

Optimism and realism at event to celebrate flexible working progress

1 year ago



Hopefulness was mixed with pragmatism at an event held at Westminster on the 29 April that marked the huge step forward made by recent changes to legislation on flexible working. The event, hosted by Yasmin Qureshi MP, was sponsored by the University of Plymouth's Dr Jasmine Kelland who partnered with Working Families, the national charity for working parents and carers.

Some of the key stats that came up during the event were:

- More dads work part-time post-pandemic (11% of fathers) – but overall, mums still work more part-time, the least flexible 'flex' as work has to fit around caring commitments (37% of mothers) (WFI 2022).
- There is still a lack of access to flex amongst those who need it. Two thirds of lower-income working parents who don't currently have a flexible working arrangement would like one (WFI 2023).
- Parents who are on a lower income are twice as likely to have an informal flexible working request rejected than the average parents (WFI 2023).
- Hybrid workers are more likely to be male, higher earners and London-based (WFI 2022).
- Recent global Deloitte survey (3,000) found that nearly 4 in 10 women with hybrid work arrangements reported experiencing exclusion from meetings, decisions, or informal interactions.
- Two million people left jobs in the past year due to lack of flexibility, and four million have changed profession or career to gain more flexibility (CIPD)
- Those who work in roles that are location-based make up 60% of the working population (CIPD)

Panellists praised the new legislation, which sees requesting flexible working as a day one right. All agreed it will help to normalise flexible working, will can contribute to achieving more equal parenting, closing the

gender pay gap and addressing the skills shortage, as well as helping utilise a full workforce which would potentially add £150 billion to the economy by 2030.

Whilst the panel, made up of Yasmin Qureshi, Dr Jasmine Kelland, Claire McCartney, Senior Policy Adviser at CIPD and Jane van Zyl, CEO at Working Families, all saw the legislation as marking a leap forward, the potential to society is currently being stifled by structural and cultural barriers. More work is needed, it was acknowledged, to address the stigma around working flexibly, especially towards men who experience a 'fatherhood forfeit', as Dr Kelland's research revealed, that sees them struggle to get the flexibility they need against a backdrop of cultural misconceptions and social mistreatment masquerading as banter. Women also suffer from this stigma, with the view that part-time work (most often done by women) was not as highly valued, and part-time workers a fifth as likely to be promoted. Panellists agreed that key to this work is cultural acceptance and an increase in the supply of flexible jobs, which could be progressed if flexible working became the default in the UK.

The consensus in the room was that there was much work to be done if we are to achieve equality of opportunity through flexibility. And with Working Families seeing a rise in queries about in-work benefits, and two thirds of lower-income working parents who don't currently have a flexible working arrangement wanting one, it is as important as ever. But, as the CIPD highlighted, with people leaving jobs or changing career in their millions to get the flexibility they need, it is something that businesses need to take note of too.

The panel acknowledged that the legislation, whilst sending an important signal of the importance of flexible working, cannot be seen as a silver bullet. They shared their priorities, alongside a framework of affordable childcare, from role models and empowering line managers to a Challenge Fund to help SMEs trial and track progress to help understand what works in this group with unique challenges, to ensure not only that flex is a success, but that it's available to all.

Dr Jasmine Kelland explained: "It was a great opportunity to discuss the future of flexible working with like-minded individuals and consider the next steps with regards to policy and organisational actions. Whilst we have come so far in this space, further action is needed to increase access to flexible working for all, specifically with regard to equality access between parents and increasing access for fathers, which will have huge dividends with regard to gender equality more broadly."

Jane van Zyl said: "This has been a wonderful opportunity to come together to celebrate how far flexible working has come, thanks to the hard work by change makers, charities and others. Whilst we recognise there is work to be done before we can say flexible working is working for everyone, today's event is evidence of the hope and dedication to make sure families, the economy, and employers feel the benefit of flex in the future."