



# Thought piece – Transforming flexible working in education: Insights from Flex Fest

Flex Fest, a webinar series funded by the Department for Education, was delivered in partnership with Capita, Flexible Teacher Talent and Flexible Working Ambassadors in Multi Academy Trusts and Schools (FWAMS), to promote the Flexible Working Multi-Academy Trust and Schools programme.

Two of the webinars held within Flex Fest sought to address the challenges of flexible working in primary and secondary schools. Presented by Lindsay Patience of Flexible Teacher Talent, the webinars outlined the priorities and challenges and featured headteachers who have successfully integrated flexible working into their school ethos and culture.

Many of the discussions drew upon the valuable insights from Cooper Gibson's 2019 research ([Exploring flexible working practice in schools](#)), which categorised the challenges into four key areas:

- resources
- capacity
- Leadership and accountability
- meetings and communications

As part of the event, speakers from several of the appointed FWAMS explained how they can support schools in their specialisms or regions. In addition, several CEOs and headteachers from both the primary and secondary sectors provided insights into how they are overcoming the challenges within their schools.

## Leaders driving change: small actions, significant results.

### Unlocking loyalty and commitment

Sue Plant, the Headteacher at John Taylor Free School, highlighted her school's local reputation for its flexible working policies. She emphasised the importance of actively listening to the needs of staff and aligning them with their employment circumstances, a practice that has yielded significant benefits. Notably, the school rarely pays recruiters as many individuals are eagerly waiting for job openings at the school.

This illustrates the importance of leaders taking the time to analyse how their system can be improved to benefit all parties. A small change can significantly impact an employee's loyalty, commitment to their career and dedication to the school's mission.

### Streamlining flexible working requests

Rebecca Cramer, CEO of Reach Academy, explained how they had simplified the ad-hoc flexible working request procedure, enabling staff to attend their child's nativity without

formalities. This change significantly reduced the barriers to requesting short periods of time off, making it less daunting and easier for staff to do.

As these practices become more commonplace, the benefits multiply. Teachers may opt to leave a bit earlier on Fridays to secure cheaper flights or less crowded trains, and others occasionally readily step in to provide support, knowing that they will in turn benefit from a culture of flexibility. This mutual support system fosters a culture of reciprocity, cultivating strong relationships and trust among the school staff.

### Nurturing staff ambitions

Michael Eggleton, Headteacher at Charles Dickens Primary School, shared a noteworthy practice: the annual “stay meetings” with his staff. These meetings serve as a powerful tool for discovering the goals and aspirations of his team. Beyond that, they help him to shape a more flexible vision that can help to achieve employee aspirations; each employee is given the chance to discuss a flexible working arrangement which might support them, as part of the meeting.

During the discussion, he was questioned whether these “stay meetings” simply resembled the traditional appraisal process. Michael emphasised that they intentionally kept the “stay meetings” separate from the appraisal process. These low-pressure conversations created a safe space for staff to freely express their ambitions, allowing leadership to respond collaboratively.

### Leading with empowerment

Mark Pritchard, Director of Education at Pioneer Educational Trust, showcased the power of leading by example. He communicated to his staff that there would be no judgment for pursuing their dreams alongside their teaching career. If that meant leaving at 3pm and walking out with the children, then “so be it”. Mark emphasised full support for their work-life balance and passions.

These success stories from school leaders serve as a powerful reminder that prioritising the wellbeing, personal growth, and work-life balance of your staff, can pave the way for a more empowered and resilient educational community, who are ready to overcome the challenges of flexible working.