flexibilityworks



FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE
SERVICES SCOTLAND

Exploring parents' experiences of flexible working and flexible childcare in lower-income households

DECEMBER 2021



CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Background	5
Method	6
Findings	8
Discussions & Recommendations	21
Appendix	24

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This research explores working parents' experiences of flexible working and flexible childcare, focusing on those in lower income households

- Findings from a survey (N=21) and one to one interviews (N=4) indicated that flexible working is broadly defined by parents in lower income households. Informal flexibility facilitated by an understanding line manager is particularly valued for those employees whose role limits their use of other flexible working arrangements such as flexi-time and home working.

- A flexible childcare setting is vital for helping parents in lower income households navigate the ongoing demands of paid work and childcare. It allows parents with unpredictable or fluctuating working patterns to find childcare that suits their individual needs at the same time as minimising their childcare costs and maximising the time they spend with their children.

- Work flexibility and flexible childcare were key to helping parents in low income households, particularly women, remain in paid work after having children.

- Employers should focus on how they can better support employees whose work flexibility is limited due to the nature of their role, particularly those who work irregular shift patterns and who therefore experience additional challenges in organising childcare. This may include better communication and training for line managers to improve levels of understanding and support to this group of parents ensuring that it is embedded into organisational culture and attitudes. This may also include increasing employee awareness of the availability of flexible childcare settings and the help with childcare costs that may be available.





INTRODUCTION

In partnership with Flexible Childcare Services Scotland (FCSS), Flexibility Works (FW) aims to explore working parents' experiences of flexible working including the benefits and challenges they face. This research also aims to explore the theory that having both a flexible employer and flexible childcare leads to positive outcomes at both the work and family levels.

This is a small, exploratory project designed to engage workers in lower income families who use FCSS. Results from a short survey and one-to-one interviews provide evidence to inform future research projects and policy initiatives.

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BACKGROUND

The Flex for Life report (FW, 2021) found that almost a third of those earning under £20,000 per year said flexibility was not appropriate for their type of work compared to an average of 23% for all employees surveyed. Further, 28% of those in lower income households (defined as those with household income of under £20,000 per year) said flexible working had a negative impact on their earnings potential.

Joanna Wilson was commissioned by FW to conduct this research. Her PhD research found many informal (as opposed to formal/contractual) flexible working arrangements in employees in lower income job roles. This included informal agreements with an understanding line manager or colleagues to provide cover; those who were trusted/established employees appeared to have more chance of obtaining agreement to the flexibility they needed.

This research aims to build on these findings and asks:

- [x] What do workers in lower income jobs/households understand by the term "flexible working"?

- [x] What are the particular concerns and challenges they face in managing paid work and family care?

- [x] What differences exist between the flexible working they have versus what they want or need? For those who have the flexibility they desire, how has it affected them? For those who would like more flexibility, what do they perceive to be the barriers to this?

METHOD

A short survey instrument was created. This was informed by the above research questions and previous FW surveys - the survey questions are included in full in the appendix. Given the desire for real life stories to inform the evidence base, one-to-one interviews were chosen as the appropriate research method to complement the survey results. These offered the opportunity to provide insights into the survey findings, using in-depth life experiences from participants and enable the sharing of (potentially sensitive) experiences that other methods (such as focus groups) may not be able to achieve.
The survey was created on Survey Monkey by FW and the survey link was sent by FCSS to their users during the week commencing 12th July 2021 and closed on 9th September. As a thank you for giving their time the survey respondents were entered into a randomly-selected draw for a £20 shopping voucher.

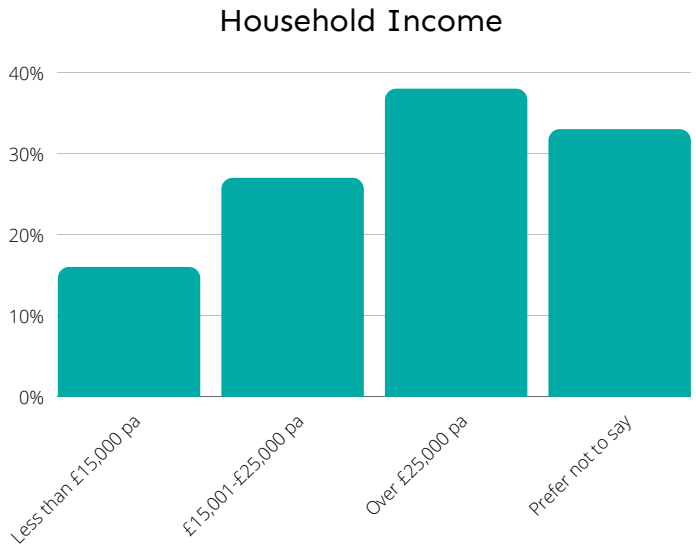
The interviews took place by phone between August and September 2021. These lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded on an audio device. A copy of the interview plan is included in the appendix. A participation information sheet was provided to each interview participant and a consent form was signed in advance of the interview. As a thank you for giving their time participants were emailed a £20 shopping voucher following the interview. Personally-identifying information is protected, participants have been given a pseudonym, a stock image and all quotes are anonymised.

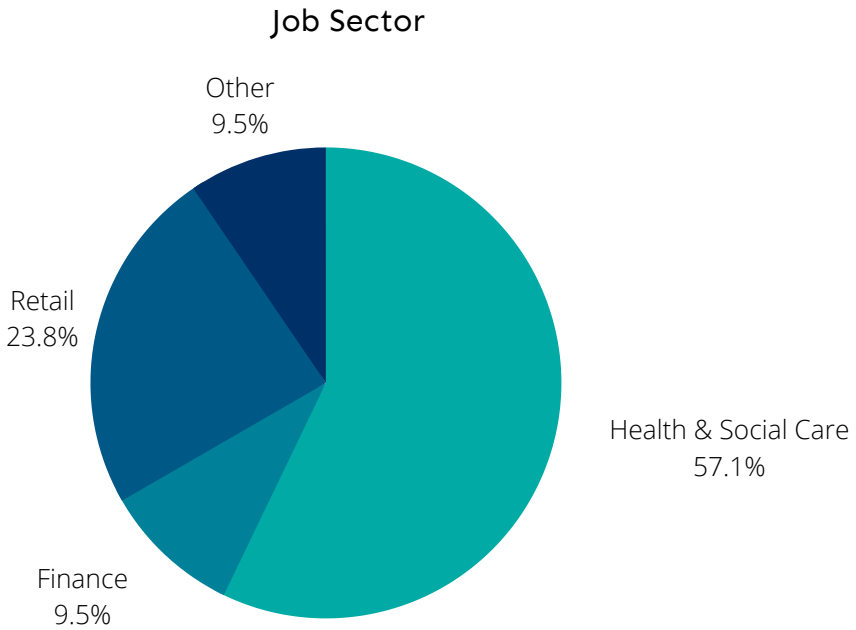
Parents in lower income households were targeted given the research interest in this group. Initially, the threshold was set for those with household incomes of below £25,000 per year however during the course of the research this threshold was increased to £35,000 given that a number of the survey respondents and interview participants coming forward had household income over this amount yet still identified as having low levels of income.

THE SURVEY SAMPLE

21 FCSS clients responded to the survey. Three respondents did not complete the demographic information at the end of the survey however of the 18 who answered, the sample was predominantly female (there was one male respondent) and 100% white. The respondents:

- ☑ Had a range of household income (see chart below)
- ☑ 67% indicated that they lived with a spouse or partner.
- ☑ 50% had one child under 16, 44% had two children (one respondent had three or more)
- ☑ Mostly worked in female dominated sectors; over 50% worked in health and social care (e.g. nurses, support workers) with almost 30% working in retail (e.g. shop assistants) (see pie chart below)





THE INTERVIEW SAMPLE

There were four interview participants, all were female and existing clients of FCSS. The following table includes a summary of each participant.

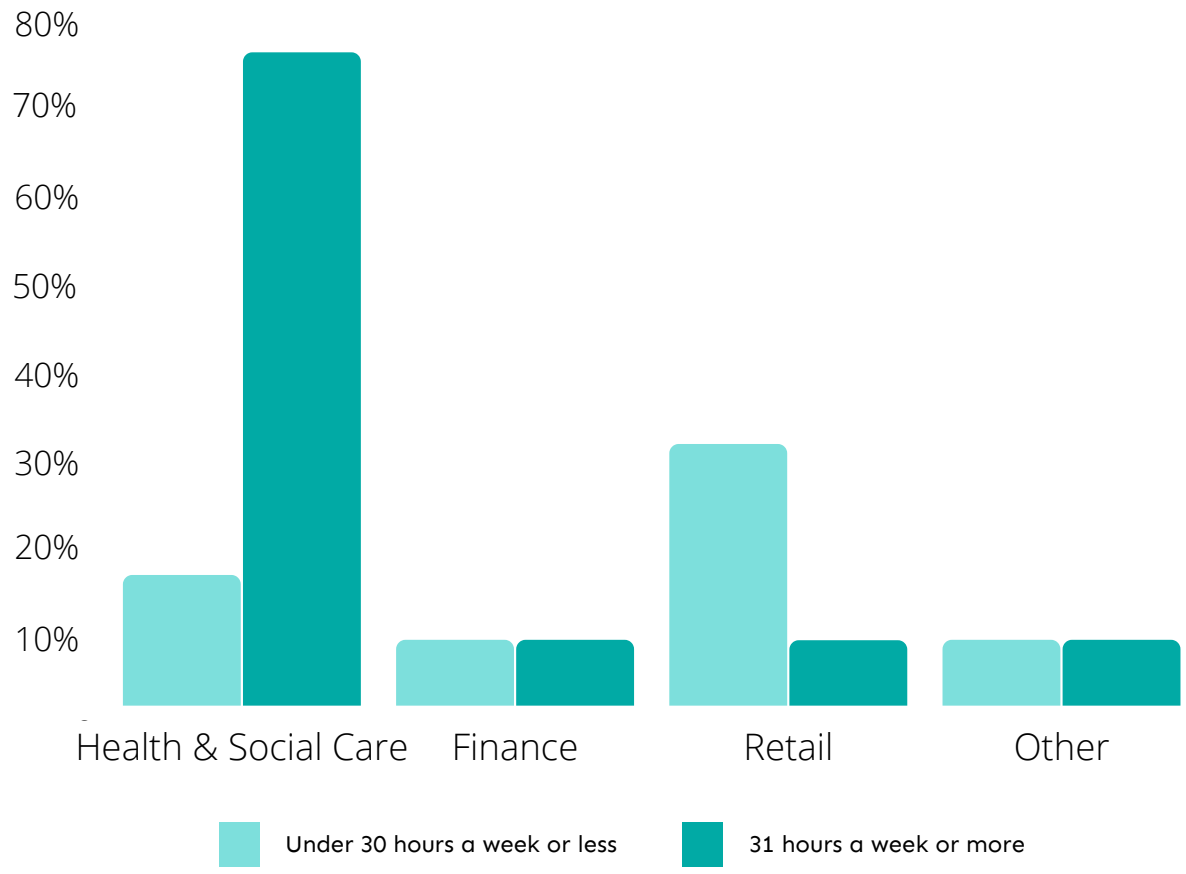
Pseudonym	Job Sector	No of Children	Cohabiting Partner	Full-time
Sandra	Health & Social Care	1	Yes	Yes
Evie	Health & Social Care	1	Yes	Yes
Hannah	Education	1	Yes	No

FINDINGS

Flexible working is broadly defined and informal flexibility is particularly valued

The following findings suggest that a broad interpretation of flexible working exists for both the parents surveyed and those interviewed. While it includes specific types of flexible working arrangements it also covers informal flexibility which is linked to having an understanding and supportive line manager or colleague who tries to accommodate needs when possible, even if on the face of it there is not great deal of scope for flexibility due to the nature of a job role. The interview participants indicated that they felt privileged when comparing their current employer to previous employers or to their partner's situation.

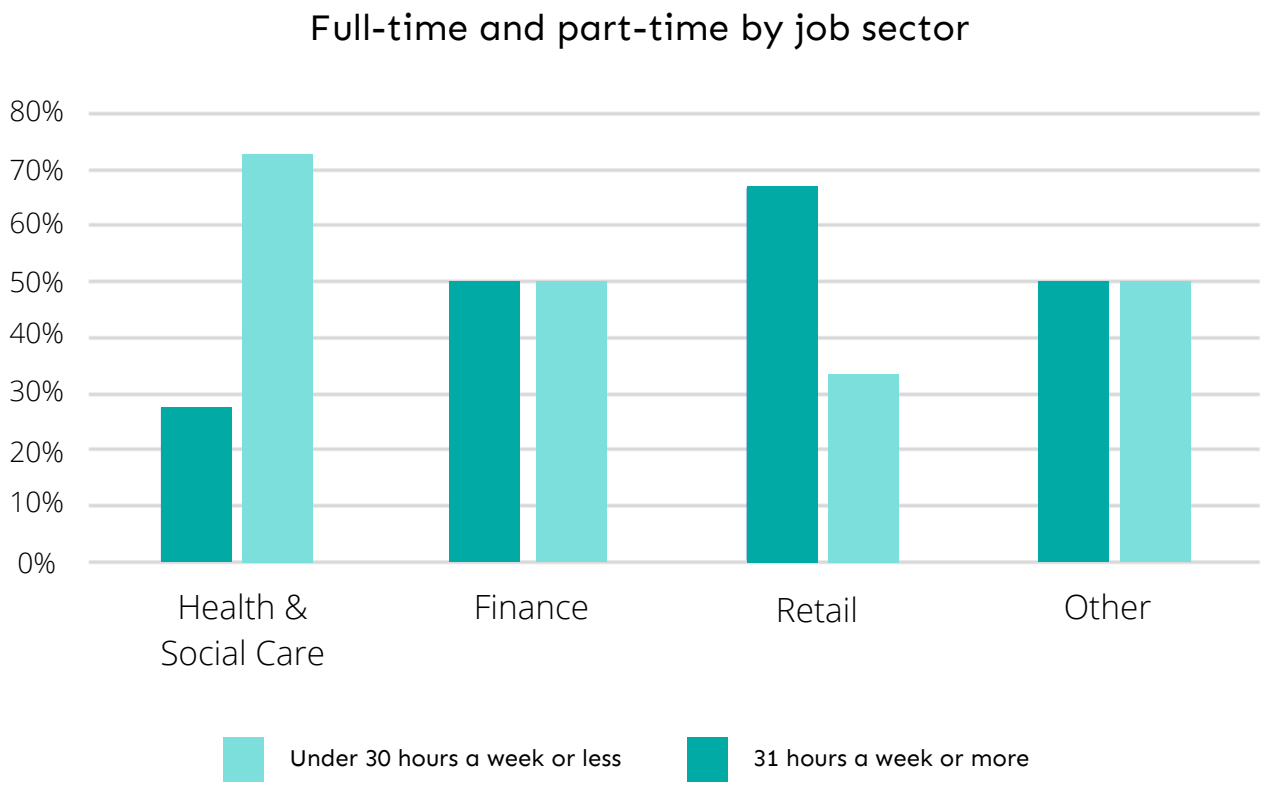
43% of the survey sample worked part-time, defined as 30 hours or fewer a week. There were some differences in the number of hours worked by job sector with those in health and social care in the sample more likely to work full-time hours and those working in retail more likely to work part-time (see chart below).



While nine respondents indicated at the start of the survey that they usually worked 30 hours a week or fewer, only five of these went on to answer that they used some form of flexible working arrangement in their main job. This suggests that part-time work itself may not always be seen as flexible working; even though these participants worked part-time hours they did not perceive that they had "some control over when, where and how long they work". There were similar patterns for those respondents who indicated that they did not work flexibly but went on to select "shift swapping".

There were a range of flexible working arrangements used by the survey respondents with the most popular being part-time and shift swaps/input to shift patterns. Only four respondents chose "none" from the list provided. Some respondents used more than one arrangement.

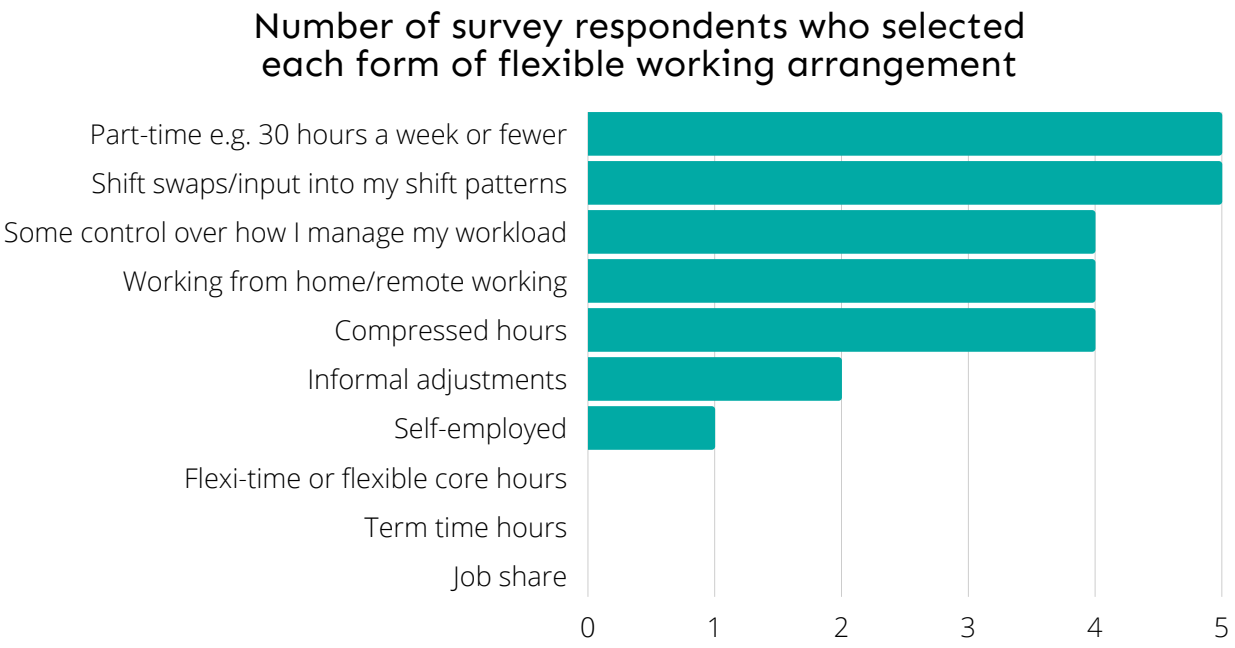
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The total number of respondents selecting each category are below (no respondents selected flexi-time, job share or term-time work):



Two interview participants used home working regularly and had flexible start and finish times when needed. Sandra was a manager in social care, she described an informal agreement with her employer to work at home when she was able to as well as flexible start and finish times if needed:



Sandra (pseudonym)

> I'm quite good in my role in that I can pretty much pick when I work...9 times out of 10 I can slip away...work around it...

Sandra also noted that she was "on call 24/7 so unless I'm on holiday my phone is never off". She regularly provided phone advice to colleagues in the evening or at weekends which indicated that while her employer allowed her flexibility she was also flexible towards them. Sandra recognised that her flexibility was specific to her manager role and she had been able to negotiate it as part of her job offer. Her colleagues did not work in the same way; due to the nature of their roles, they were on set shifts however Sandra described her organisation's approach as "very flexible...I have a lot of girls...they do set shifts or half shifts or permanent nights....they [her employer] are quite family-friendly, we are quite lucky in that sense that although it's a care industry job". This is interpreted as Sandra meaning that her line manager (who "has four kids of her own so she knows what's what") tried to be as flexible as possible in finding ways to suit the shift preferences of individual employees.

Beth worked in a finance role in the third sector, she was currently working part-time hours over three days with all work done from home (home working had been in place at her organisation since the start of the pandemic). Like Sandra her home working and flexi-time was on an informal basis; she described her organisation as "more like a family than a workplace" indicating that flexibility did not need a formal discussion or arrangement, no one tended to abuse the system and in return the employees were flexible towards the company, working at weekends or long hours if needed (the reciprocity shared with Sandra's account above).

In contrast, the other two participants did not have access to regular flexi-time or home working due to having to be present in the workplace during set shift patterns or employer opening hours. Evie, worked full-time (9am to 5pm) in the health and social care sector. Her working hours were dictated by her clinic's opening times however she noted instances where she worked past 5pm to finish her caseload or took work-related calls later in the evenings. Other than reduced hours work which she felt "would not be financially viable" for her, Evie had limited opportunities for flexibility as she needed to be present in the clinic each day during opening hours.

Despite this, Evie felt that she was lucky to have set hours "I'm in a privileged position in some respects because I'm 9-5 Monday to Friday, a lot of places don't have that…" which was linked to the predictability of her work suiting her as well as not working evenings or weekends. Evie also noted that "while there are some restrictions at work they [her employer] are friendly and pretty flexible when it comes to children…so they will try and accommodate for parental leave, carers' leave or annual leave so they are pretty good like that".

Hannah worked in early years education, she was on a two-week rota involving one week of early and one of later shifts. Hannah had set shift patterns, could not work from home and did not have access to flexible start and finishes however she indicated that informal flexibility was there when she needed it. She provided examples of where her line manager had helped organise a shift swap when her childcare arrangements had fallen through or had allowed her to leave early because there were enough other employees to "take care of things". Hannah attributed this support to her particular line manager:



Hannah
(pseudonym)

"depends on who your manager is…there is still the option to phone in sick …there was a high level of staff absence and then when the new manager came in the absences dropped, there wasn't as many…so I think that definitely had a lot to do with it…that they were able to get that extra support and understanding".

Parents' strong desire to be with their children was enabled by work flexibility

Work flexibility had a number of benefits and was most commonly linked in the survey to meaning that parents could care for their children and save money on childcare. Among the interview participants, there was a strong desire to be with their children which some had been able to make work in their current role or by finding a new role more suited to their family's needs. However, the survey showed that a number of respondents still sought more flexibility than they currently had with the reasons for not having it often linked to the nature of their work. Indeed, the two interview participants working full-time in the health and social care sector expressed a desire to reduce their hours. While they indicated that due to their financial situation they were not in a position to accept the corresponding reduction in pay they also referred to the current pressures in their sector (e.g. short-staffed) which presented an additional barrier to this.

The survey respondents who used flexible working indicated a number of benefits to them. As shown in the chart below, the most commonly selected benefits centred on childcare, both being able to care for their children and also to save money on childcare which tended to be selected by those who worked part-time, were able to shift swap or who had some informal flexibility. This is perhaps expected given that the sample was parents with nursery school-aged children.



Asked how working part-time (18 hrs per week over three days) and home working (all the time) suited her, Beth indicated that it was "absolutely perfect at the moment". For Beth working her hours over three days meant shorter working days and that she could fit in shopping/washing/cooking. In her words:



Beth
(pseudonym)

> "For me being a mum it is absolutely brilliant, nursery is just round the corner, I get in the car and within 2 minutes I am at nursery so in case anything happens … I can bring them home and carry on working, for a mum with very young children that is very important because if I will be working in the office sometimes it takes half an hour to get from centre if not longer to get back….working from home is brilliant.".

One point to note is that Beth did indicate she missed the social interaction from work and would ideally prefer to be in the office every 2 weeks or so (this is a theme which has consistently come out of research into flexible working in the pandemic but is not explored further in this report). Also touched on in both Beth and Sandra's accounts is that they both referred to working longer hours if needed and at weekends which was linked to reciprocal flexibility mentioned above. Again this is not explored in detail in this report but other research has found certain types of work flexibility are linked to longer hours and stress (the so-called "darker side of flexibility").

Furthermore, 60% of the survey respondents indicated that they were happy with their current flexible working arrangements which is a positive message. However, while all four interview participants indicated that they were relatively content with their own working pattern (whether that was via flexible working or via the way in which they had managed to organise their and their family's life around their paid work) their answers were more nuanced than the "Yes/No" answers offered by the survey. Indeed, some participants had changed jobs since having children and/or were planning changes in the future which were informed by their family's needs.

Both Sandra and Hannah had made changes to their jobs after having children indicating that their current roles suited their family life a lot better and were informed by their desire to spend more time with their children:



Sandra

> "I mean I did do shifts when E [son] was little and I hated it, I didn't like being away from E...when I don't see E ....when I was doing shifts I could go about 3 or 4 days without seeing him because he was still sleeping when I went to bed and still sleeping when I got home so he would go about 3 or 4 days and his behaviour...just went...off the radar, you know a huge increase in negative behaviour that we didn't want to see whereas in this role he's at least seeing me on a morning or a night and he knows he's seeing me those times...so it's a lot better, it suits us down to the ground".

Hannah had moved from working in the private sector to a similar role in the public sector following the end of her maternity leave. To her this meant more job security, higher pay, paid sick leave but also shift patterns that suited her better:



Hannah

> "It's one of the best things I did because I have more time at home with G [child]".

While Hannah indicated that her shifts worked for her at the moment she was already thinking ahead to when her child turned 3 and was eligible for funding to go to a school nursery; she had applied for a term-time post with her current employer with hours that were more aligned to the school day and which meant she could organise the childcare better.

Both Hannah and Sandra had changed to jobs which suited them better after having children. This suggests that the 60% of survey respondents who indicated that they were happy with their flexible working arrangements may include those who were given the flexibility they needed by their existing employer but also those who left jobs to seek more flexible opportunities with another employer. This is a common theme in past research and linked to the downgrading of careers for women.

Indeed, 40% of the survey respondents indicated that they would like to change their working arrangements (this group contained a mixture of those who already used one or more forms of flexible working and some who did not currently use any). The table below summarised the type of change they desired together with the perceived (main) barrier to getting this:

Job Sector	What they would like changed?	Main barriers to getting the flex
Health & Social Care	Later start times	It's not appropriate for my job role
Retail	For them to understand that having children and not having flexible hours is not good	My manager doesn't encourage it
Health & Social Care	More flexible hours	It's not appropriate for my job role
Health & Social Care	Family friendly shifts	It's not appropriate for my job role
Health & Social Care	More sociable hours	My organisation doesn't encourage it
Health & Social Care	The offer to reduce from 5 to 4 days pw	The arrangements aren't available for employees at my level.
Health & Social Care	I would go term time	It's not appropriate for my job role

It is noticeable that nearly all the respondents who said they would like more flexibility are in health and social care which is well-known for shift working, night working and a lack of flexi-time which was also reflected in the accounts of the two interview participants who worked in this sector. While Sandra had previously worked set shifts she had been promoted to a more senior and more flexible role. Evie however felt that options for her were currently limited ("I would love to be able to do condensed hours….but that's not an option… get a little bit more time off…but that's not going to happen"). She felt this was due to the nature of her role due to her need to be present in the workplace at set times but also that "it wasn't available from a staffing point because they are always short-staffed". Evie also indicated that in any event she was not in a position to reduce her hours due to the impact on her take-home salary, which was echoed by Sandra ("I'd love to be able to cut my hours as well but at this moment in time it's not an option").

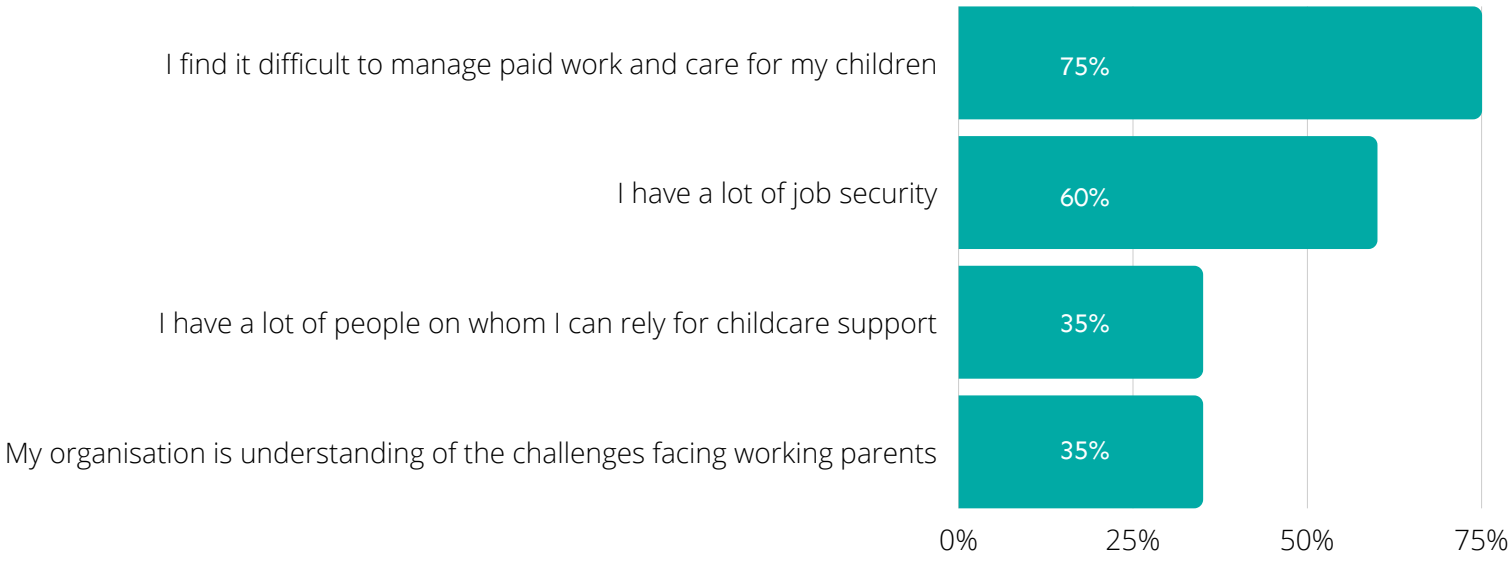
A flexible childcare setting is vital to helping parents navigate the ongoing demands of paid work and childcare

The survey results showed that three-quarters of respondents found it difficult to manage paid work and childcare and this was a common theme that emerged from the interviews. Challenges for the interview participants in combining work and family centred on the costs of childcare and navigating this around their working patterns and those of their partner. Having a flexible childcare setting as well as flexibility in their paid work clearly helped the participants navigate these challenges and in some cases they indicated that it meant they had been able to continue to participate in paid work after having children. However, it was still not easy for them; the day to day juggling, reacting to changes to their schedules or those of their partner and organising childcare around work was clearly demanding, leading to feelings of stress and exhaustion. The cost of childcare for children under 3 was also an ongoing concern, something to be "survived" financially until they qualified for funding.

The survey results (see chart below) indicated that the majority of respondents found it difficult to manage paid work and care for children and this appeared to be linked to levels of support, i.e. those who agreed it was difficult were also likely to disagree that they had a lot of people on whom they could rely on for childcare support.

It is encouraging that 60% of the respondents felt that they have a lot of job security however there were sectoral differences here; those in health and social care appeared more likely to say this and indeed this group had a number of respondents who worked for the NHS. Despite this job security there were however a number of respondents working in health and social care who disagreed with the statement that their organisation was understanding of the challenges facing working parents (only 35% of the sample agreed their organisation was understanding).

Levels of agreement to the following statements (strongly agree or agree)



In line with the survey results, all the interview participants indicated that they found it a challenge to manage paid work and care:



Hannah

"It is quite a nightmare trying to organise, that extra stress of childcare, I have it so regimented and organised that if one aspect were to slip, if somebody couldn't do it, everything then is up in the air...it is quite stressful but I like to be organised and have it all set out, and I'm lucky because there is a consistency with my shifts."



Evie (pseudonym)

"This is where the exhaustion comes in."



Sandra

"Even though I have the flexibility it is still difficult because I am on call a lot of the time...so for instance at weekends...if something major happens then I need to go in so that kind of means calling on family quite ...not often but too much than I'd like...I struggle more when F [partner] is on nightshift,...no way I can go into work...so many work things going on, that's the hard part. A lot of phone calls out of working hours, at least one a night and two to three at weekends."

As indicated by Sandra's quote above, the working pattern of her partner presented a challenge that was shared with the other participants (Hannah and Evie) who also had partners working shifts which involved evening work, night shifts and weekend work. At times this worked because it meant their partner could look after their child/ren when they were working and other times it was a source of frustration, particularly when the shifts were unpredictable or communicated at short notice. Hannah's partner was on a zero hours contract and tended to work on average around 37 hours each week:


Hannah

> "It is something he has spoken to his work about to try and get his rota in advance but they say they can't and he's anxious not to push that in case they don't give him shifts...they don't take into account childcare...his shifts are very unpredictable and he can work Monday through to Sunday, it's different every week, some weeks it's days, some weeks it's nights, there is no consistency whatsoever to his work, he gets a rota usually on a Friday for the following week starting on Monday...with it being a zero hour contract....it's about flexibility for them [partner's employer]. As a company they don't want too many people on the rota....an advantage would be R [Hannah's partner] having a finish time...we can't plan or organise anything,...[childcare] very much has to be organised around my schedule than around his schedule...it leaves a lot of uncertainty".

Hannah's partner had recently decided to change role and was starting a new job in a few months' time; this was a Monday to Friday role with a possibility to compress his working week into Mon-Thurs, which she indicated "will be better all round for our family".

Hannah's point that childcare had to be organised around her schedule was shared by Sandra and Beth's accounts who appeared to be the primary carer for their children and had made changes to their paid work to accommodate this rather than their male partners making changes (although they indicated that their partners were very much involved with the childcare whenever they could). Indeed, these participants' partners had little or no flexibility. Beth's partner worked full-time as a skilled labourer and was out of the house from 7-5pm five days week. In her view her partner's employer "are not flexible at all ...it is a family-run company but they are very strict... for the doctor or dentist he has to use annual leave". Asked whether her partner would be able to take time off at short notice to care for the children if they were sick Beth responded that her partner would have to use annual leave or take unpaid leave but "they wouldn't be happy about it...because he is a man...they would expect a woman to take time off to look after kids". It was Beth's flexibility that she felt allowed her to continue to work since having children:



Beth

"I couldn't work....if had a very strict workplace I would have to leave my job and become a full-time mum....I don't want to give up my professional life altogether...don't want to be only a mum"

Evie and her partner organised their paid work hours so that most of the time at least one of them could be with their child. Her partner worked evening shifts only and looked after their child during the day (they used FCSS for a short period when the end of Evie's shift overlapped with the start of her partner's shift). Evie was positive about her partner's involvement with their child and the saving they made on childcare costs however she highlighted a lack of family time and a desire to change this:



Evie

"at the moment we are kind of between a rock and a hard place I feel, I think when you reach the age of 3, because we would be entitled to extra hours of funding, that might be able to help us more because we can have a bit of flexibility and my husband could say "look, I'll just work during the day" a bit more so we can have maybe a bit more evening time or whatever, maybe sit down and have a family meal together and things like that...it's very rare that it's happening...his works flexibility is not good at all, not that accommodating...ideally we would be on the same shift pattern, I know it would cost more money but for family time...that would be better because we really need to plan things very carefully, try and get annual leave or whatever to try and do something a bit more as a family"

Evie's comments about the funding available for childcare when her child turned 3 shared a common theme with Sandra and Beth who both commented on the high costs of childcare when their children were under 3 (a time when they indicated that no funding was available to them and they did not have family on which they were able to call for help with childcare):



Sandra

"I struggled for the first couple of years because I had to pay for E's [son] nursery ...I went back to work when E was 8 months old and at one point we were questioning whether it was even possible because it was so expensive...I know they are bringing in this childcare for 2 year olds but I think it needs to go younger, it's kind of put us off having another child to the point we are questioning whether we can because of childcare costs."

Indeed, only 35% of the survey respondents agreed with the statement "I have a lot of people on whom I can rely for childcare support" indicating that a number of them may have/have had similar challenges to Sandra. Even for those who did have a family support network such as Hannah, keeping childcare costs to a minimum was still very important. Hannah described why she chose FCSS:



Hannah

"I explored a lot of different options, we looked at a childminder - she was flexible with the hours but not the days...same with nurseries, it never tied in the right time with my work and it wouldn't work for the fornightly basis of my rota...FCSS was a saving grace for us...it's worked out perfect, with regard to having the childcare changing every week and saving us money...the only other alternative would be to book him in full days but we would be paying for the full day but not using it so money-wise we would be spending a lot more..."

Like Hannah the other interview participants were very positive about the flexible nursery setting provided by FCSS which also was echoed the survey open text responses:



Beth

"I like the idea that I can book the children in even for 2 hours because...I don't have a network of support from other family members where I can just drop the kids off there if I need to go to the doctors for example, so the flexible hours were very important".



Sandra

"..didn't want a childminder because it's not the same every week. If F [partner] is on an early shift then he can pick him up, there is a whole week where I don't need a nursery or a childminder but a childminder would mean I took up a space and would have to pay every week....so it was just to try and save a little bit of money was why we went for FCSS..."



Evie

"And it's to save a bit of money...ideally M [son] would be in nursery a little bit longer to get more from it but the way it works it's financially better... we'd looked a few place but with the fact that's its hourly and because F [partner] changes shifts each week, it's a little bit easier... everywhere else we were looking at was about £1000 a month....there would be no point my husband working to be honest."

Anonymous

"If it wasn't for FCSS I don't know what I would have done...all employers need to be more flexible because not everyone has a nursery they can rely on like I have." (a survey respondent who had no work flexibility and indicated that their employer was not understanding of the challenges facing working parents)

KEY MESSAGES FROM SURVEY & INTERVIEWS

Predictability of shifts helps with their work/life balance

having a partner whose role offered more flex would help them a lot

The cost of childcare is very inhibitive - may impact decision of more children in future

Even with regimental planning, lack of flex in the workplace can still leave childcare up in the air

Flexibility of hours vs days is very important for childcare and saves families money compared to booking full days they don't need

Having both flexible working and flexible childcare is deemed very important to be able to manage both work and childcare

Part time working is not always associated as being flexible working

Access to even small amounts of informal flexibility can reduce stress

KEY MESSAGES FROM SURVEY & INTERVIEWS

A lot of the flexibility on offer depends on the individual line manager

Being away from children for days at a time (i.e via certain shift patterns) can have a detrimental effect on children's behaviour and therefore the quality of family life

Many people feel that flexible working is not appropriate for their job role

DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

There was a strong message around the need for employers to be understanding and supportive to employees managing paid work and childcare and the importance of line managers in this regard. This was particularly the case where the nature of an employee's role did not offer a lot of opportunity for flexi-time or home working and where reduced hours options were not an option for employees due to the impact on their take-home pay. For these employees, it appears that informal flexibility was particularly valued and involved only small changes such as allowing shift swapping which made a big difference to their lives. Predictability was also valued such as having shift patterns communicated enough in advance to enable childcare to be organised. This suggests that what policies or interventions may define as flexible working is not necessarily consistent with what employees interpret as an employer being flexible.

Parents' flexibility needs are driven by a desire to spend time with their children and these needs change alongside those of their children. Anticipating such needs is key for employers to ensure retention of employees who are parents, particularly women. Indeed, only a minority of the parents surveyed agreed that their organisation is understanding of the challenges they face indicating that there is work to be done in this area.
Employers may wish to:

- ☑ Include a broader definition of flexibility in their policies which includes informal flexibility and talk about what is important to frontline workers i.e. predictability of shifts, self-rostering, line managers being aware of their team's personal circumstances, regular shifts etc
- ☑ Give examples of what informal flexibility might look like in a particular role focusing on examples at more junior levels of employees
- ☑ Focus on ensuring a consistent message is given in communications between line managers and employees about what is and is not possible within a role.
- ☑ Focus on encouraging flexibility for all workers, particularly men to level the playing field

It is clear that a flexible childcare setting provides a number of benefits

It allows parents with unpredictable or fluctuating working patterns to find childcare that suits their individual needs at the same time as minimising their childcare costs (a key consideration for working parents in lower income households) and maximising the time they spend with their children. Along with workplace flexibility, flexible childcare was an important part of enabling parents, particularly women, to continue to participate in paid work after having children. Participants indicated that they had tended to hear about FCSS by word of mouth from other parents or internet search engines; employers with shift workers may wish to actively promote the availability of this type of childcare setting to their employees.

It is noteworthy that the viewpoint represented by this research is overwhelmingly from the mother's perspective. These women tended to work in female-dominated roles and had flexibility and/or supportive line managers who were understanding of the challenges they faced because of their own parental experiences. It is clear from the interview participants' accounts that their male partners did not have such a flexible experience; they were in roles that were not understanding of the issues facing parents as well as there being some indication that in male-dominated environments the situation was more difficult. This is in line with previous research and with expectations. It is notoriously difficult in this type of research to obtain a male viewpoint or that of an employer who has perhaps not yet bought into the case for family-friendly working. To progress the policy aim of flexible working for all employees it is these types of employers and employees on which future research must focus to identify the barriers that exist and ways in which to address them. A sectoral focus may be worthwhile for example, identifying those sectors or occupations which tend to be more male-dominated, those which have lower levels of flexible working or those with high levels of shift work (e.g. health care, the protective services, retail and transport-related occupations).

NOTES & LIMITATIONS

This is a small, exploratory project only. Generalisations cannot be made outside of the survey sample and interviews however the results offer insights that will help inform larger projects in this area. Future research may wish to seek the view of male parents but also single parents who did not feature in the interview sample. The difficulties in recruiting parents for the interviews despite the voucher incentive highlights issues with availability which may be compounded for single parents and also those working in inflexible jobs. Future research into this group of parents may also wish to look more closely at the lowest quintile of household income in different areas of Scotland to identify the most appropriate/accurate threshold (as highlighted earlier in the report this threshold was initially set at £25,000 pa but increased to £35,000). As one participant pointed out, parents earning less than a certain amount/in receipt of certain benefits would qualify for free council-provided childcare from when their child turned two and would not necessarily be using FCSS.

The recent literature in this area of flexible working has not been reviewed in detail for the purposes of this report however this may provide useful background to inform future projects.

Savings on childcare costs were a key issue for the interview participants and the funding available when their child turned 3 was strongly welcomed. However, the childcare support provided to these parents and their children before the age of 3 is lacking and indeed a range of other research has highlighted a policy gap in this area. While a flexible childcare setting and workplace flexibility go some way to addressing these working parents' needs, the cost of childcare before the age of 3 is seen to be prohibitive and it is clear that parents in similar positions (more often than not women in a primary carer role) are at risk of leaving paid work in their child's early years as a result.

APPENDIX

1. Online survey question wording
2. Semi-structured interview guide

1. Survey Question Wording

What is your job title? (If you have more than one job please answer this question for your main job only.)

Please include a brief description of your duties in your main job.

Approximately how many hours, in general, do you spend in paid work (include all paid jobs including main and second job) each week?

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

- I find it difficult to manage paid work and care for my children
- I have a lot of people on whom I can rely for childcare support, e.g. grandparents, friends, after school clubs
- I work for/with an organisation who is understanding of the challenges facing working parents
- I have a lot of job security i.e. I am not worried about losing my job

Do you currently use some form of flexible working arrangement in your main job? Flexible working generally means having some control over when, where and how long you work. It can be informal or formal (in your contract) or a mix of both.

Please select which of the following 'flexible work arrangements' you currently use (please tick all that apply):

- Part-time e.g 30 hours a week or fewer
- Shift swaps/input to my shift patterns
- Some control over how I manage my workload every week (i.e. a mix of when or where I work)
- Informal adjustments to daily working times (e.g. sometimes leaving work early then making time up)
- Working from home/ remote working (sometimes or often)
- Flexi-time or flexible core hours (working a set number of hours, some of which are at set times in the day but with a choice of start/finish times)
- Term time hours (only working during school term time)
- Compressed hours (i.e working full time hours over 4 days or 4 days over 3 etc)
- Job share
- None

In what ways do the above flexible working arrangements benefit you (please tick all that apply)?

- I can look after my children
- I can care for an adult who is elderly, sick or has a disability
- I can take on additional work/ earn more money
- It helps me to save money on childcare
- It helps me to save money on travel
- I can plan my life better i.e. have certainty over time I will have at home
- I am more productive at work
- I am happier
- I am healthier
- I have more quality time with my friends and family
- N/A- I do not have access to flexible working
- Other (please specify)

Would you like to change anything about your current flexible working arrangements?

What do you believe is the main reason why you do not have the work arrangements that you would like (select only one)?

Do you have any final comments, questions, ideas or concerns about your experiences of balancing paid work and childcare that you haven't had a chance to share above?

What is your sex?

Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?

What is your ethnicity?

Do you live with a spouse or partner

How many children aged 16 or under live in your household?

What is your household's total annual income from all sources before tax (i.e. including your earnings and those of any spouse/partner plus any other income received such as benefits, tax credits)?

2. Semi-structured interview guide
Be guided by the participant but aim to cover:

Introductions	• Explain structure of interview and aims of the research • Check how much time they have available • Consent to record and transcribe – check they have signed and will return the consent form. • Answer any questions. • Have loose structure but plan to treat as a conversation and be steered by them while keeping to the following themes. • Ask them to be as open as possible but can refuse to answer
Opener Questions	• Ask for a little summary of their work and family life, such as: • Age of children, number of children, who else in the household • Type of job or jobs, hours worked, how long in job. • Could ask about education or job of partner (if exists)
Flexibility	• Ask them to describe a typical working day (if there is a typical one!) • How do they work? E.g. during the day, evenings, weekends, set hours? • What types of flex do they use if any? • How does it help them? • What challenges to they have? • Their org's approach to helping employees balance family and work • Would they like things to be different – barriers If have time might explore Covid context and anything specific to them – were they on furlough, how did they manage with isolation, if any?
Childcare	• Who looks after the children while you are at work? • What about the holidays/sick days/isolation periods, how do you cover these? • How do you find managing work and childcare? • Do you have any other caring responsibilities? • Affordability of childcare • Availability of childcare
Support needed/the future	• What kind of support would help you get what you need? • How will things change in the future/will your needs change too?
Closing comments	• Anything else relevant that we have not covered but you would like to add? • FW will send the M&S voucher, ok to pass on your email?

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