

**Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee
Inquiry into child poverty and parental employment**

The need for flexible and family friendly working policies and employers was a very clear theme in addressing child poverty in the Committee's recent call for views with some respondents suggesting solutions such as ensuring fair work and just transition agendas deliver family friendly employment and considering opportunities afforded by the current tight labour market to improve working conditions.

We look forward to presenting evidence on 22 June.

Flexibility Works

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1. 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. We are a team of leading experts and commentators, bringing a depth of knowledge, insight and years of practical experience to help businesses and individuals thrive.

Our Purpose

Enriching people's lives by transforming the way we work

Our Vision

Creating a working culture that truly values work life harmony, enabling all people and businesses to thrive

Our Mission

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

Our Founders

Flexibility Works is a social business, co-founded by two of Scotland's leading experts in Flexible Working – Lisa Gallagher and Nikki Slowey. Between us we have vast experience of working directly with employers in Scotland around flexible working. We also have experience of working in senior roles within different sectors and setting up and running organisations.

Flexibility Works is our way of harnessing our energy, knowledge and passion to support more employers than ever before to move their dial on flexible working. Our approach is human, professional and practical. We have worked with large and small organisations across different sectors to create working culture change.

Working flexibly is not only good for employers and people, it has the power to address deep-rooted, societal and economic issues like poverty, inequality, and the health and wellbeing of our nation.

As two mums of six boys, it is our personal and professional mission to change working culture in Scotland, creating a more fair and flexible way that will benefit workers not only today but our children's generation and generations to come.

2. Summary Intro

Not having flexibility often means that people are forced to leave their job, or take a lower paid job and/or level of seniority in exchange for the flexibility they need. They may not be able to access work at all, or they may suffer from detrimental mental or physical health issues. This is not good for the economy or people, it's not good for equality and diversity and it's not good for accessibility or employability.

Flexible working is key for employers too; our research shows flexible working is a key factor in recruiting new talent and retaining people for longer. It also enhances employee wellbeing, engagement, productivity and helps to reduce absenteeism and enhances diversity within organisations.

Working flexibly is not only good for employers and people, but it also has the power to address deep-rooted societal and economic issues like poverty, inequality and the health and wellbeing of our nation. Greater flexible working benefits people at all ages and stages of life. And while we do not work exclusively with any one group, we recognise that flexible working in particular benefits parents, carers, women, people with disabilities and older workers.

A key focus for Flexibility Works has been, and will continue to be, a 'voice' for non-office-based workers and those on lower incomes. And indeed to find – and put into practice-practical wellbeing solutions for those workers around work life harmony. The views of many business leaders, MPs and often workers themselves is that flexible working is 'only possible' for office-based or knowledge workers i.e. those who can 'work from home'. We want to increase the momentum we've built in this area by supporting more frontline workers and helping more employers implement measures that will improve the work life harmony of lower-income and frontline workers.

The demand for flexible working in Scotland is huge; our 2023 research shows 82% of people in Scotland have or want flexible working. Many employers in Scotland expect to offer more flexibility, but the real challenge is doing this well and inclusively. We have a particular interest in ensuring that lower income workers and frontline workers are included in the flexible working conversation and are not left behind. This year, we also have a role to play in ensuring employers are prepared for the new flexible working legislation that will come into law later in the year or early in 2024.

During the pandemic, we witnessed a big change in behaviour around flexible working, in particular home working. However, there is still much work to be done to support employers to change their mindset for the long term. Currently 36% of workers in Scotland don't work flexibly, yet 60% say they'd like flex as they believe it would make a difference to their lives.

The biggest differentiator in whether or not someone can work flexibly is their income level. Only 51% of Scottish workers earning less than £20,000 a year work flexibly, compared with 80% of workers earning more than £50,000.

There continues to be a need to ensure that certain groups, in particular, women and lower income workers in frontline services, don't face a further penalty if the gap between those who have flex, and those who don't, widens. In our 2023 research we found 43% of women earning less than £20,000 to report having 'no access to flex'.

There is huge demand, and need, for flexible working from **people who are not currently working** and are looking for a job. In our 2023 research of 216 unemployed adults looking for work, 43% said flexibility and control over where, when and/or how much they work was the single most important factor in their job search. This is higher for women who are unemployed. This demonstrates that many people who are currently unemployed in Scotland really need a flexible job, otherwise they're simply not able to work. This is especially true for unemployed people with caring responsibilities, such as parents.

Seven in ten (71%) Scottish workers who use flexible working say that without it, their work and home life would suffer in some way. Flexible working is clearly a lifeline for many people in Scotland. Nearly a third of flexible workers say their mental health would be affected if they did not have flex (this is significantly higher for single parents and people who have a disability or long term health condition). Meanwhile 27% of people with a disability or long term health condition and 26% of mothers say they would have to stop working altogether if they couldn't work flexibly.

We also know employers that have a flexible working culture attract diverse talent, have happier people and increased productivity and profit; 71% of senior Scottish business leaders say flexible working has been good for their business and 69% think flexible working can boost Scotland's economy. Employers report lack of vision, applying flex to all roles and grappling with the complexities of hybrid working as the current challenges they are facing in embedding flex. There is a need for employers to have continued access to support, training, best practice and insight to support their journey to greater flexibility. For example - currently 4 in 10 employers do not offer any support or training for managers to help them embed flexible working.

3. Key Data

All stats quoted, unless otherwise stated, are from Flex for Life 2023 (www.flexibilityworks.org/flexible-working-research/flex-for-life-report-2023/), Flexibility Work's annual research which tracks flexible working in Scotland.

We asked 200+ people who are unemployed what having a job with flex would mean:

- 41% said - I could take a role with more hours and earn more money
 - 40% said - It would improve my mental health
 - 36% said - I'd be able to work when previously that's not been possible
 - 32% said - I'd be able to work without paying too much on travel
 - 30% said - I'd be able to work and manage family/caring responsibilities
 - 26% - said I'd be able to work and manage a disability or long-term health condition
 - 17% - said I could take on a more skilled or senior role.
 - 7% - said I could work without childcare costing too much (nb 10% of women, 2% men)
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- 91% of unemployed women said having some control over **where** they worked would make getting a job easier, as did 77% of unemployed men.
 - 92% of unemployed women said having some control over when they worked would make getting a job easier, as did 82% of men.
 - 89% of women and 74% of men said having some control over **how much** they worked would make it easier to take up employment.
 - 8% of unemployed Scottish adults looking for work say that **if they couldn't work flexibly** they wouldn't be able to work at all because childcare would cost too much (nb the sample size here is v small – 17 people)

This affects women much more than men
 - 10% of unemployed women
 - 4% of unemployed men

Lack of flex/visible flex is a barrier to employment:

- The *Scottish Flexible Jobs Index* finds that only 28% of advertised vacancies offer flexible working (Timewise)
- 54% of unemployed Scottish women and 34% of men say they wouldn't apply for a job if it didn't mention flexible working.
- 74% of unemployed Scottish women and 60% of men said it had been difficult to get information on the level of flexible working in most jobs they've considered applying for.
- 62% of unemployed Scottish women and 44% of unemployed Scottish men say they feel uncomfortable asking about flexible working in an interview, suggesting employers need to be more upfront about potential flex

The less you earn the less likely you are to work flexibly

51% of all Scottish workers earning less than £20,000 a year work flexibly, compared with 80% of workers earning more than £50,000.

Lower earners also miss out on financial savings, such as off peak travel and childcare because they are less likely to be able to work flexibly:

- 63% of people earning more than £50K regularly work from home v 24% of people earning less than £20K.
- 18% of higher earners are full time remote v 10% of workers earning less than £20K.
- 25% of people earning £50K+ can make informal amends to their work pattern v 9% of people earning under £20K
- 18% of people earning £50K+ compress their hours v 7% of people earning under £20K

Lack of flex/visible flex is a barrier to progression

- Nearly one in four (23%) Scottish workers 'definitely' or 'probably' wouldn't apply for a role if it didn't mention flexible working.

For many working parents flex is a life line. Losing flex would have a significant impact:

- 26% mothers say they'd have to **stop working completely**
- 28% of parents would have to **pay more for childcare**
- 26% would have to **rely more heavily on family and friends for childcare**
- 55% of single parents say their **mental health would suffer.**

Our data suggests women are more likely to leave the workforce if they can't work flexibly while fathers are more likely to find a childcare solution that will allow them to stay in work.

4. Case Studies

Chelsea's search for home working to allow her to earn and manage her agoraphobia

Chelsea Birkett is qualified as a criminal law paralegal and she's worked as a prison custody officer as well as a financial book-keeper.

But she's currently out of work, and she's been turned down for hundreds of roles in the last 16 months because she needs 100% home working to help her manage agoraphobia.

Chelsea, 30, who lives in Aberdeen with her daughters aged eight and three, said: "I had to leave my job with the prison service because of my mental health. I thought I had a chest infection because I was finding it so hard to breathe. But it turned out to be panic attacks because of agoraphobia.

"I'm receiving help, and I'm slowly getting better. I can manage a short walk now. But I still struggle leaving the house.

"I've applied for hundreds of roles but either I'm too qualified, not qualified enough, or employers want at least some presence in the office. Even when jobs are advertised as home working, I get told that I need to come into the office once or month, or for training. For me, that's just not possible at the moment.

"I've tried explaining my situation to recruiters. But even though I've always had excellent reviews for my work and I know I'm capable, I just get told time and again that unfortunately they'll have to take me off their list.

"It's so disheartening. And frustrating given that for so long things had to be 100% remote and companies still functioned fine.

"Ideally I'd work part-time hours around my girls. But I'd make a full-time role work if I could flex my hours and use my evenings when the girls are in bed.

"Having a job I could do from home would make a phenomenal difference financially to us as a family. It would help my mental health too, to have more purpose."

Chelsea completed a Women Returners programme in East Renfrewshire this summer. She's still looking for a job.

How flex is helping Liz stay in work, and work more hours

Liz Flight, 50, works 35 hours a week term time only for Flexible Childcare Services Scotland's nursery in Dundee.

Liz, who is an early years practitioner, lets her line manager know any shift preferences a week in advance, such as the fact she likes to start at 10am so she can walk her son to school first, and these are taken into account when the rota is prepared.

Liz said: "The flexibility I have is amazing. Without it, I just wouldn't be able to work, or I'd have to do fewer hours and that would impact how much I can earn. I love my job and the fact I can provide for my family as well as my husband.

“My son is only 10 so I like to be around for him in the mornings and make sure he gets in to school safely, then I have time to lock up and get to work. My husband starts early and finishes about 3.30pm, so he's home for school pick-up.

“I know lots of people who don't have the flexibility I have and it's such a shame because it can make a big difference to people's lives, especially in terms of helping parents of younger children get into work. I think some companies worry that if they give people more say over shifts, things will get out of hand. But the reality at my work is that the team is very flexible too. If the nursery needs me to cover a shift and I can do it, I will. The flexibility has to go both ways.”

Liz lives in Dundee with her husband and their 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son.