

Flexible working roundtable in Parliament – Culture is the last barrier, say leading experts from industry and research

7 months ago



Wednesday 16 July, [Peter Dowd MP](#) hosted a roundtable in Parliament on flexible working. Attending the session, convened by the [Policy Liaison Group](#) on Workplace Wellbeing, were Baroness Lister and a wide range of experts, employers, and campaigners. There was strong consensus that flexible working must not be viewed as a perk. It is central to how we design and lead workplace reform, benefiting both employees and employers, society and the economy.

The UK continues to work some of the longest hours in Europe, yet productivity remains sluggish. Participants argued that closing this gap requires a shift in mindset: from valuing time to valuing outcomes. Flexible working, when done well, can help people perform at their best. Engineering a culture change by building trust is the key factor.

Many managers still struggle to lead teams they don't see face-to-face daily, yet evidence shows that autonomy and flexibility can strengthen performance, not weaken it. Giving employees greater agency is proven to raise wellbeing, retention and output. However, speakers warned that cultural resistance remains strong. Too many decisions are still shaped by legacy habits or discomfort with change.

Meanwhile, flexible working is increasingly viewed by employees as essential. Policy Liaison Group Chair, Gethin Nadin said:

"Flexible working options have, for the first time in two decades, outstripped pay as the number one thing employees look for in a new job. This is a significant change not just in the workplace, but how British people wish to live their lives" (see quote in full below).

Experts stressed that implementation is just as important as intent. Without clear frameworks and confident managers, flexible work can stall or create unintended consequences, like work intensification and loneliness, leading to poorer mental health, not better.

Leadership featured prominently in the discussion, viewed as the missing link in making flexible working work. Too often, it is treated as a change in scheduling rather than a deeper shift in mindset. Ensuring its success depends on equipping managers to lead differently, with the skills to support autonomy, focus on outcomes, and adapt team structures accordingly.

The business case is clear. Data from the 4 Day Week Campaign's pilot showed that staff turnover dropped by 57%. 89% of participating companies chose to retain the model long-term. When employees feel they are working more effectively, it builds trust within teams, and that trust, in turn, contributes to stronger business outcomes (see James Reeves' quote below).

Across sectors, participants agreed that flexible working needs to reflect operational realities. But the goal remains consistent: to support employees in delivering value through higher productivity and wellbeing.

Comments from speakers

Peter Dowd – Labour MP for Bootle

"My aim in tabling the amendment was simple: to get the debate about the four-day week moving. We know better working conditions lead to lower absenteeism, greater resilience in the workforce and stronger productivity. With ongoing changes in how we work, including the impact of artificial intelligence, a shorter working week isn't a radical idea. It's an inevitable next step, and we need to plan for it properly."

See the [*amendment paper*](#) (p21) of the *Employment Rights Bill* for Peter Dowd MP's amendment.

Baroness Lister of Burtsett

"Much of the discussion is rightly focused on a four-day week, but we should also be thinking about different models of shorter working time. For many women, particularly those with caring responsibilities, a shorter working day might be more beneficial than a shorter working week."

Dr Gemma Dale – Senior Lecturer, Liverpool Business School

"Flexible work has such power to support wellbeing, inclusion and diversity, but only if we implement it well. That means training managers, supporting people through trial periods, changing systems and ways of working. Without that, we risk unintended consequences like work intensification or isolation. The more autonomy we can give people, the better that is likely to be for motivation, engagement, productivity and health. It's not just about time, it's about how we design work."

Roopa Nagori – Senior Lecturer, Coventry University

"If we want flexible working to succeed, we need to train managers to lead differently. Too often, flexible working is seen as just a change in hours, but it's a change in mindset. Managers need to move away from measuring performance by attendance and learn to support autonomy and value outcomes. Leadership is the missing link."

Gethin Nadin – Chair, Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing

“More than 80% of UK employees say if their employer removed flexible working options, they would look for a new job. They want more flexibility, not less. Flexible working options have, for the first time in two decades, outstripped pay as the number one thing employees look for in a new job. This is a significant change not just in the workplace, but how British people wish to live their lives.

This profound impact of more flexible working is unlocking tens of billions of pounds for the UK economy by bringing more people into, and back into work, improving public health, particularly among parents, reducing levels of burnout, reducing sickness, and decreasing absence levels.”

James Reeves – Campaign Coordinator, 4 Day Week Campaign

“We now have extensive data showing that four-day week models can deliver real benefits to people and businesses. In our largest pilot, staff turnover dropped by 57%, reported levels of anxiety, fatigue and sleep issues decreased, mental health improved, and 89% of companies chose to continue. In our latest pilot, this grew to 100%. This isn’t about ideology, it’s about results. Giving people more control over their time improves focus, engagement and, ultimately, business outcomes.”

NB: The 4 Day Week Foundation is running the UK’s third National 4 Day Week Pilot in September. Interested companies should contact info@4dayweek.co.uk to find out more.

Previous roundtables of the Policy Liaison Group

- [Women’s wellbeing and health in the workplace with Dr Beccy Cooper MP — July 2025](#)
- [Mental health in the workplace — April 2025](#)