



**Building  
back better  
for working  
parents**

**#FlexTheUK campaign briefing**



supported by our  
campaign partner:



# Executive summary



**Over the long months of the pandemic, working parents have held a uniquely challenging role: trying to meet the demands of their jobs or find suitable work while caring for children, homeschooling and managing regularly changing restrictions and guidance for their family.**

Now the relaxing of those final restrictions is in sight, we wanted to capture how the UK's 13 million working parents are feeling about their experiences of work and family life over recent months, what their concerns are as we move into the 'new normal', and their thoughts on the future of work. What we uncovered was an extremely mixed experience throughout the pandemic, and a strong sense of concern from many parents about the stability of their jobs and the impact on their family life when restrictions are finally lifted.

Our briefing, based on a May 2021 YouGov survey with 1,043 parents of children aged 18 and under, of which 839 have been working during the pandemic highlights how:

- The experience of flexible working for parents over the pandemic varied significantly by socio-economic status, education, and gender.
- One in five (19%) parents reported that they had no support from their employer to help them manage childcare at all.
- Parents who had access to flexible work through the pandemic saw benefits for their family life, reporting more quality time with their children (61%).
- Although the majority of working parents, particularly women, said that caring responsibilities were not shared more equally over the pandemic, a notable minority (40%) did report a more equal balance.
- 50% of parents we surveyed are concerned that a return to less flexible working, as restrictions are lifted, will have a negative effect on their family life.

- After having to manage childcare alongside work throughout the pandemic, nearly a third of working parents (29%) say they are worried that their caring responsibilities will make them more vulnerable to redundancy when the furlough scheme ends.
- Despite current concerns, most parents are confident that flexible working will become the norm in the future (62%).
- Parents overwhelmingly want the government to intervene to create more flexible jobs (77%), and for employers to use their own initiative to do so (84%) - and would consider jobs advertised as flexible more attractive when looking for work in the future (69%).

There are clear actions that employers and governments can take as we 'build back better' from the pandemic to make sure that the positives emerging from this challenging time are built on, not discarded. Based on our key findings, we share practical recommendations for government and employers that would transform the world of work for millions of working parents.

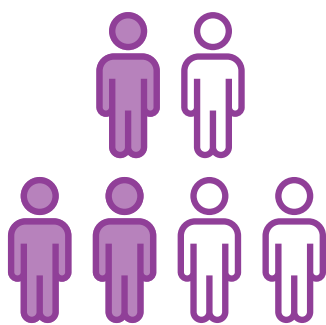
**When we talk about 'flexible working' it's really important to note that we are not just talking about remote working or working from home – we are talking about flexing hours, part time work and job sharing too.**



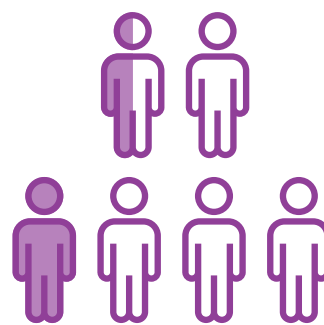


# Access to flexible working during the pandemic

**For half of parents, the pandemic did not alter existing working arrangements (50%). But a substantial number of parents had access to flexible working during the pandemic who did not have access to it previously (43%). And, amongst those parents, there is a striking class gap: whilst 51% of middle-class parents worked flexibly during the pandemic (who previously did not) only 30% of working-class parents did.<sup>1</sup>**



**51% of middle-class parents worked flexibly**



**30% of working-class parents worked flexibly**

This is no surprise: it is a product of wider inequalities relating to educational attainment and employment. Access to flexible working has traditionally been associated with knowledge-based roles, often based in offices, that have been dominated by middle class people.

**Most parents whose employer allowed more flexibility in how and when they worked during the pandemic felt that it enhanced their work-life balance (53%).** Although, again, the experience of flexible working varied considerably according to socio-economic status, with the benefits being felt more strongly by middle class parents. 62% of middle-class parents achieved a better balance between work and family life as a result of working more flexibly, whereas only 39% of working-class parents did. This has implications for employers: highlighting the importance of monitoring flexible working arrangements to ensure that employees have equal access to them.

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<sup>1</sup> NRS Social Grades was used as the form of social classification in the YouGov survey.

**My employer allowing more flexibility in how and when I worked during the pandemic gave me a better balance between my work life and time with my family:**

**53%**

**All parents agree**

**38%**

**All parents disagree**

**62%**

**Middle class parents agree**

**39%**

**Working class parents agree**

Parents based in London were more likely to observe a relationship between flexible working and improved work-life balance than any other region (57% versus 33% in Midlands), signalling the effect of a strong knowledge-based economy in the capital on the experience of work.



**In our recent employee survey, 40% of respondents identified as being parents or having caring responsibilities. They told us overwhelmingly that they want the flexibility to manage where and when they work. We've listened and have responded by producing a set of flexible working principles. They combine some of the positive adaptations we've made over the last 15 months and the good habits which have allowed us to collaborate and perform so well in the past. We're encouraging colleagues right across the business to use the next few months to experiment with different working patterns: to find what works for them; to show us what they want their working life to be like in the future; and to use these new flexibilities to enable our teams to perform at their very best.**

- David Allen, Chief Executive of Wates Group, campaign partner for #FlexTheUK



# Family life and flexible working during the pandemic and moving beyond it

**During the pandemic, most working parents felt supported by their employer to manage their childcare arrangements.** For instance, 29% were offered the opportunity to change hours and working pattern to accommodate caring and home-schooling responsibilities. However, one in five (19%) of parents say that they did not receive any support from their employer to manage the challenges of being a parent during the pandemic.

**Flexible working was widely seen to have a positive impact on family life. Most working parents who had access to flexible working during the pandemic felt that it resulted in more quality time being spent with their child/children (61% versus 29%),** and this experience was shared across social classes. Women reported enjoying slightly more quality time with their children during the pandemic than men (66% versus 56%).

During the pandemic  
I enjoyed more  
quality time with my  
child(ren)

61%

All parents  
agree

29%

All parents  
disagree

66%

Women agree

56%

Men agree

**In general, many parents are worried about what will happen when restrictions are lifted should we move back to less flexible ways of working.** The majority of parents said they were concerned that less flexible ways of working would have a negative impact on family life (50% versus 32%). But, as the main beneficiaries of flexible working, middle-class parents were more concerned about its loss than working-class parents (58% versus 39%).

**In the future, when all restrictions have been lifted, I am concerned that returning to less flexible ways of working will negatively affect my family life**

**50%**  
All parents agree

**32%**  
All parents disagree

**58%**  
Middle class parents agree

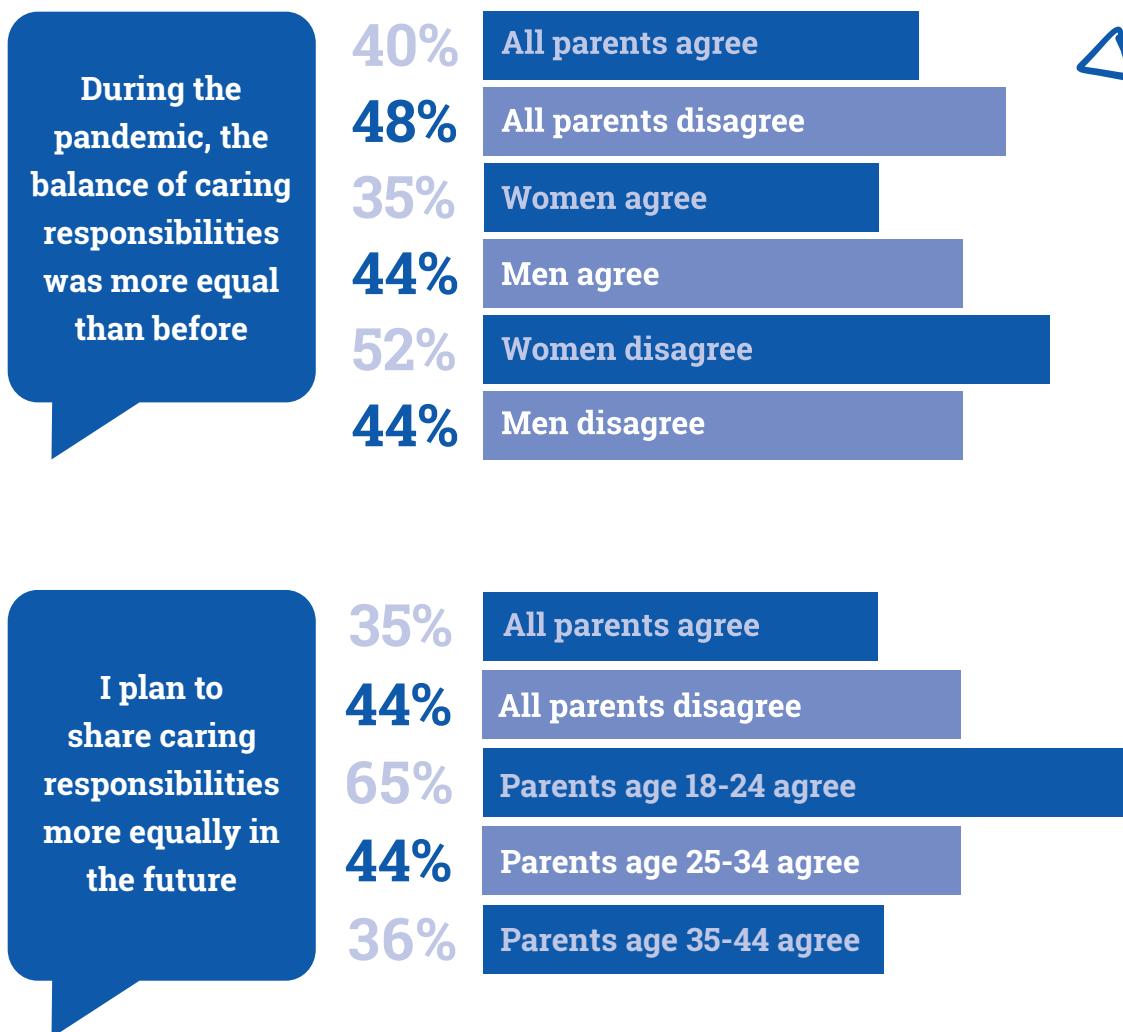
**39%**  
Working class parents agree



**During the pandemic my husband started to work from home for the first time. This meant that he could spend more time with our daughter and help me more around the house. I returned to work after maternity leave and I was also asked to work from home. This made home and family life much easier for us to manage as we both have long commutes to and from work. We worry that as life returns to normal we may be asked to return to the office and this would make managing family life more difficult. We feel it would result in a negative impact on us and our daughter.**

- Member of Working Families' Parents and Carers Advisory Panel

Although the majority of working parents, particularly women, said that the balance of caring responsibilities (like childcare and housework) was not shared more equally over the pandemic, a notable minority (40%) did report a more equal balance over the pandemic; and 35% say they plan to continue sharing caring responsibilities more equally once restrictions are lifted. The age of parents had a significant effect on their views about sharing caring responsibilities, before and beyond the pandemic. Younger parents were more likely to share the burden of caring during the pandemic and wanted to do so into the future. 51% parents aged 25-34 agreed that the balance of care was more equal during the pandemic than before compared to 38% of parents aged 35-44.





# Concerns about work moving beyond the pandemic



**Some parents are feeling particularly vulnerable in the current labour market because of their parental and caring responsibilities.** Looking ahead to when the furlough scheme ends, nearly a third of working parents (29%) said they were concerned that their position as a parent with caring responsibilities made them more vulnerable to redundancy. This rises to 34% amongst women. This highlights how precarious work is for many parents and their awareness of the difficulties of finding and maintaining a job that fits alongside family life.

**I am concerned that being a parent with caring responsibilities will make me more vulnerable to redundancy when the furlough scheme ends**

**29%**

**All parents agree**

**42%**

**All parents disagree**

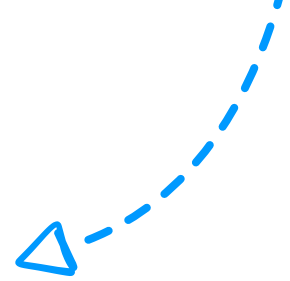
**34%**

**Women agree**

**27%**

**Men agree**

# The future of flexible working



**Despite concerns about maintaining their newly acquired flexible working patterns beyond the pandemic, respondents are generally confident that flexible working will become mainstream in the future, for all workers and not just for those in senior roles** (62% versus 23%). Middle class parents felt especially confident about the main-streaming of flexible work (66% versus 55% working class parents).

**Pro-actively advertising jobs as flexible would make them much more appealing to working parents (currently 13 million people), influencing not only their future choice of employer, but, in many cases, their capacity to enter the labour market.** 69% agree that they would be more likely to apply for a job that was advertised as flexible, and this rises to 76% amongst women. This provides clear direction for employers to change practices to open access to more diverse talent, and, for government, to ‘build back better’ and rebuild an economy that works for everyone.

**In the future, when all restrictions have been lifted, I’m more likely to apply for a job that’s advertised as flexible than one that isn’t**

**69%**  
All parents agree

**17%**  
All parents disagree

**76%**  
Women agree

**62%**  
Men agree

**Parents want both the government and employers to take action to ensure the availability of more flexible jobs in the future.** 77% of parents thought it would be a good thing if the government intervened to make more jobs flexible. Women felt particularly strongly about this, with 83% expressing an interest in reform. These findings stress the importance of the government bringing forward the Employment Bill, particularly to address the challenges facing low-income families and ensure flexible working doesn't mean accepting insecure job roles and contracts.

**77%**

**All parents agree**

**I think it would be a good thing if the government intervened to encourage employers to make more jobs flexible**

**13%**

**All parents disagree**

**Parents recognised that change was not just the responsibility of government, but of employers as well.** 84% of parents want to see employers step up and create more jobs that work for parents, without waiting for government intervention. This strong desire for employers to take action and create more flexible jobs was felt by parents regardless of gender, age, class and region.

**84%**

**All parents agree**

**Employers should do more to create jobs that work for parents and not wait for the government to intervene**

**8%**

**All parents disagree**





**Advertised roles should absolutely say if they are flexible or not. When I am looking at adverts, this is the first thing I look at, before salary, job description, benefits, anything. I'd like to see the system turned on its head & all advertised roles have to be flexible & it's for the employer to justify why a role cannot be flexible.**

**I have friends & colleagues who work in the emergency services, work shift work, teachers, solicitors etc who all work flexibly, there is no excuse not to nowadays. You risk excluding a huge section of the workforce, which is potentially discriminatory, as the vast majority of these are women.**

- Member of Working Families' Parents and Carers Advisory Panel

Overall, whilst the number of people working flexibly increased due to the pandemic, access to flexible opportunities was experienced unevenly by socio-economic status and gender, as were the positive effects on family life. Yet despite these differences in experience, looking to the future, there is consensus amongst parents that steps need to be taken by government and employers now to create more jobs that work for parents.








# Recommendations




## **For employers:**

Working Families Employer Members reported that where they allowed flexible and remote working over the pandemic, productivity stayed the same or increased. We can learn from existing and emerging good practice. We want employers to:

-  Design and advertise jobs as flexible. The majority of job roles can be performed successfully with some form of flexibility built into them, whether that is flexing locations, working flexible hours or designing roles as job shares. The evidence from our employer members shows significant business benefits when roles are designed flexibly, including increased productivity, retention and diversity.
-  Actively encourage flexible working to support staff with caring responsibilities and promote wellbeing. This could be through senior role modelling, and measures such as allowing requests for flexible working as a day one right.
-  Monitor flexible working arrangements to ensure that all employees are able to progress by working in a way that balances their individual needs with those of the business. Employers should consider flexible working alongside their equality, diversity and inclusion plans. This involves looking at which employees work flexibly (home based, flexi time, reduced hours) by job role, diversity characteristics, and social background, to ensure benefits are being felt equally across the workforce: equal rates of pay, retention and progression.

## For government:

The promised Employment Bill presents an opportunity to ensure that expressions of commitment to creating more flexible jobs are turned into action. We are keen to see the Employment Bill brought forward in 2022, and include:

-  A requirement on employers to advertise roles as flexible unless there is a strong business case not to do so.
-  Action against exploitative and insecure employment practices by ensuring that workers are entitled to contracts that reflect the hours they work, and are given advanced notice on their shift patterns.
-  Measures to make it unlawful to make pregnant women and new parents redundant other than in very limited and specified circumstances, such as the closure of the business.

In the meantime, as we move out of the pandemic, the government can drive the narrative on flexible working so that employers understand the full range of flexibility that can be built into different job roles and the benefits they bring: not just for individuals but for business.





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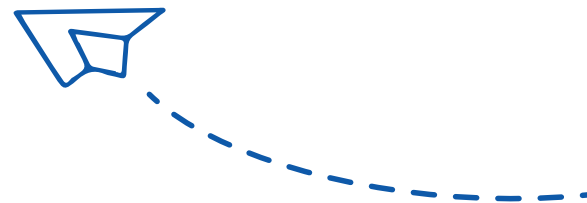
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