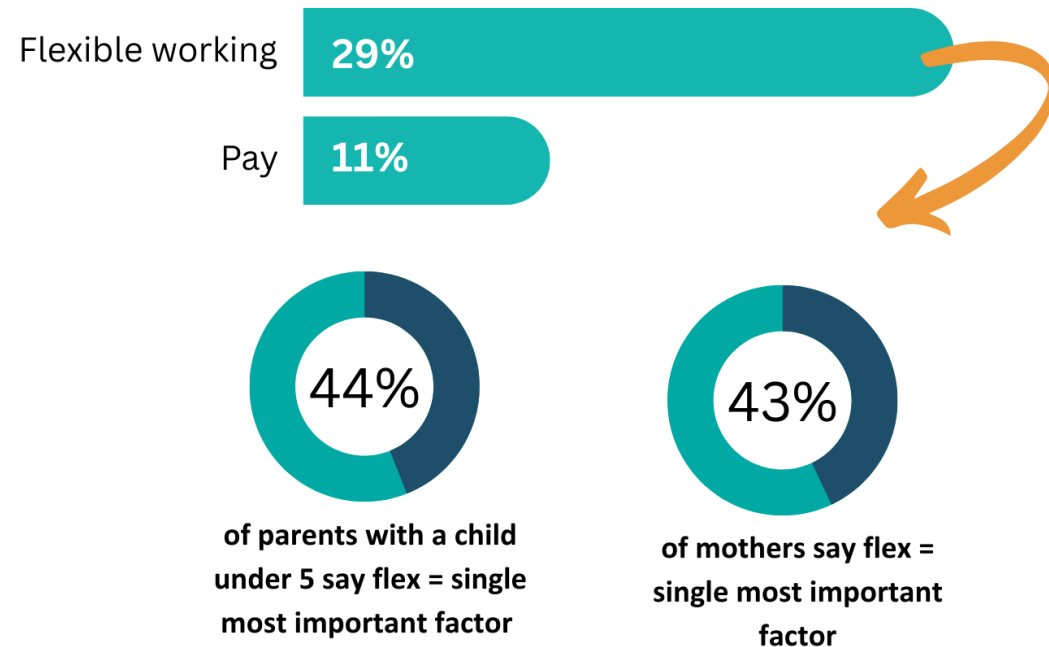
The unemployed parents who are most likely to say lack of flex is a barrier to work are those with some of the greatest (and therefore most expensive) childcare needs. Many of them simply won't be able to pay for childcare, which makes flexible working even more crucial in any job offer. Employability professionals should work with their network of employers, advocating for roles with more flexibility, to help move the dial on reducing parental unemployment and child poverty.

Flex supply and demand issues in recruitment

Almost half (47%) of unemployed parents looking for work say flexible working is **an important factor** in their job search. Nearly three in ten (29%) say flexibility is the **single most important factor** when looking for work, and this is highest for parents with a child under five (44%) and mothers (43%). The figure for unemployed parents living in poverty was the same as the average at 29%. By contrast, only 11% of all unemployed parents looking for work say salary is the single most important factor in their job search.

Despite this high demand for flexible jobs, too often job seekers can't see the flex they need in job adverts or on company websites. According to [Timewise](#), only 33% of Scottish job adverts mention flexible working. Our data shows nearly half (45%) of unemployed parents have found it difficult getting information about flexible working for jobs they've considered applying for.

Single most important factor in job search (unemployed parents looking for work)



45% it's been difficult getting information about flexible working

So what?

Employability programmes rightly look at upskilling individuals. But our data shows many people won't be able to take a job, however skilled they are, if the flexibility they need isn't available. Many employability providers already advocate for more flexible working in their conversations with employers. But this is not yet standard practice, and it should be. Employability staff can also play a greater role in helping fathers think about what they really want, or need, in terms of flexible working, rather than just following social 'norms'. Employers need to create more flexible jobs, and to ensure they showcase existing flexibility too. Too often we find employers already offer good flex but don't mention this in job adverts.



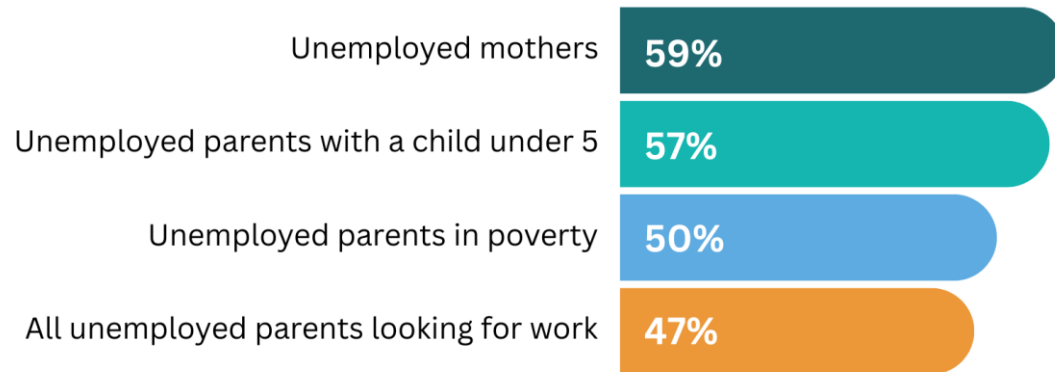
Focus on: Unemployed fathers and flex

Unemployed fathers looking for work are three times less likely than unemployed mothers to say flexible working is their single most important factor in their job search (15% compared with 44% respectively). Nearly a quarter (23%) of unemployed fathers say they don't want any flexibility because they're 'wary' of it, compared with only 5% of unemployed mothers, and unemployed fathers are much more likely to be looking for full time roles than unemployed mothers (28% compared with 9% respectively). This shows how much still needs to change in the culture of workplaces, and in people's minds, about who flexible working is for.

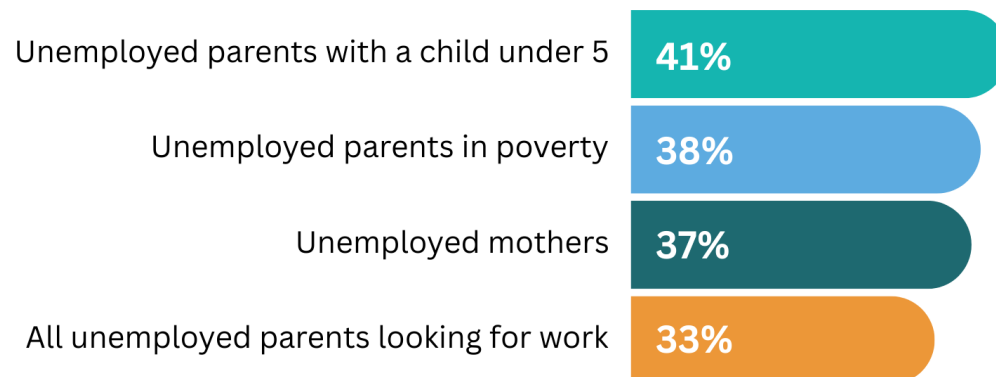
No flex, no application

Many employers still assume people will ask about flexible working if they need it. But our figures show that's just not true. Unemployed parents are put off applying for roles (or accepting job offers) if flexible working isn't available and obvious.

I've seen a job I wanted to apply for but the advert didn't mention flexible working, so I didn't apply



I've turned down a job offer because the job lacked the flex I needed



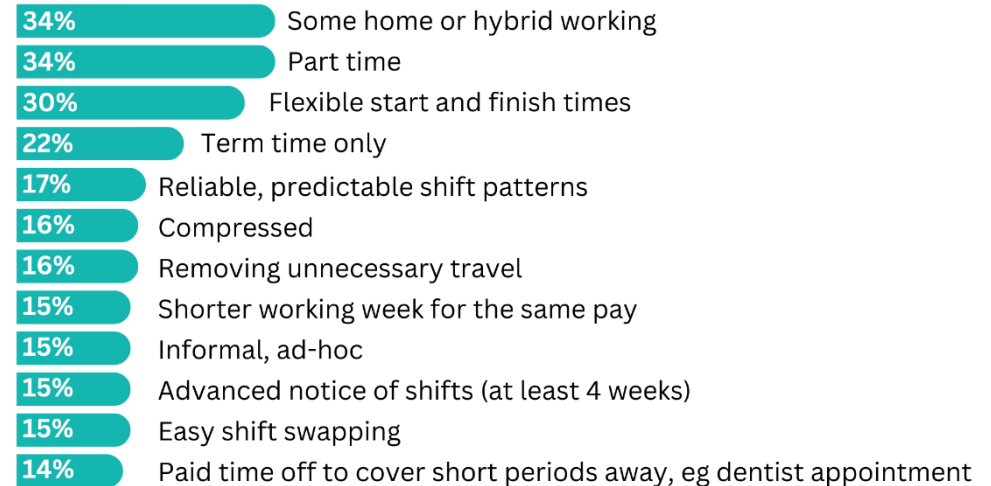
So what?

The impact of not applying for a role, or worse – not feeling able to accept a job offer because the role isn't flexible enough – is particularly acute for parents in poverty, for whom the opportunity of employment could help their family escape poverty. It also means that employers could be missing out on talented candidates. Employability providers will be more successful at supporting parents into work if all professionals understand the vital role flexible working plays in balancing work and family life.

What types of flex do unemployed parents want?

Home and hybrid working, part time hours and flexible start and finish times are the most sought-after types of flexibility for unemployed parents looking for work. When we looked more closely at the data, it was clear that mothers and parents living in poverty want almost every type of flexibility more than other parent groups. In particular, unemployed mothers want part time hours (46%) much more than all unemployed parents (34%) and term time hours (27% of unemployed mothers compared with 22% of all unemployed parents). The main difference for unemployed parents living in poverty is their desire for flexible start and finish times (42% compared with 30% of all unemployed parents). These differences are likely because mothers are often the 'primary' carer for their children, and because childcare is often too expensive for families living in poverty, so any job needs to be as flexible as possible to reduce the need for paid childcare.

Types of flex most wanted by unemployed parents



- 46%** of **unemployed mothers** would like part time hours
- 42%** of **unemployed parents** living in poverty would like flexible start and finish times
- 27%** of **unemployed mothers** would like term time hours
- 20%** of **lone parents** would like paid time off to cover short periods away, eg dentist appointment

So what?

Unemployed parents looking for work want a wide range of flexible working patterns, just like employed parents do, so it's important employers don't make assumptions about what to offer. For policymakers, the desire for flexibility among parents living in poverty should be taken into account in employability programmes, and these should also include work directly with employers.

How many hours a week do unemployed parents want?

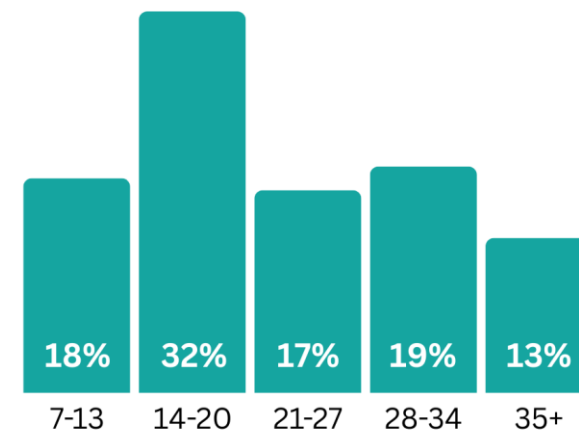
Fewer than one in seven (13%) unemployed parents looking for work in our sample say they'd like to work full time (35+ hours a week), though there was a significant gender difference. Only 9% of unemployed mothers were looking for 35+ hours, compared with 28% of fathers.

The most popular number was between 14 and 20 hours, which equates to between two and three days a week. This option was particularly popular with unemployed lone parents (39%) and unemployed mothers (37%). This was also the most popular option for unemployed parents living in poverty (31%).

Through Jobcentre Plus, the UK Department for Work & Pensions requires parents of children aged three and above to be available for [work, and look for work, for up to 30 hours a week](#), or they risk losing some of their Universal Credit benefit payments. Our data doesn't cut neatly across the same hours of work but it still shows at least two thirds of unemployed parents (67%) don't want to work this many hours. For many, it's just not physically possible to work that many hours if they don't have enough childcare.

We looked at preferred start and finish times for unemployed parents looking for work. About a third of unemployed mothers clearly wanted working hours that allowed school drop-offs and pick-ups but this means two thirds of unemployed mothers **don't** necessarily want school hours, and responses for all unemployed parents were incredibly varied with no other discernible patterns.

Total weekly working hours wanted by unemployed parents looking for work



So what?

There's a strong desire for jobs that are less than full time hours among unemployed parents looking for work. This is out of kilter with how much parents are being asked to work in order to maintain their Universal Credit payments. But parents are more likely to accept roles they feel they can manage well alongside their family responsibilities. When it comes to daily start and finish times, there's definitely no standard, or preferred format. This is an important reminder for employers and employability advisers of how very individual needs and preferences are.

**Flex helps
parents stay in
work**



The difference 20 minutes makes to Iain

Iain Redley, a design engineer at Almond Engineering in Livingston, moved his start and finish time forward by just 20 minutes and has saved hundreds of pounds a month in childcare as a result.

He said: “When my twin daughters started school I asked if I could move my working day forward just a little bit, so I could pick them up at the end of the school day and avoid paying for after-school childcare.

“Even though I work the same number of hours, I feel like I have extra time in my day. I really enjoy spending time with my girls. I help them with their homework and run them to all their clubs, which they wouldn’t be able to do if my wife and I both worked till gone 5pm. I also have time to cook more nutritious meals, so we all benefit from that too.

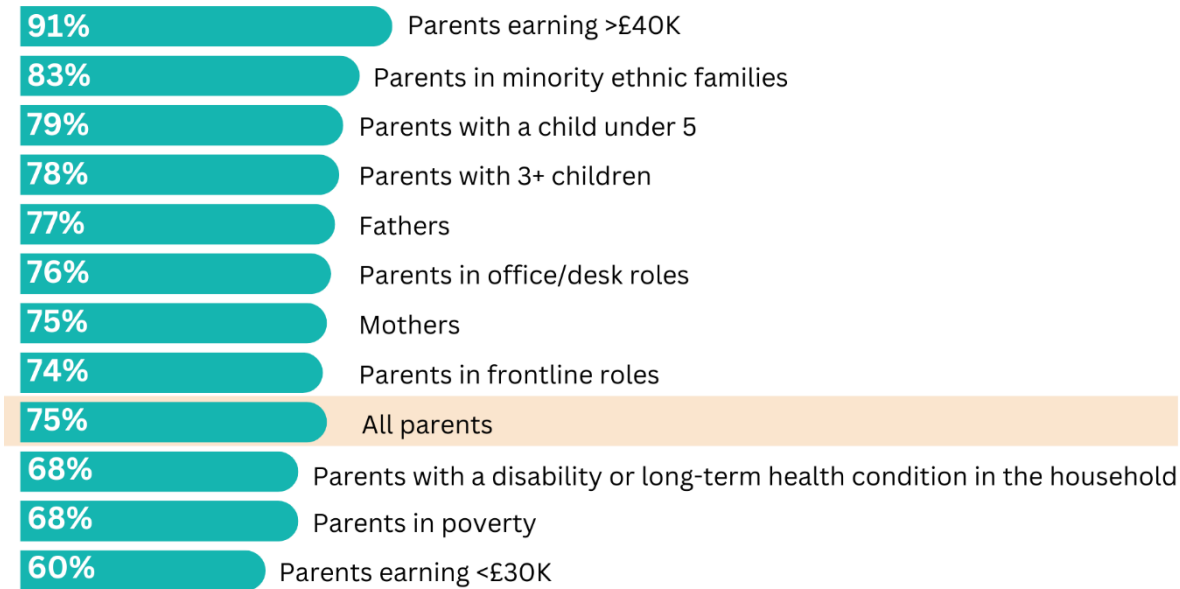
“At work I get so much done by starting early. I’m at my most alert and it’s usually very quiet so I can blast through tasks while my concentration is at its best. There are other people in the team who prefer a bit of a lie-in, and they work later when they concentrate well. It makes sense to let people work when they are naturally more productive.”



Which parents work flexibly?

Three quarters of working parents (75%) have some flexibility in their role, compared with 67% for all Scottish workers. This is no surprise given we know that childcare is the most common reason workers cite for wanting or needing flexible working. But not all parents can work flexibly and inequalities that we see in the general working population are also present in our data specifically for parents. In particular, parents who earn less money, live in poverty, or who are in frontline roles are less likely to work flexibly than parents who are better paid, better off and desk-based.

Parents who work flexibly



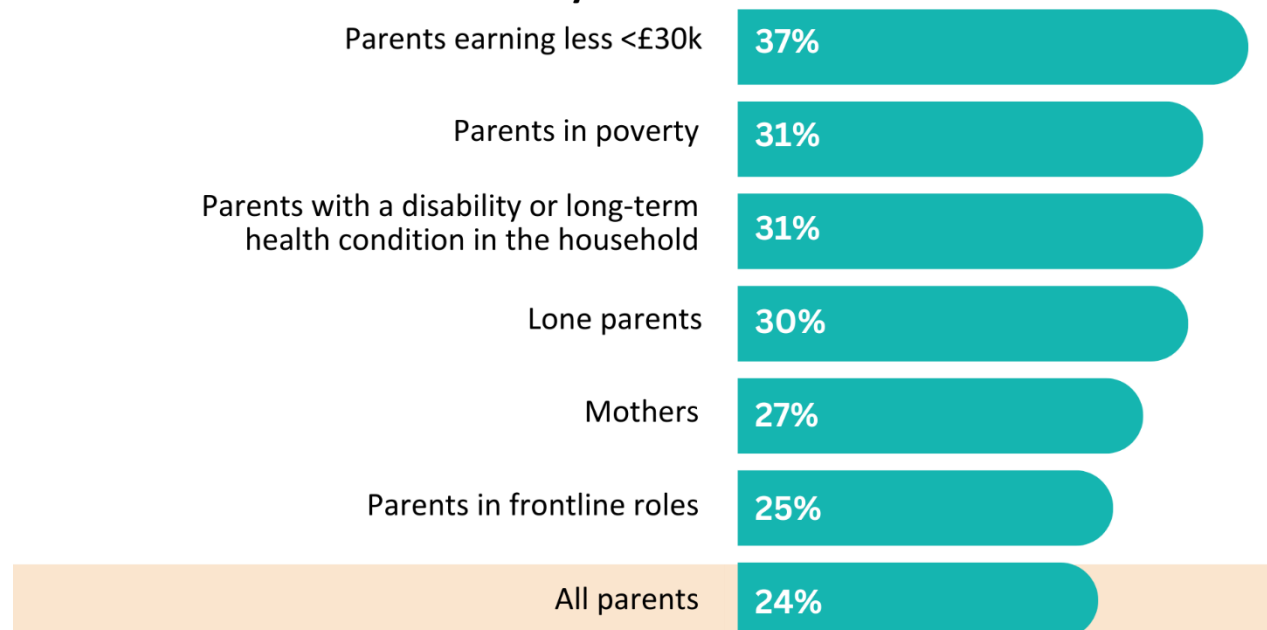
So what?

Childcare responsibilities are a real consideration for working parents, and flexible working can help parents navigate and balance home responsibilities alongside their job. This is especially important for lower paid parents, for whom paying for childcare can be prohibitively expensive.

Which parents don't work flexibly, and which parents want flex the most?

One in four (24%) working parents in Scotland don't work flexibly, and of those, 63% would like to. Lower paid parents and those in poverty are the least likely to work flexibly. But it's parents without flex on middle to higher incomes, those with a disability or long-term health condition in their household and parents from minority ethnic families who are most likely to want flexible working.

Parents who don't work flexibly



The top 5 parent groups without flex who want it the most are:

- 84%** Parents earning £40-£50K
- 80%** Parents with a disability or long-term health condition in the household
- 79%** Parents from minority ethnic families
- 70%** Parents with a child under 5
- 68%** Parents in frontline roles
- 63%** All parents

So what?

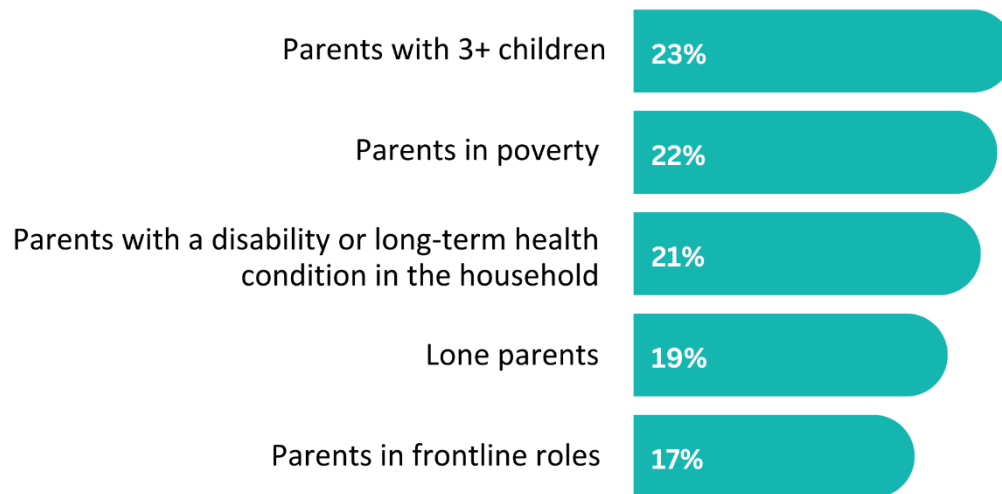
It might surprise policy makers and employers just how much parents in some groups want flexible working. Even among groups where flexible working is already high, demand for flexibility is still not being met. For example, 79% of parents with a child under five do work flexibly. But among the remaining 21% who don't, 70% of them would like to. It means the vast majority of parents with a child under five have or want flexible working.

It might also surprise readers that workers who are least likely to work flexibly – those who are low paid and/or living in poverty – are not also those that want flexible working the most. We've carried out focus group work on this in the past, and the discussions suggested that one of the reasons for this is that some low-paid workers think flexible working isn't for 'people like them'. We need to change mindsets on this point. We know flexible working can help people get into work and stay in work, which can help reduce poverty. But many employers still think workers will ask for flex if they need it. Our research suggests the people who need flex the most won't ask for it, and that employers need to be proactive in talking about flexible ways of working with teams.

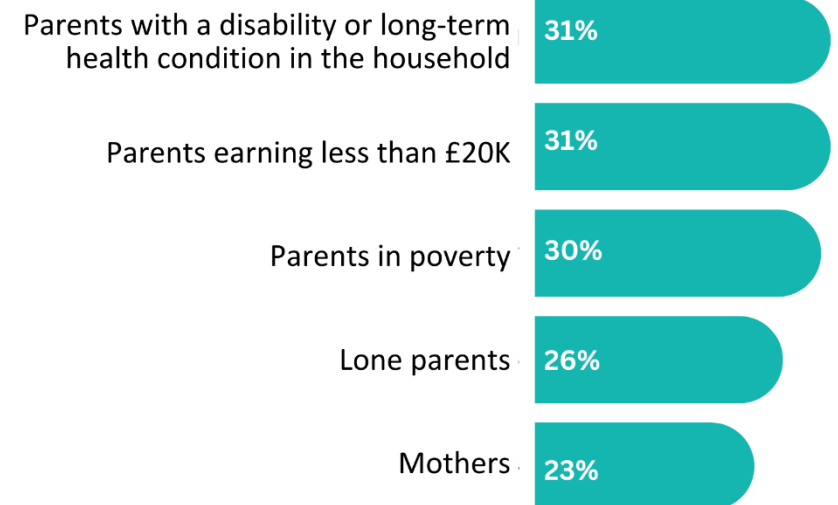
Impact of flex on ability to work

More than one in seven (15%) working parents who can work flexibly say that flexible working was their gateway to work, enabling them to access work when previously they'd not been able to. While nearly one in five (18%) working parents who work flexibly say they'd have no choice but to stop working if their flexibility was no longer available. As always, the impact is felt more keenly in some groups than others. Parents living in poverty, those who have a disability or long-term health condition in the household and lone parents appear in our top five groups for each statement.

Flex means I can work when previously that's not been possible



I'd have no choice but to stop working if flex was no longer available



So what?

Our data shows flexible working made it possible for one in seven of our surveyed parents to work. This is an obvious but important point for anyone who cares about parental employment.



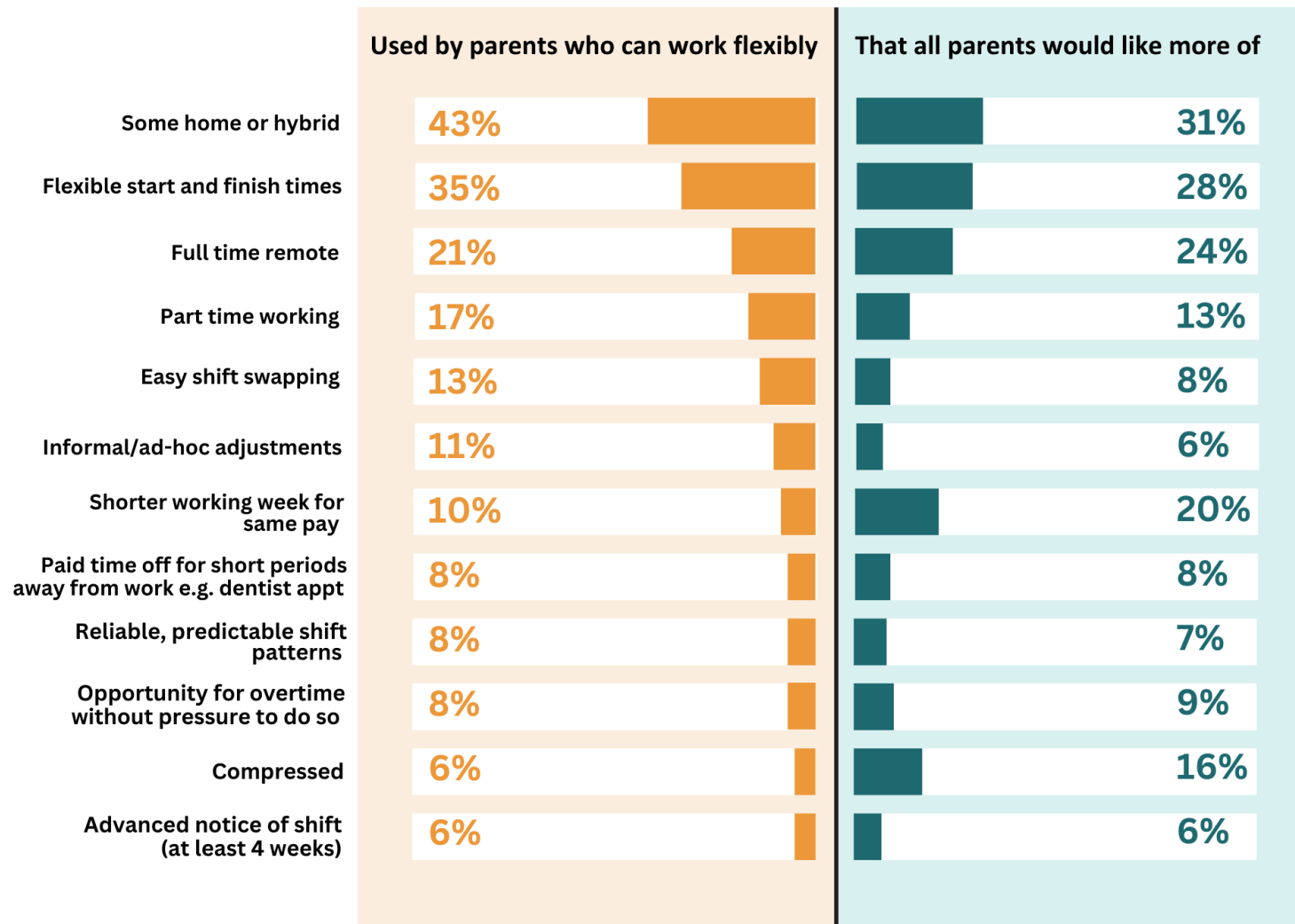
Focus on: poverty

Working parents living in poverty are among the parent groups most likely to say flex means they can get into work and stay in work, highlighting the positive difference flex can play in reducing poverty. This feels slightly at odds with our previous finding that working parents living in poverty don't seem to want flex as much as other groups, which we suggest could be down to a lack of awareness about what flex is, or a misunderstanding about who flex is for. The data shows that perceptions of flexible working are very mixed in this group.

What is clear is that working parents living in poverty are one of the groups least likely to work flexibly (68% work flexibly compared to our 'all parent' average of 75%). Parents living in poverty are more likely to work in lower paid and frontline roles. This means programmes aiming to reduce child poverty through improving parental employment should support employers in creating more flexibility in lower paid and frontline jobs.

What types of flex do working parents use, and want more of?

The most popular types of flexible working used and wanted by parents are home and hybrid working, flexible start and finish times and full time remote working, which all echoes our wider data looking at all Scottish workers. It's worth noting that the use of, and desire for, part time hours remain highly gendered with far more mothers using them, and wanting them, than fathers.



So what?

Parents' use and desire for a wide range of flexible working patterns shows employers that want to recruit and retain good staff, and look after staff wellbeing, should explore the full range of flex for all roles. This includes managers being proactive and asking about working patterns while people are in post, not just during recruitment. It's also a reminder that flexible working is much more than just home and hybrid working, with many options possible in frontline roles.



Focus on: part time hours

Our data shows Scottish working mothers are four times more likely to work part time than Scottish working fathers (29% and 7% respectively). This is different to [ONS data](#) for men and women (not just parents) across the UK, which says 38% of women and 14% of men work flexibly. But both datasets show a significant gap between men and women working part time.

Our data also shows more mothers (16%) than fathers (10%) would like part time hours. These figures include parents who work full time and would like to reduce their hours, and some parents who already work part time but would like a change to their hours.

The gender disparity is driven largely by cultural norms around who looks after children. Six in ten (61%) working mothers in our research cohort say their main reason for working flexibly is childcare, compared with four in ten (42%) working fathers.

For mothers to truly progress at work, more fathers need to be responsible for more childcare and domestic work at home, and work more flexibly than they do currently to accommodate their children. It's true the move towards gender equality expands far beyond the world of work. But within 'the world of work' employers and policy makers should explore ways to create more quality part time roles that allow men and women to progress, and create a working culture that normalises men as fathers, such as improved paternity leave and positive expectations around men working flexibly, including part time.

How many hours a week do working parents want?

We've already looked at data for **unemployed parents** and the hours they'd like to work. This section covers responses from **working parents**. As expected, we got a range of answers when we asked how many hours a week parents would like to work. Just 27% of parents say they'd like to work more than 35 hours a week, and we reminded them in our survey question that reducing hours would reduce their income. Mothers were more likely than fathers to want part time hours, with fewer than one in five (18%) mothers wanting to work 35+ hours a week. But it's worth highlighting that almost two thirds (65%) of fathers would like to work fewer than 35 hours a week, suggesting much more desire for part time working than employers and policy makers may realise.

Number of working hours wanted each week

Number of hours	All Parents	Fathers	Mothers
7-13	8%	8%	8%
14-20	16%	10%	23%
21-27	21%	18%	25%
28-34	27%	29%	26%
35+	27%	36%	18%

- Among parents with a **disability or long-term health condition** in the household, the most popular option was 21-27 hours. (27%)
- Among parents **living in poverty**, the most popular option was 28-34 hours (26%)
- For **lone parents**, the most popular option was 28-34 hours (30%)

Ideal start and finish times

We asked working parents about their preferred start and finish times. Nearly three in ten (29%) mothers would like to start work at 9.30am or 10am, compared with 16% of fathers. And similarly at the end of the day, more than a quarter (27%) of mothers would like to finish between 2.30pm and 3.30pm, compared with 17% of fathers. This shows a significant minority of mothers are looking for roles that mirror school hours. But conversely, it also shows the majority of mothers aren't looking for school hours, and the responses overall were incredibly varied.

So what?

We need all employers and employability providers to understand that flexible working can mean relatively small changes that make a big difference (did you see Iain's story on p19? Changing his start and finish time by just 20 minutes saves his family hundreds of pounds a month in childcare and gives him more time with his daughters).

We also need more part time roles, including those within school hours, to help parents – especially mothers – stay in work. BUT our research also shows that policy makers and employers can't make any assumptions about what sorts of hours parents want and need to work. It's highly individual and employers will need to think about what sorts of flex are possible in all roles as they talk to candidates, or existing employees, about their individual needs.

**Flex can help
– but sometimes
hinders – career
progression**



Promotion and parenting possible for Rachel

Rachel Watson has worked part time in marketing roles for the Scottish Government for six years around her three children. She was promoted in 2020 and now job shares a senior role with colleague Cheryl Bell.

Rachel said: “I want to be there for my children after school, to help them with their homework, to make their dinner, and chat to them about their day. These are simple things. But they’re important. Flexible working makes them possible.

“Initially I joined a team that was managed by two people who were already job-sharing, and their philosophy was to encourage flexible working because they understood the benefits.

“I feel very lucky to have a job I love without having to give up time with my children. But I wish, in a way, that it didn’t need to be considered as luck! This should be the norm for everyone, not the exception.”

Rachel is Head of Health Marketing for the Scottish Government. She works four days a week, flexes her start and finish times and works hybrid so she can also be around for her children.



Impact of flex on how much work parents can do (and get paid for)

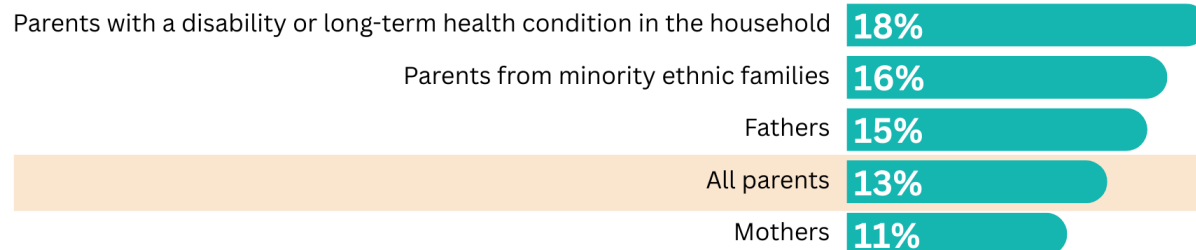
In theory, flexible working has the potential to help parents work more hours, and therefore earn more money. For example, working from home can allow parents to extend their working day and earn more money because there's no commuting time, and they're physically at home when their children get in from school.

Our data shows 13% of parents say working flexibly means they can work more hours and therefore earn more money. It seems to make the biggest difference for parents with a disability or long-term health condition in the household, with nearly one in five (18%) saying flex means they can work more and earn more.

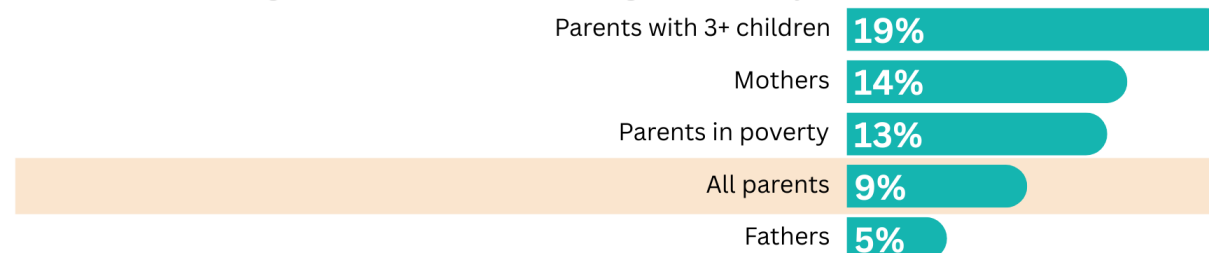
Overall however, one in ten (9%) working parents say flexible working means they're now working fewer hours and earn less money. This, of course, refers to the impact of reduced or part time hours. As expected, mothers are more negatively affected than fathers; 14% of mothers say working flexibly means they work fewer hours and earn less money, while 11% say they work more hours and earn more money. Fathers fare better; 15% work more and earn more, thanks to flex, compared with just 5% who work less and earn less.

Flexible working means...

...I'm now working more hours and earning more money



...I'm now working fewer hours and earning less money

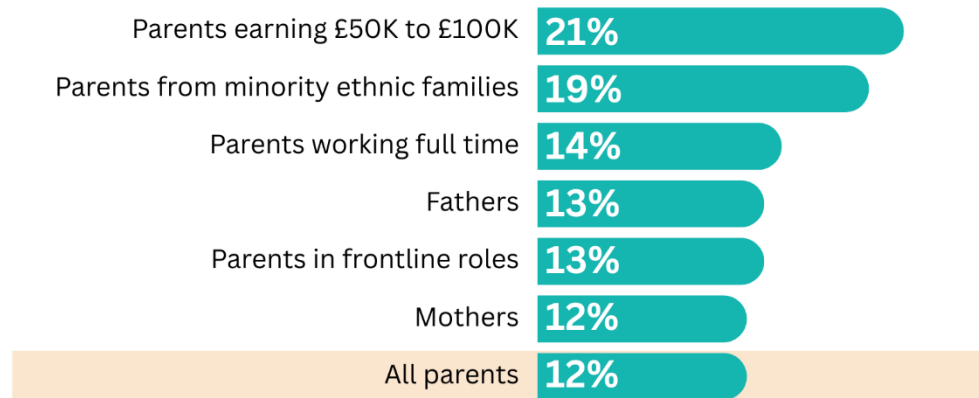


So what?

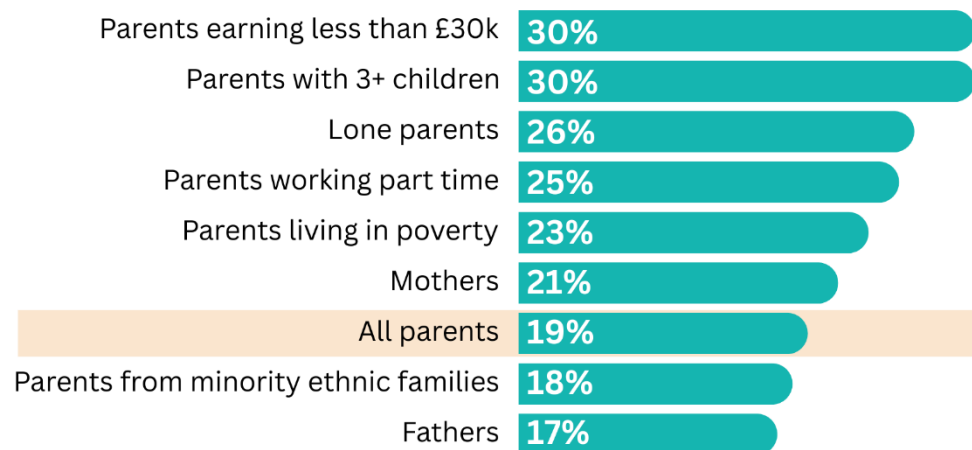
Our data shows greater flex can help parents to work more, and earn more. But for many parents it means working fewer hours, and as we report in our next section, part time roles can mean parents work well below their skillset.

Impact of flex on level of work and skills use

Flex means I've taken on a more skilled or senior role (working parents with flex)



I work below my skillset (all working parents)



Flexible working can help working parents take on a more skilled or senior role. But our data suggests this helps groups who tend to 'need' flexibility less, such as higher earners, full time workers and fathers. When we asked all workers whether they felt they worked below their skillset, the worst affected groups were parents who tend to 'need' flexible working more, such as parents with three or more children and lone parents, and parents who are working part time, or who earn less than £30K (which also includes lots of parents who work part time).

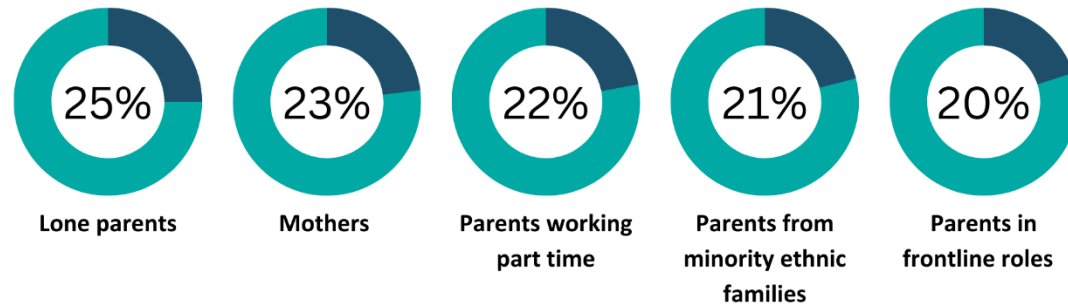
Lack of flex responsible for many parents working below skillset

We asked parents who felt they were working below their skillset why this was the case. There was a mix of responses including that they hadn't found the right job opportunity. But one in five (19%) parents cited a lack of flexibility. Similarly, one in five (19%) parents told us they feel 'stuck' in their current role because they can't see the flexibility they need to progress elsewhere.

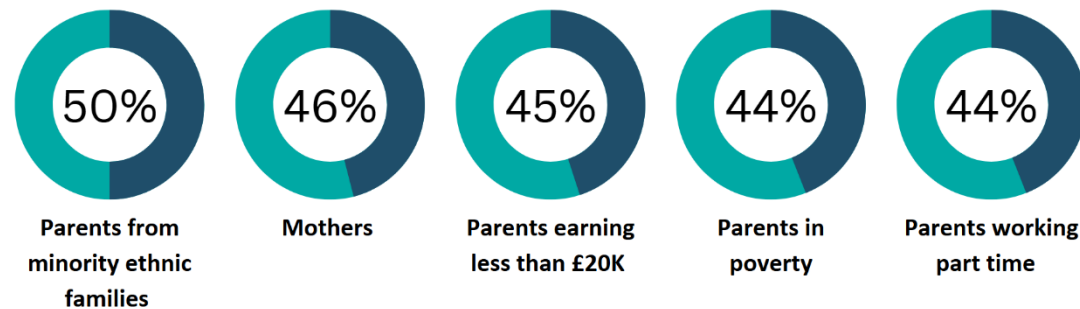
So what?

Some people think many parents actively choose less challenging roles because that's what they want. But our data suggests that a lack of flexible working severely limits the options for some groups. See our next page...

Top 5 groups who feel 'stuck' in their current role because they can't see the flex they need elsewhere



Top 5 groups who work below their skillset because they can't find the flex they need to work at a higher level



So what?

Our data suggests a sense of stagnation exists for many parents who would like to progress but a lack of flexibility is holding them back. The reality is that many managers still value presenteeism, and equate longer working hours (ideally in the office where the manager can see them) with higher commitment and potential for progression. Employers need to ensure managers understand that long hours in the office don't necessarily mean better outcomes. It's also an opportunity for employers. Those that do offer good flexibility, and make this clear in job adverts and on their website, could appeal to a much wider pool of talent.



Focus on: Parents from minority ethnic families

Our data from 224 parents from minority ethnic families shows their use of flexible working, and desire for it, is higher than our average figures for all parents. A total of 83% of parents from minority ethnic families work flexibly compared with 75% of all parents, and 79% of minority ethnic parents who don't work flexibly would like to, compared with 63% of all parents. We also found parents from minority ethnic families fared better with flex enabling them to work more hours and earn more money (16% compared to 13% for all parents) and taking on a more skilled or senior role (19% compared to 12% of all parents).

However, while parents from minority ethnic families reported similar to average figures when it came to working below their skillset (18% compared to 19% of all parents), half of minority ethnic parents (50%) said this was because they couldn't find the flexibility they need to work at a higher level – the highest of any parent group. They were also among the groups most likely to say they'd had a flexible working request refused in the last year (35% compared with the all-parent average of 25%). This demonstrates just how much parents from minority ethnic families value, and look for, flexible working, and suggests racial bias may influence some managers' decisions to refuse flexible working. Employers and policy makers should take this on board when trying to create more diverse workforces.

Need for more (visible) flex in recruitment to help working parents change jobs

Our data shows 30% of Scottish working parents are currently considering changing jobs and of those, more than half (56%) say flexible working is an important factor in their job search. Lone parents, parents with three or more children and mothers were most likely to say flexible working is an important factor (64%, 64% and 62% respectively). Yet according to [Timewise](#), only 33% of jobs are advertised as flexible.

What's more, our figures show more than a quarter (28%) of parents were put off applying for new roles if no flex was mentioned, and 18% have turned down a new job or promotion offer because the role lacked the flex they needed. There is a need (and also an opportunity) for employers to showcase the flexibility they already offer in job adverts, and to explore greater flex in all roles.

Top 5 parent groups who have not applied for a role they wanted because no flex was mentioned

- 35%** Parents working part time
- 34%** Parents with a child under 5
- 33%** Parents from minority ethnic families
- 32%** Parents living in poverty
- 31%** Parents with a disability or long-term health condition in the household

Top 5 parent groups who've turned down a promotion, or a better job, because it lacked flex

- 29%** Parents earning £40K - £50K
- 24%** Parents with a disability or long-term health condition in the household
- 24%** Parents with 3+ children
- 23%** Fathers
- 21%** Parents with a child under 5

So what?

Lack of flexible working, or visible flexible working, is a barrier to progression, as well as being a barrier to work itself (remember our data from unemployed parents looking for work: 47% have not applied for a role because flex wasn't mentioned, and 33% have turned down a job offer). If you're trying to encourage more women and diverse workers to join your workforce, or progress in your organisation; or if you're seeking to reduce poverty through better parental employment, addressing flexible working (and making this visible in recruitment) is key.

**Cultural
support for
parents and
flex still lacking**



If I couldn't work flexibly, our family wouldn't function

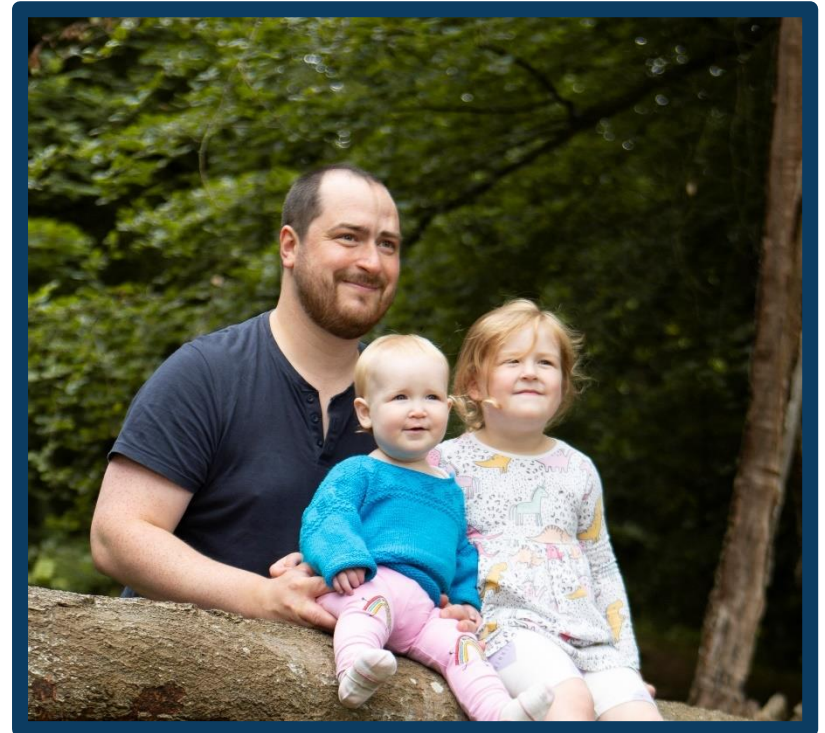
Greg Borthwick works full time (but very flexible hours) as a family worker for charity Dads Rock so he can also be around for his two daughters aged six and two.

Greg's wife Gill was recently diagnosed with a disability that affects her mobility and means she can't drive, so Greg's flexible hours are vital for managing family logistics.

Greg said: "The nature of my work means I don't have set working hours, and I need to work some evenings and weekends because that's when the dads I work with are often free. While this wouldn't suit everybody, it means I can also be hugely available for my family, running my daughters to and from school and nursery, or to clubs, and cooking dinner, before picking up work again in the evening.

"It was clear from the moment I joined Dads Rock that flexible working, and working around your family's needs, was the norm. Our CEO is really open about what he's doing with his family. The culture comes down right from the top, and it means I feel really comfortable changing my work pattern if need be. So long as my work gets done, and is done well, no one minds when I do it.

"If I couldn't work flexibly, our family wouldn't function. I'd have no choice but to work less. I could increase our use of paid childcare but financially it would make more sense for me to cut my hours."

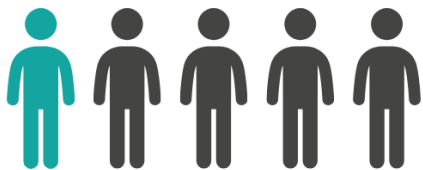


Do parents feel supported by their employers?

Many employers already understand the business benefit of supporting their workers' wellbeing. For parents, a crucial part of wellbeing at work comes from feeling their line manager understands their parenting responsibilities and trusts them to get their job done, even if their child is sick, or if they've taken a few hours to attend a school event.

Yet according to our data, one in five (22%) working parents don't feel their employer supports their childcare obligations. These employers are likely to get less from their workers, who are likely to be more stressed and less focused at work, or call in sick if they really need to be somewhere with their child.

Parents who don't work flexibly reported the highest levels of feeling their employer didn't support their childcare obligations. They were also the most likely to say they'd like to work flexibly but didn't think it was acceptable to ask. This was in response to a question for all parents about whether they felt comfortable asking for flexibility in the first instance, or changing the flex they already have. The average for all parents was 41%.

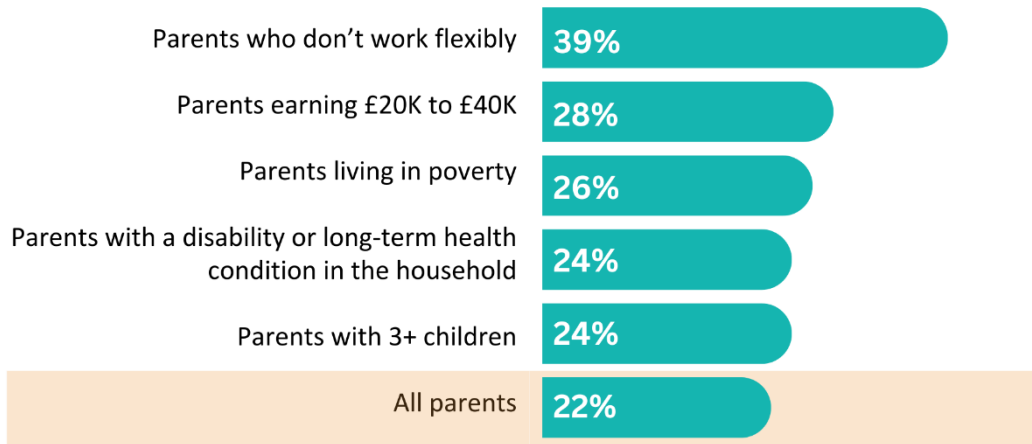


1 in 5 parents feel their employer doesn't support their childcare obligations

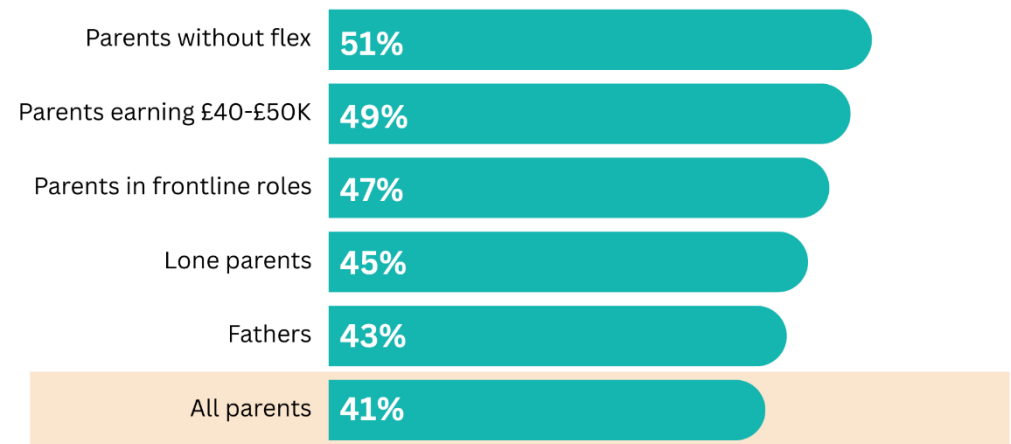


2 in 5 parents would like to work more flexibly but don't feel it's acceptable to ask

Top 5 parent groups who feel their employer doesn't support their childcare obligations



Top 5 parent groups who'd like to work more flexibly but don't feel it's acceptable to ask



So what?

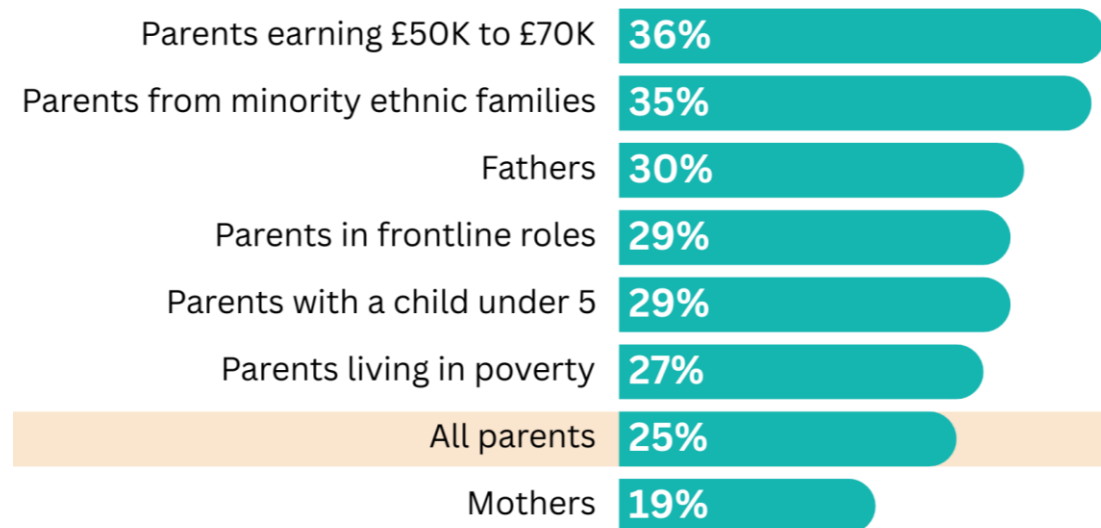
It's particularly striking how much of a difference flexible working makes to whether parents feel supported or not. We found three quarters (75%) of parents with flex felt their employer supported their childcare obligations compared with 43% of parents without flex. Employers that don't create a supportive working culture for parents (and all workers) risk missing out on the benefits of a more focused, engaged and loyal workforce.

Which parents have had a flexible working request refused?

One in four (25%) parents have had a flexible working request turned down in the last year. Parents in higher earning roles were the most likely to have been refused. Don't forget, they typically have more flex than many other groups and are likely to make more requests in the first place.

Parents from minority ethnic families and fathers were the next most likely to have had a request refused. We don't know the detail of what people asked for and whether it was suitable for their role and employer. But we encourage employers to treat all requests equally, regardless of ethnicity and gender.

I've had a flex request turned down in the last year



So what?

The UK Government's Employment Rights Bill, which is due to come into force in 2026, will make it harder for employers to unreasonably refuse flexible working requests because employment tribunals will have greater powers to explore whether the refusal was 'reasonable'. Of course, employers can and should be able to refuse a request if there is a good business reason not to. But training line managers so they understand what flexible working is, how it can benefit the employer as well as individuals, and how to have difficult conversations and find alternative solutions, will be essential to comply with the new law.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates how flexible working can make a significant difference in helping parents get into work and stay in work. We've also demonstrated how good flexible working all the way up the salary and seniority scale can help parents progress at work. All of this is good for parents, their families – especially those living in poverty – as well as our wider economy and society.

And yet we still have plenty of conversations with employers who don't understand flexible working is more than just home and hybrid working. Our data shows there is still not enough flexible working, and the flexibility that does exist is not visible enough during recruitment. There is still entrenched gender bias about who flexible working is for that holds too many parents back, or locks them out of work altogether.

In answer to the question in our report title – are we nearly there yet? No, we are not.

Many people think it should be down to employers to change, and that it's not for governments to interfere. But businesses are fragile right now. They have their heads firmly down in day-to-day delivery tasks, and planning for the likes of the forthcoming National Insurance rises. Many just don't have time to think about how to do things differently. Flexible working still feels like a 'nice to have' for when things are more stable.

The UK Government's Employment Rights Bill, which is due to be implemented in 2026 and will make it harder for employers to unreasonably refuse flexible working, gives us a brief opportunity to influence employers while they are more open to changes around flexible working, to ensure they remain legally compliant. Scottish Government and local authorities can help deliver specific support to employers to prepare for the new legislation while also raising broader awareness of what flexible working can look like in different roles, and how to design and advertise flexible roles that deliver much wider benefits to workers and employers than just 'keeping legal'.

If businesses did create more flexible working in all its guises, across all different roles, it could help address some of their immediate priorities around recruiting and retaining skilled staff, and drive productivity and business growth. This would be good for the Scottish economy too.

But given the Scottish Government's key priority is eradicating child poverty, the most compelling reason to create more flexible working is because of the direct impact it has on parental employment. Creating more job opportunities parents can actually manage, as well as better pathways for progression and influencing working culture so it's more supportive of parents (and anyone else working flexibly), will all shore up a route out of poverty for families and children.

We've included eight practical recommendations below for **Scottish Government, local authorities and other public sector bodies**, as well as **employability providers**, that would better influence and support employers to offer greater flexible working for parents in particular, and all other workers and job seekers in general.

Recommendations

1. Lead by example

Scottish Government, local authorities and other **public sector organisations** should be positive and influential role models for flexible working. This is particularly important right now, as many employers are taking cues from media coverage of high-profile organisations and leaders that are pulling back on the flexibility available to workers. The Scottish Government, along with other public sector organisations, should continue to ensure they offer all their own workers some form of flexible working, whatever their role, making flexible working the default way to work. They should seek feedback from staff about their flexible working practices. Job adverts should lay out flexible working options so they're clear 'at a glance' rather than in the small print, and this should be standard practice across all platforms used for advertising public sector roles.

2. Make flexible working a measurable requirement for grants and procurement

Currently, flexible working is listed as 'desirable' rather than 'mandatory' for organisations applying for Scottish Government and other public sector funding and contracts. Flexible working should be a measurable requirement for procurement and grant giving, with clearer expectations about acceptable levels of flexible working in supplier organisations and around advertising roles as flexible in recruitment. Flexibility Works' forthcoming accreditation scheme for employers could also be utilised by **Scottish Government, other public sector organisations and independent funders** as evidence of a genuine commitment to flexible working. All funders should also ensure they lead by example, as set out in our first point.

3. Widen the focus of employability programmes

Scottish Government, local authorities and **employability providers** should widen the role of employability programmes, so the focus is not solely on making people 'fit' the existing jobs market. This should include informing and upskilling all employability staff so they understand what flexible working is and the benefits for people and employers, as well as recognising where flex could support individuals into work, and being able to advocate for flexible working with employers. Second, funders should endorse the use of some employability funding to work directly with employers, encouraging and supporting them to design and advertise more flexible roles.

4. Increase support for career returners

To help parents, and others, get back into work the **Scottish Government** should re-start funding ‘returner’ programmes for specific groups locked out of work. Other **public sector organisations** should consider the benefits of running high-quality returner programmes. These should include helping people understand the types of flexible working available to them, what their legal rights are around requesting flexible working, as well as how to find and apply for a flexible role and negotiate for flex during recruitment. Returner programmes should also establish closer and on-going partnerships with employers, to drive wider change within employers.

5. Embed flexible working in business and economic strategies

Given its vital role in workforce participation, productivity, and business sustainability, flexible working should be embedded in Scotland’s economic strategies, including plans for business growth and major initiatives such as the development of Great British Energy. All **public sector bodies and agencies** involved in economic development and business support should actively champion the benefits of flexible working and ensure flexible working is a core part of discussions between businesses and the government. In addition, these organisations should 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 more flexible and family friendly working. This should specifically include employers with non-office staff and workers in low paid roles.

6. Fund pilots to drive more flexible working in low paid roles

Many parents living in poverty are in low paid roles, often with very limited flexible working arrangements. In addition to providing business support services, **Scottish Government** and **local authorities** can fund pilot programmes trialling flexible working (beyond public sector four-day work weeks) for sectors with the highest numbers of lower paid workers. These are often in frontline industries, such as hospitality, construction or social care, which the Fair Work Convention has already identified as urgent priority sectors for increasing fair work opportunities. This will create new sector-specific evidence to influence Scottish employers, and help low-paid parents stay in work and progress, potentially helping them escape poverty.

7. Fund activities to support employers to embed flexible working

Too many employers still don't understand what flexible working can look like, including hard-to-flex sectors such as retail, manufacturing, care and engineering, and employers are unaware of the significant evidence that flexible working benefits people and organisations. **Scottish Government** can spearhead a Scotland-wide awareness campaign to support employers. This could include research with workers, employers and unemployed adults looking for work to provide data-driven insights, sharing best-practice employer stories and insights, or delivering free online and in-person events for employers to learn more. Funding for manager training and/or consultancy services would also help drive positive change. Scottish Government previously funded these kinds of activities via the Workplace Equality Fund and other programmes, and we encourage it to do so again, particularly in the run-up to the Employment Rights Bill becoming law. Many employers are more open to receiving support if it will keep them 'legally compliant', which means there's an immediate opportunity to inform and influence employers on how to get flex right and promote its wider benefits while employers are listening.

8. Use this data to inform guidance for new flexible working legislation

As mentioned, the UK Government's Employment Rights Bill will become law in 2026, which will give employment tribunals greater powers to scrutinise employers' decisions to refuse flexible working, and consider whether those decisions were 'reasonable'. We hope our **governments in Holyrood and Westminster** will consider our data when drafting new guidance for employers on how to handle flexible working requests, and what constitutes 'reasonable' under the new legislation.

How we help

We're here to help employers, policy makers and employability advisers get flexible working right with a range of practical support.

Find inspiration and expert guidance with our free resources



You can find lots of inspirational employer case study stories, our fully referenced [Building the Business Case for Flex](#) resource to help create your own business case to influence managers and senior leaders, and our super practical [7 Steps to Flex](#) employer guide to help employers get flex right, all for free on our website. You can also read our other research including our sister [Flex for Life](#) report which gives a broader overview of what flexible working looks like in Scotland.

Consider consultancy



Whether you want a light-touch low-cost audit and practical recommendations, our fully comprehensive [Go Flex](#) programme or something else in between, we deliver 'off the shelf' and bespoke consultancy services drawing on more than a decade's experience helping Scottish employers improve their flexible working offer.

Book training for managers, or teams



We offer a range of certified training workshops including for [employability professionals](#) to help you promote flex with employers and secure flexible job opportunities. Other workshops are aimed at all [managers](#), to equip them with the skills and confidence to effectively lead and support flexible and hybrid teams, or our [Working Well for Hybrid Teams](#) workshop helps strengthen team connection and communication in hybrid teams.

Keep in touch



Join our [mailing list](#) for a monthly newsletter full of new research findings, real-world stories from employers and expert commentary on what's happening in the wider world of flex. Or get in touch direct via hello@flexibilityworks.org.uk or **0141 378 8330**.

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 drive business success and individuals' wellbeing. 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.

As a social enterprise, 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 all our sponsors and supporters who made this research possible.



Arnold Clark





Thank you

www.flexibilityworks.org
hello@flexibilityworks.org

