



Addressing negative perceptions of flexible working in schools

PLEASE NOTE

The Employment Relations (Flexible Working) **Act** received Royal Assent on 20 July 2023 and is expected to come into force in 2024. This will introduce new protections for employees and new requirements for employers in relation to statutory flexible working requests. This collection of resources will soon be updated in line with the new legislation.

About this resource

Those working in schools and multi-academy trusts often cite challenges to implementing flexible working in schools/settings and trusts (including special schools, alternative provision and pupil referral units). While there are challenges, both perceived and real, there are also many examples of schools that successfully overcome these. Some key challenges are addressed here.

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1. Flexible working is not compatible with a career in teaching

It is a misconception that flexible working is incompatible with a career in teaching. Evidence shows that flexible working is associated with benefits in schools, including supporting staff wellbeing and work-life balance, as well as productivity and job-life satisfaction¹. The following case studies highlight how schools have implemented flexible working successfully, demonstrating its compatibility with teaching:

[United Learning – Case study – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/united-learning)

[White Meadows Primary School – Case study – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/white-meadows-primary-school)

[Implementing job shares successfully – Case study – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/implementing-job-shares-successfully)

More information on how flexible working can work in schools including practical support is available [here](#). This includes information about [Flexible Working Ambassador Schools/MATs](#).



2. By accepting one request or being more proactive about flexible working, the floodgates will open

Promoting flexible working in your school may mean more staff members formally request flexible working, but it is unlikely that lots of staff will request the same flexible working pattern as individual circumstances vary and not everyone will require or desire the same form of flexibility.

It should be recognised that it may not always be possible to agree every statutory request for flexible working, but all requests should be treated equitably. What is important is that there is a fair process in place and that employees are able to raise their flexible working request, discuss the options and reach a mutual agreement.

You can adopt a strategic approach to implementing flexible working to help make it manageable for both the individual and wider school community, including:

- Facilitating an open conversation with all staff about what they need or would like.
- Designing a process for managing requests which accommodates the needs of staff, leaders and others (such as the school's timetable).
- Committing to reviewing and improving these arrangements annually and discussing them with staff and recognised trade unions.
- Implementing 'whole school' flexibility which does not require a formal request, such as planning, preparation and assessment time taken off-site.

¹CooperGibson Research, 2019. 'Exploring flexible working practices in schools'; IFF Research, 2021. 'School and College Panel: December 2021'; IFF Research, 2022. 'Flexible working in schools: exploring the costs and benefits'.



3. If an individual goes part time, they will have to stay working part time indefinitely

As individual circumstances change, individuals may want to request a change in their working pattern and increase their hours. For example, a staff member may wish to work part time for several years to support caring responsibilities and may then want to go full time again. Although contractual changes are permanent, it is important to review arrangements over time and consider whether a new arrangement might be beneficial.



4. Flexible working is only for those with parental or caring responsibilities

Flexible working is not only an option for those with parental or caring responsibilities. Across sectors, individuals of all ages and all circumstances expect to work flexibly. NFER recently published research suggesting that the proportion of new graduates in professions similar to teaching, who reported mainly working from home, increased rapidly from 15 per cent (2018/19) to 44 per cent in 2021/22 ([NFER, 2023, 'Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report'](#)).

You can request flexible working whatever your individual circumstances and for whatever reason you choose. In addition to parental and caring responsibilities, circumstances that flexible working can support include phased retirement, returning from a career break, combining work in a school with professional development or work in your field of study, volunteering, or to support work/life balance.

DfE have published [case studies](#) to highlight a range of motivations for flexible working. For example, a school in which a [part-time teacher runs the education unit in a local museum for the rest of her working week](#).





5 Flexible working is not for those in more senior roles/flexible working will affect my career progression

Flexible working is an option you can consider whatever stage you are at in your career. There are many examples of successful formal flexible working arrangements in senior teaching roles including:

[Flexible working in schools: Headteacher job share - YouTube](#)

[Working in a co-headship job share - Case study - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

[There is support available for making flexible working a success in leadership roles.](#)

It is important that we collectively challenge the misconception that flexible working is not compatible with career progression, as this is an equalities issue. Well-designed flexible working can enable individuals to reconcile work and caring responsibilities. Currently, women are more likely to have caring responsibilities, therefore offering flexible working at a senior level can enable women to progress, reflecting their skills and potentially reducing the gender pay gap. ([CMI and Government Equalities Office, 2020. 'Flexible working: A guide to flexible working for senior leaders and managers'](#)).



6. Flexible working only means part time

Flexible working is not limited to part-time or job-share arrangements. There is a range of other flexible working types including:

Varied hours:

- **Staggered hours.** The employee has different start, finish and break times.
- **Compressed hours.** Working full-time hours but over fewer days.
- **Annualised hours.** Working hours spread across the year, which may include some school closure days, or where hours vary across the year to suit the school and employee.

In-year flexibility - these types of flexible working are sometimes referred to as 'informal' flexibility:

- **Personal or family days.** Days of authorised paid leave during term time to which all employees in a school are entitled.
- **Lieu time.** Paid time off work for having worked additional hours.
- **Home or remote working.** The employee carries out work off site. For example, Planning Preparation and Assessment time conducted off site, or leaders carrying out some duties from home.

In the Department for Education's [Working Lives of Teachers Survey \(2023\)](#), four in ten teachers and leaders (40%) reported using some form of flexible working arrangement themselves, whether formal or informal. Alongside part-time working, examples included ad-hoc flexibility such as personal days off at manager's discretion, time off in lieu or planning, preparation and assessment time taken remotely.



7. Timetabling constraints make flexible working challenging to implement

It is possible to timetable effectively to accommodate flexible working, as demonstrated by the [DfE's Flexible Working Ambassador Schools/MATS](#). The Flexible Working Ambassador Schools Programme 2021-22 promoted culture change within the sector via webinars and direct school-to-school support. A theme within the programme was challenging perceptions and offering practical solutions to the challenges of timetabling to allow schools to respond to and meet flexible working requests.

Examples of solutions include:

- Setting a date for requests to be submitted so that there is time to plan the timetable.
- Having clear policies and guidance in place which encourage conversations, including exploring flexibility when making requests. This is especially important given that not every arrangement can necessarily be accommodated. For example, if an employee requests a part-time arrangement, they could be flexible about their non-working day.
- Using effective timetabling tools to help manage flexible working requests.

There is [support available](#) for timetabling to accommodate flexible working.



8. Parents do not like having their child or children taught by more than one teacher, particularly in primary schools

The most important factor in improving pupil outcomes at school is the quality of teaching and the opportunity to work flexibly can help to recruit and retain talented teachers.

In 2022, the Department surveyed a panel of parents and secondary pupils on their experiences and perceptions of being taught by two job-sharing teachers. The majority (62%) of surveyed parents, whose child had been taught by job-sharing teachers, reported that this had a positive or null impact on their child. Reported positive impacts on their child included: experiencing a range of teaching styles (46%), building relationships with different personalities (45%), and being able to go to more than one teacher for help and support with their learning (33%) and wellbeing (19%) ([Kantar, 2023. 'Pupil, Parent, and Learner Panel 22/23 November wave'](#)).

Employers can support teachers who work flexibly to continue to deliver excellent teaching by allowing sufficient handover time for job-share partners and ensuring continuity of other employees such as support staff.



9. Flexible working will affect pupil outcomes

There are many examples of schools which achieve excellent pupil outcomes, alongside developing a culture supportive of flexible working, as demonstrated by the DfE's [Flexible Working Ambassador Schools/MATS](#).

The biggest factor in improving pupil outcomes at school is the quality of teaching – flexible working policies can help to recruit and retain talented teachers which will support teaching consistency.

In recent research with school leaders, those interviewed noted that flexible working helped to retain good staff and to improve teacher wellbeing, which were perceived to ultimately lead to better pupil outcomes ([IFF Research, 2023. 'Flexible working in schools: exploring the costs and benefits'](#)).



10. Flexible working is not affordable for schools

Research suggests that the benefits of employing teachers working flexibly go beyond cost comparisons and management time. If flexible working arrangements are successful and experienced employees are retained, the reduction in cost from recruitment and induction could offset that cost.

We recently commissioned [research to explore the perceived financial and non-financial costs and benefits](#) of teachers and school leaders working flexibly. An overriding theme from the research was that the benefits of flexible working were generally seen to outweigh the costs, as leaders felt that flexible working helped retain good staff and improve teacher wellbeing, which was perceived to ultimately lead to better pupil outcomes.

Overall, participating leaders reported that their schools do not explicitly measure or track the financial costs or benefits of their flexible working provision. Leaders were, however, aware of financial costs associated with flexible working arrangements, even though these were generally not measured. Reported costs included an increased wage bill associated with part-time working, a longer timetabling process, extra line management, and planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time.



Contact us

If you have a query regarding the flexible working toolkit please contact [DfE's flexible working team](#). If you have suggestions on resources we could develop as part of our toolkit, please [contact Capita](#).

