Work-life balance for men in Wales – capturing the benefits of flexible working

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1   Focus of the study

This report explores men's use of flexible working practices to meet their caring responsibilities. The study on which it is based explored the availability of flexible working and the factors that influence uptake in six medium sized organisations in Wales. The organisations studied were:

- Careers Wales North East (CWNE)
- Milford Haven Port Authority (MHPA)
- NewLaw Solicitors
- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA)
- Valleys to Coast Housing (V2C)
- Wales Millennium Centre (WMC)

These constitute a geographical and sectoral cross-section of medium sized Welsh employers, but are intended to be an illustrative, rather than representative, sample. Whilst not making claims to representativeness, the research nevertheless provides interesting insight into the extent of men's uptake of flexible working for caring purposes, into the challenges encountered by employers in providing flexible working opportunities, and into some of the strategies employed to overcome these.
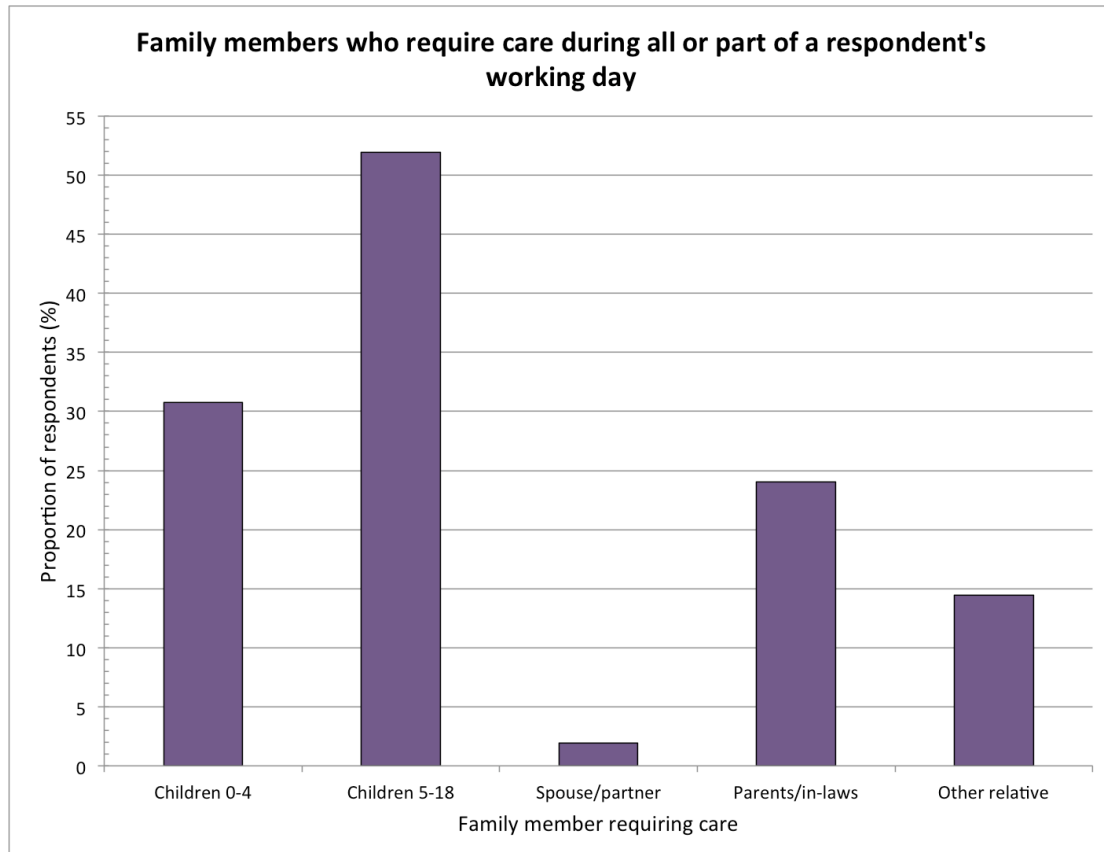
To enable the research to be undertaken within a short timeframe, the organisations were identified through pre-existing contacts. Employee findings are based on a questionnaire survey circulated to all male employees of the six organisations, from which an overall response rate of 17% was achieved. Responses were requested only from men with family members requiring care for all or part of the respondent's working day, and so the actual number of potential respondents can be assumed to be somewhat below the total number of male employees. The given response rate therefore represents a conservative estimate. The employer findings draw on semi-structured interviews conducted with senior managers, team leaders and HR officers. Further information on the project method is presented in the Appendix.

The report is presented in three sections: employee findings, employer findings and a concluding commentary.

2   The employee perspective

Care requirements

Respondents were asked what family members require care during all or part of their working day. A large majority of respondents (73%) had children. Over 50% of respondents had children of school age, with approximately 30% having younger children. 24% had parents or parents-in-law who require care, and 14% had another family member requiring care. Only 2% of respondents had a spouse or partner in need of care.

Family members who require care during all or part of a respondent's working day

Proportion of respondents (%)

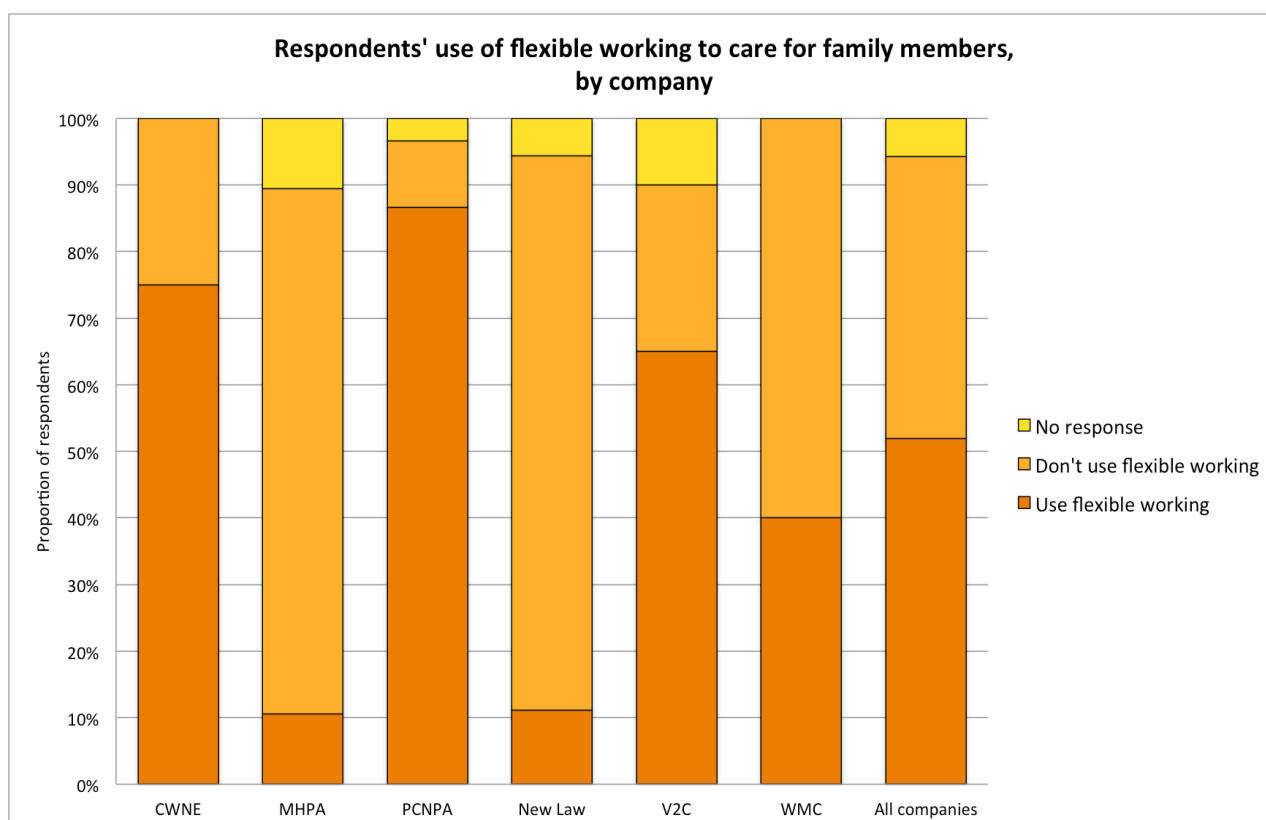| Family member	%
Children 0-4	~31
Children 5-18	~52
Spouse/partner	~2
Parents/in-laws	~24
Other relative	~14.5

Family member requiring care

22% of respondents had more than one category of family member requiring care. Slightly over half (57%) of this figure can be accounted for by respondents who had children aged both between 0-4 and between 5-18.

Proportion of care provided by all respondents
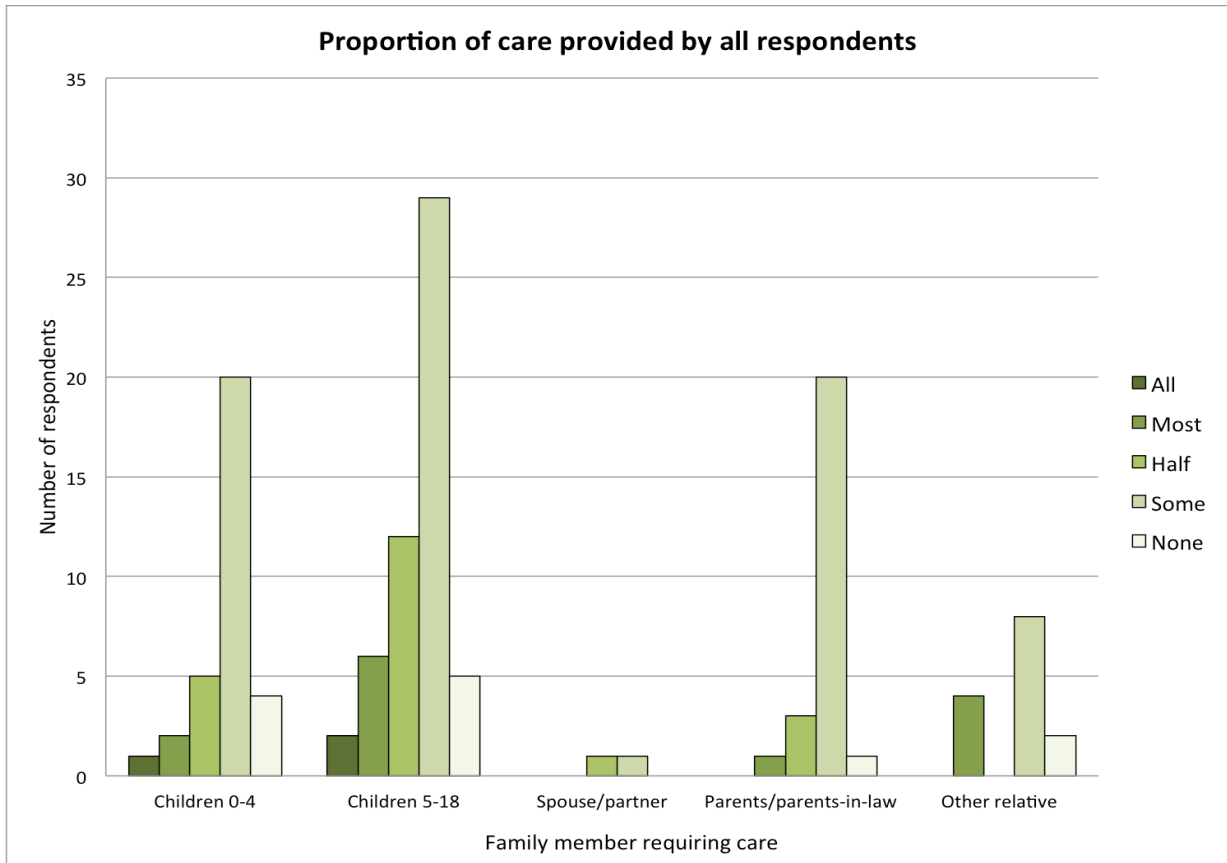
Respondents were also asked how much of the care they provided for those family members who require it. In all cases a majority provided "some" of the care.

Of those respondents who provided none of the required care for their relative(s) (n=11), two thirds cited a reason for this. Of these, 86% (n=6) listed length of working hours/commuting time as a barrier to care provision. Barriers to the provision of more care are discussed in greater detail below.

Use of flexible working

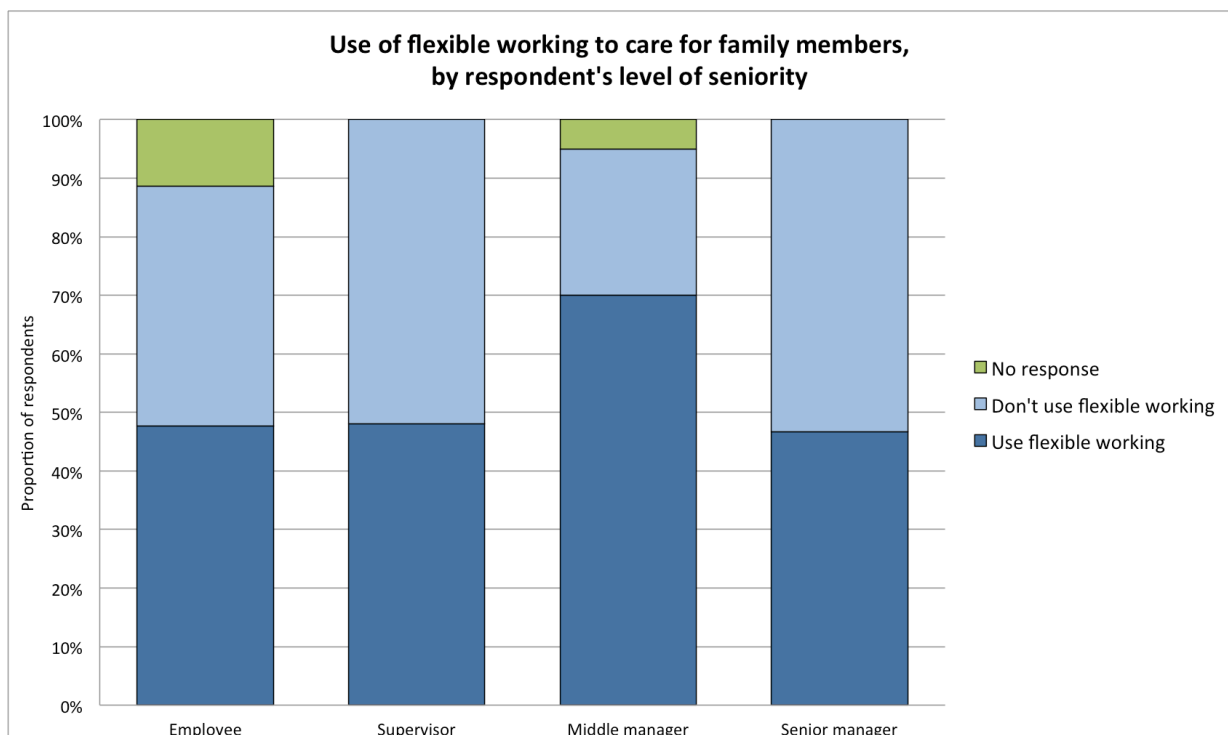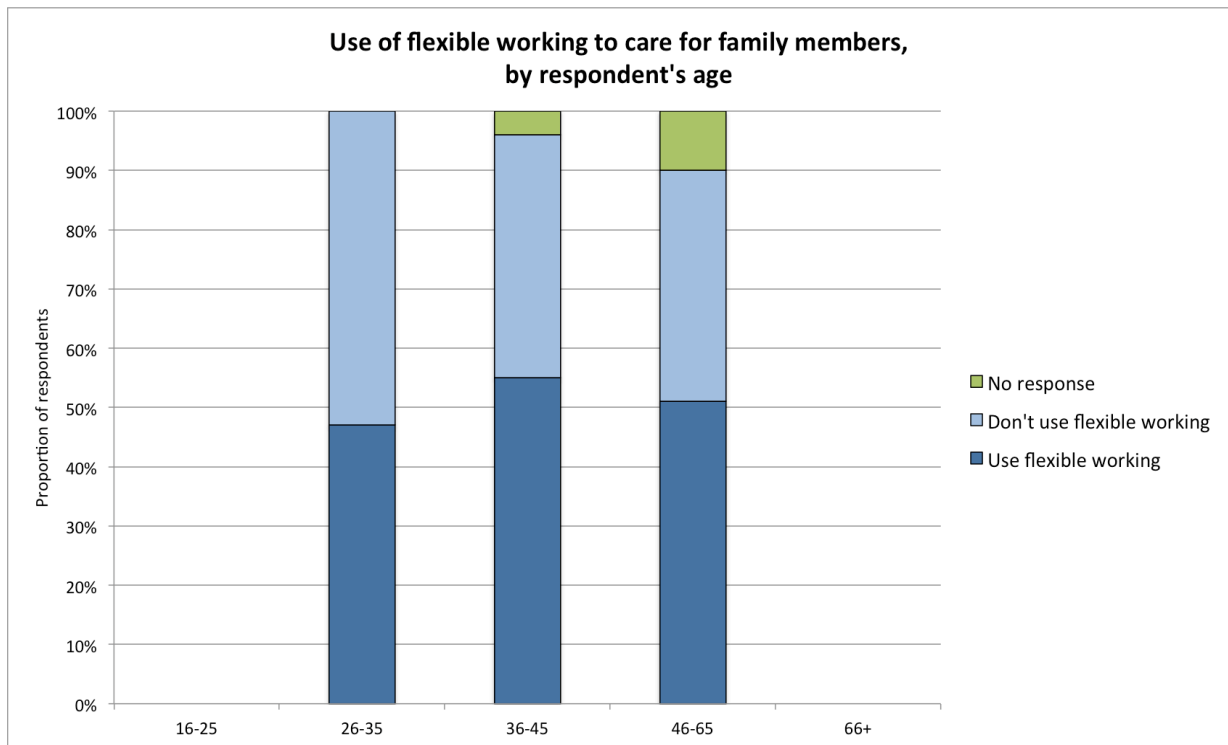**Respondents' use of flexible working to care for family members, by company**

In all of the organisations surveyed, men were using flexible working to enable them to care for family members. However, uptake varied significantly by organisation. On average, 52% of respondents made use of flexible working. In Careers Wales North East and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, over three quarters took advantage of available opportunities to work flexibly. At the opposite end of the spectrum, at both Milford Haven Port Authority and NewLaw Solicitors uptake was, at 11%, forty-one points lower than the mean. Uptake of flexible working among respondents at Valleys to Coast and the Wales Millennium Centre was within thirteen points of the mean.

These findings are not dissimilar to those of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which in 2009 assessed the uptake of flexible working opportunities by sector. The EHRC study showed community/social services and public administration, education and health to have higher uptake than other sectors[i]. Similarly, in this study Careers Wales North East, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and Valleys to Coast Housing – all organisations which have arisen from a local authority culture – emerged with the highest levels of uptake. And, where the transport, storage and communications sector displayed low uptake of flexible working in the EHRC study (second only to manufacturing), here the Port Authority had among the lowest uptake.

Although use of flexible working appears in some measure to be related to sector, sector should not be imagined to have a deterministic influence on

practices within an organisation. Since individual organisational cultures contribute to our definition of a sectoral culture, rather than sectoral culture affecting how individual organisations operate, it is on the whole more helpful to note differences at the level of the organisation.

Other factors with a potential influence on flexible working uptake include age, level of seniority, level of qualification and household income. This study found no observable pattern of increasing or decreasing use of flexible working with either increasing age or rising seniority.

Use of flexible working to care for family members, by respondent's age

Use of flexible working to care for family members, by respondent's level of seniority

The observed peak in uptake of flexible working at middle management level was mainly produced by responses from PCNPA and V2C, two of the organisations with the highest overall uptake. This suggests that uptake is more closely related to organisational culture than to level of seniority.

Use of flexible working to care for family members, by respondent's level of qualification
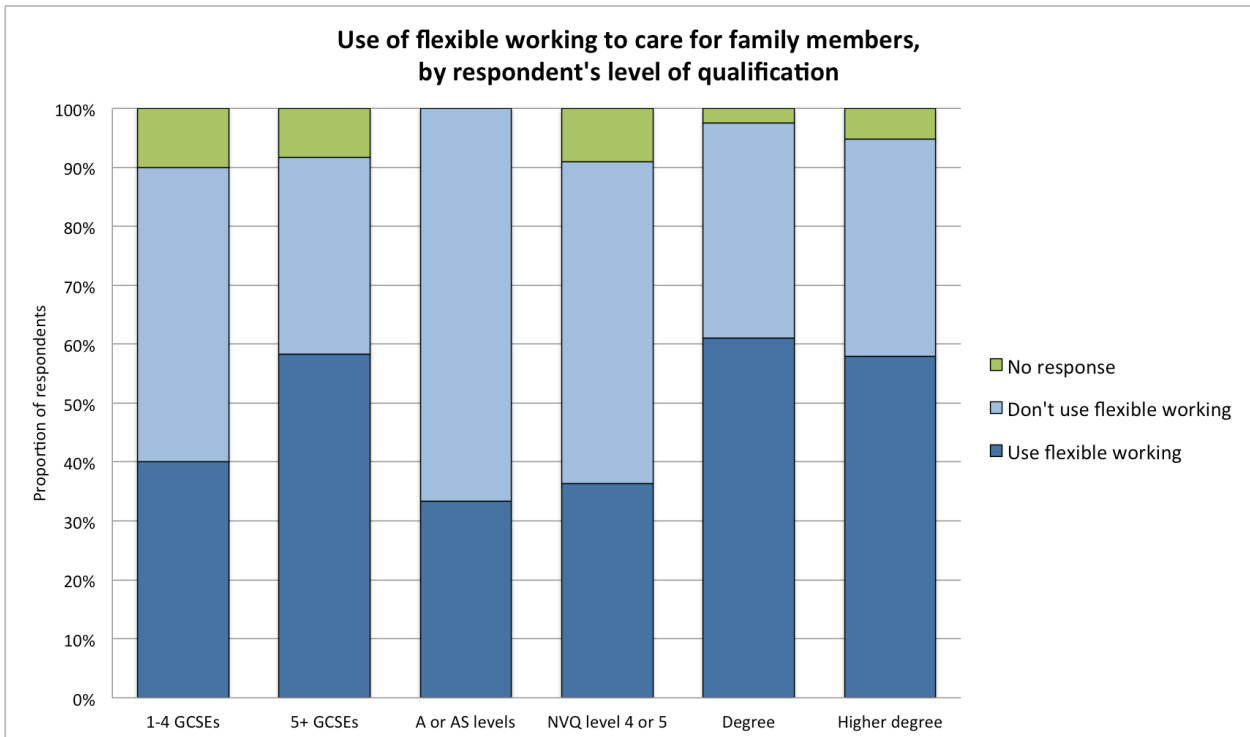
For the third variable, level of qualification, initial examination of the data suggests no obvious trend. Given previous research which has identified the educational level of parents as being positively related to take-up of parental leave[ii], this is an unexpected finding.

However, further investigation of the data highlights an interesting distinction between organisations. 71% of those with 5+ GCSEs (or equivalent) who use flexible working again came from PCNPA and V2C. Of those with 1-4 GCSEs (or equivalent) who use flexible working, once more the majority came from PCNPA.

Although the absolute numbers of respondents under consideration for each of these subcategories (level of qualification, organisation and use of flexible working) are rather small, this again tends to support the view that, where uptake might otherwise be low – as for employees with few formal qualifications – organisational culture can play a part in increasing uptake.

**Use of flexible working to care for family members,
by respondent's net household monthly income**
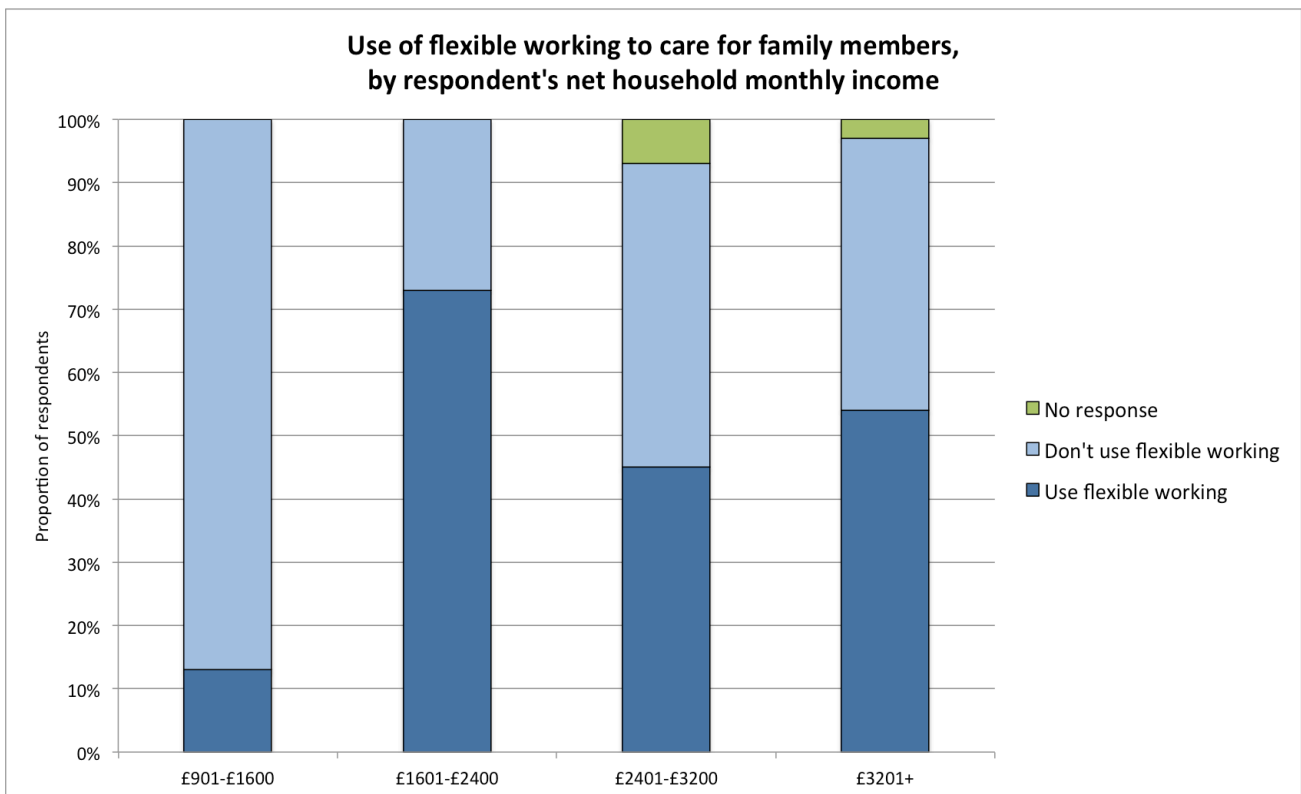
The final variable observed was level of household income. As the above chart shows, respondents with a monthly household income between £901 and £1600 were far less likely to use flexible working than those in any other income band. 71% of those in the £901-£1600 band not working flexibly were from organisations with the lowest overall uptake, again suggesting a possible link with organisational culture. Nevertheless, given the much greater use of flexible working at higher income levels, low absolute income emerges as a likely barrier to uptake in its own right.

One further analysis was conducted to determine whether respondents with multiple caring commitments were more likely to use flexible working than those with one type of caring commitment. This was undertaken on the basis that those with multiple commitments might be expected to have a more complicated timetable of care provision, and therefore a greater need to negotiate work commitments to accommodate this.

Chi-square analysis compared use of flexible working among respondents with one type of family member requiring care, with its use by those with family members in more than one category (children aged 0-4, children aged 5-18, spouse/partner, parents/in-laws and other family members). The analysis found there to be no relationship between the variables[1]. Respondents with multiple caring commitments were no more likely to use flexible working than those caring for one type of family member.

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[1] $X^2=0.0256$, d.f.=1, P=0.87

Types of flexible working used

Most forms of flexible working were being used in the study organisations, although few were in anything other than small-scale use. The most commonly used forms of flexible working were flexitime (n=29) and time off in lieu (n=22). Of the six organisations surveyed, three offer flexitime to at least some of their staff; non-office based staff were least likely to have flexitime available to them. 13% of respondents have successfully requested to work from home at least part of the time.

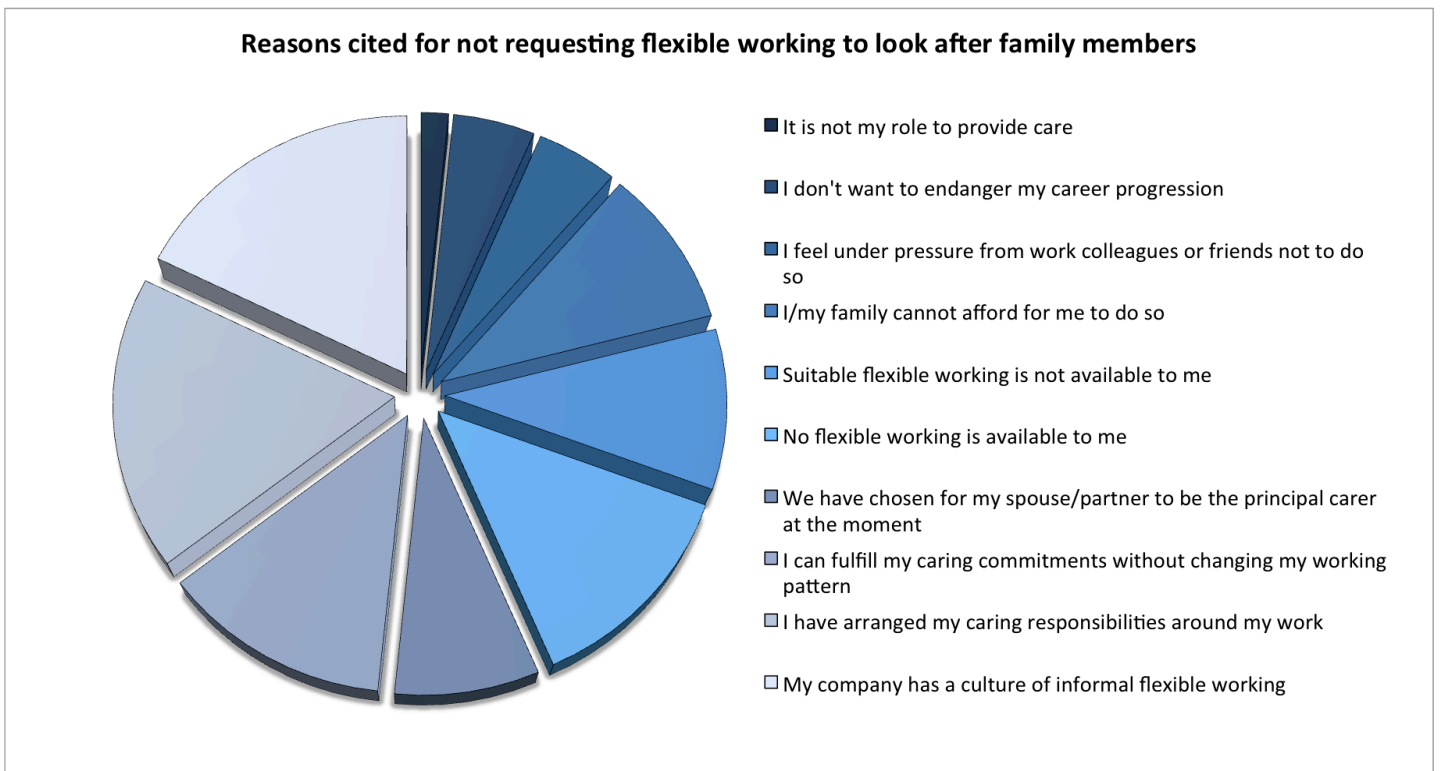Respondents' uptake of different forms of flexible working
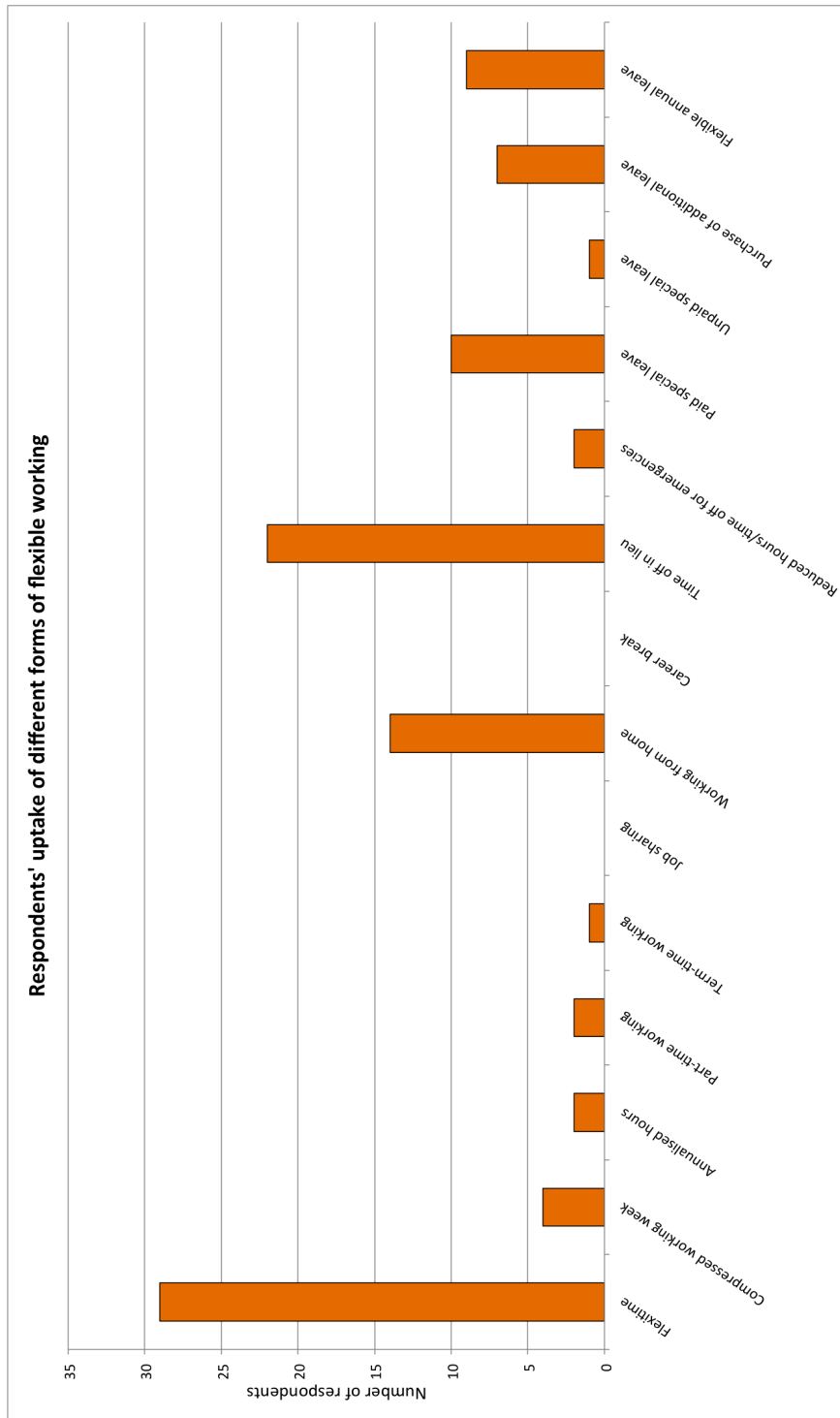
The next most commonly used forms of flexible working related to leave arrangements: paid special leave, which is pre-arranged for a specific purpose; purchase of additional leave; and flexible use of annual leave entitlements, in which hours rather than full- or half-days are taken by an employee.

The role of flexitime in reducing the need for individual flexible working requests, and the use of alternatives to flexitime for non-office based staff are discussed in the third section of this report.

Attitudes towards flexible working
Respondents who had not requested any of these forms of flexible working were asked the principal reason for not doing so.

Reasons cited for not requesting flexible working to look after family members

- ■ It is not my role to provide care
- ■ I don't want to endanger my career progression
- ■ I feel under pressure from work colleagues or friends not to do so
- ■ I/my family cannot afford for me to do so
- ▢ Suitable flexible working is not available to me
- ▢ No flexible working is available to me
- ▢ We have chosen for my spouse/partner to be the principal carer at the moment
- ▢ I can fulfill my caring commitments without changing my working pattern
- ▢ I have arranged my caring responsibilities around my work
- ▢ My company has a culture of informal flexible working

The chart shows a broad distinction between a positive choice not to request flexible working (56% of respondents) and actual or perceived barriers to requesting flexible working arrangements (44%). Thus, the grey-blue sectors on the left hand-side of the chart list reasons including ability to fulfil caring commitments without requesting flexible working, or a company culture of informal flexible working. Meanwhile, to the right-hand side concerns such as endangering of career progression and financial pressures are highlighted.

Respondents' perceptions of the amount of care they are providing for family

- Right amount of care
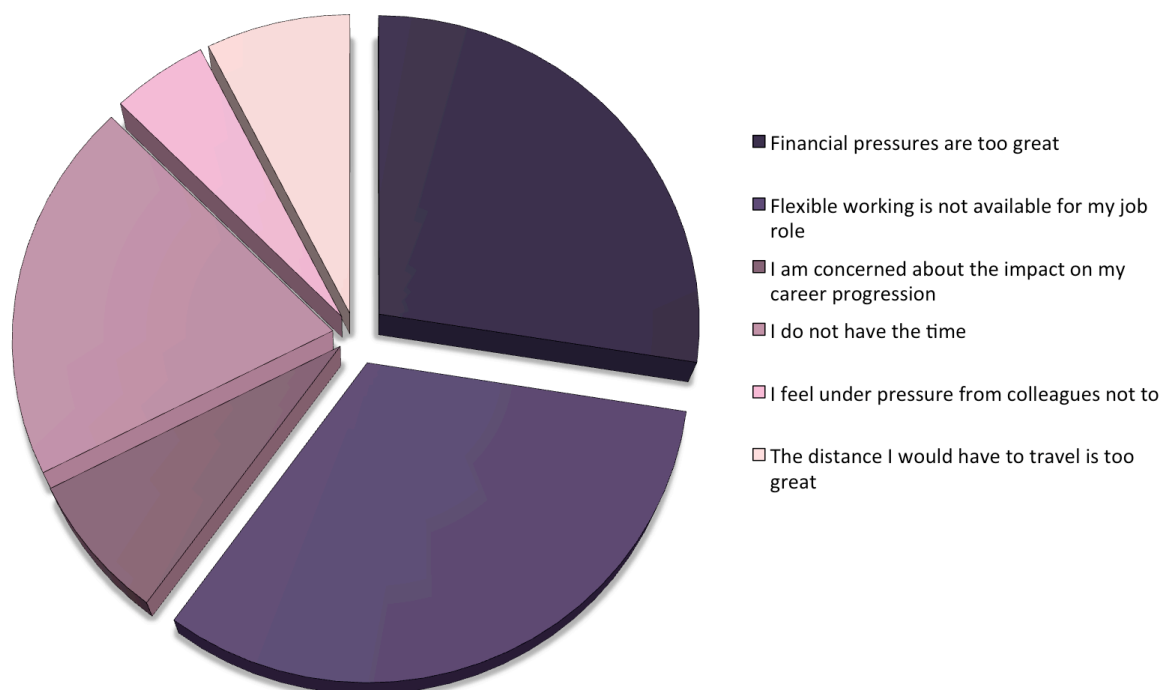- Not enough care
- Too much care
- No response
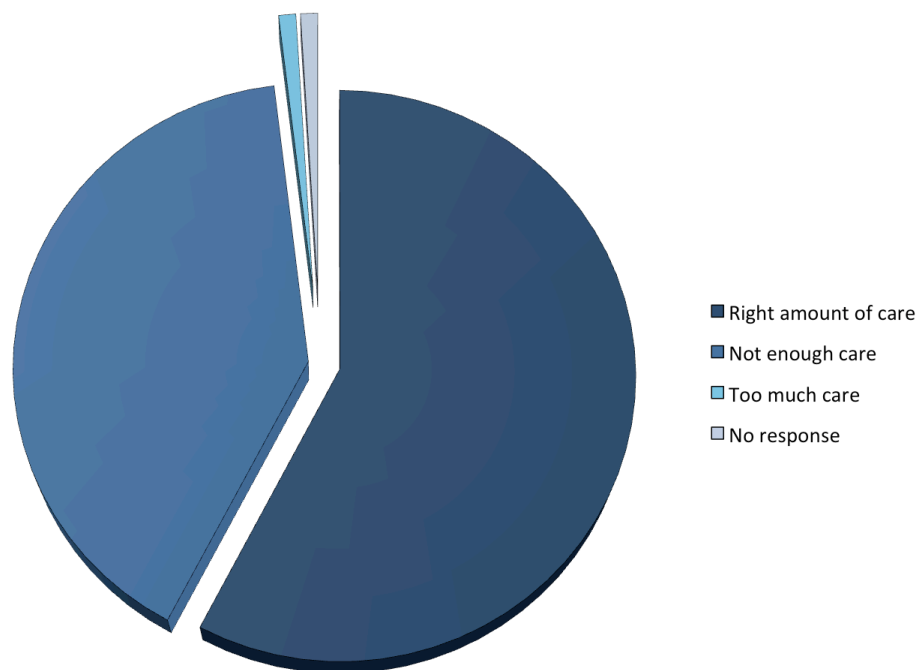
Asked about their perception of the amount of care that they provide for family members, a majority (58%) felt that they provided the right amount of care. However, a sizeable minority (40%) felt that they were not providing enough care.

Barriers to the provision of care

This latter group was asked to suggest the main barrier to them fulfilling their caring responsibilities. The three most frequently cited barriers were non-availability of flexible working opportunities (32.5%), financial pressures (27.5%) and lack of time (20%). Peer pressure and impact on career progression were, together with the distance respondents would have to travel to fulfil a caring commitment, of lesser concern.

Given that provision of flexible working opportunities is within the gift of the employer, organisations' strategies for maximising availability (discussed in Section 3 of this report) should therefore be regarded as of considerable importance.

Reasons given for not providing more care, by those who describe themselves as not providing enough care

- Financial pressures are too great
- Flexible working is not available for my job role
- I am concerned about the impact on my career progression
- I do not have the time
- I feel under pressure from colleagues not to
- The distance I would have to travel is too great

With specific reference to take-up rates for *parental* leave in Europe, the European Commission has found that rates of payment for leave are, alongside organisational and sectoral cultures, the flexibility of arrangements and level of educational attainment, a crucial determinant of uptake[ii].

It is interesting to note from respondents to the current survey that, of those who were prevented from providing more care because of financial pressures, 55% identified themselves as coming from middle or high income, dual earner households. A minority, therefore, were constrained by either being the sole earner in a middle/high income household (9%) or by coming from a low income household (36%, of which half were single-income and half dual-income).

Although low *absolute* income acted as a barrier in approximately one third of cases, even for more affluent respondents an anticipated dip relative to their regular income was sufficient to limit the amount of care which they provide. Thus for higher earning households there is an apparent tension between the desire to provide more care and to continue earning at the current rate – in this instance the respondents have chosen the latter.

Informal flexible working

Eighteen percent of respondents who had not requested flexible working stated that their employer operated an informal system which allowed them to work flexibly without making a request. When *all* respondents were asked about their use of informal flexible working practices, their responses were as follows.
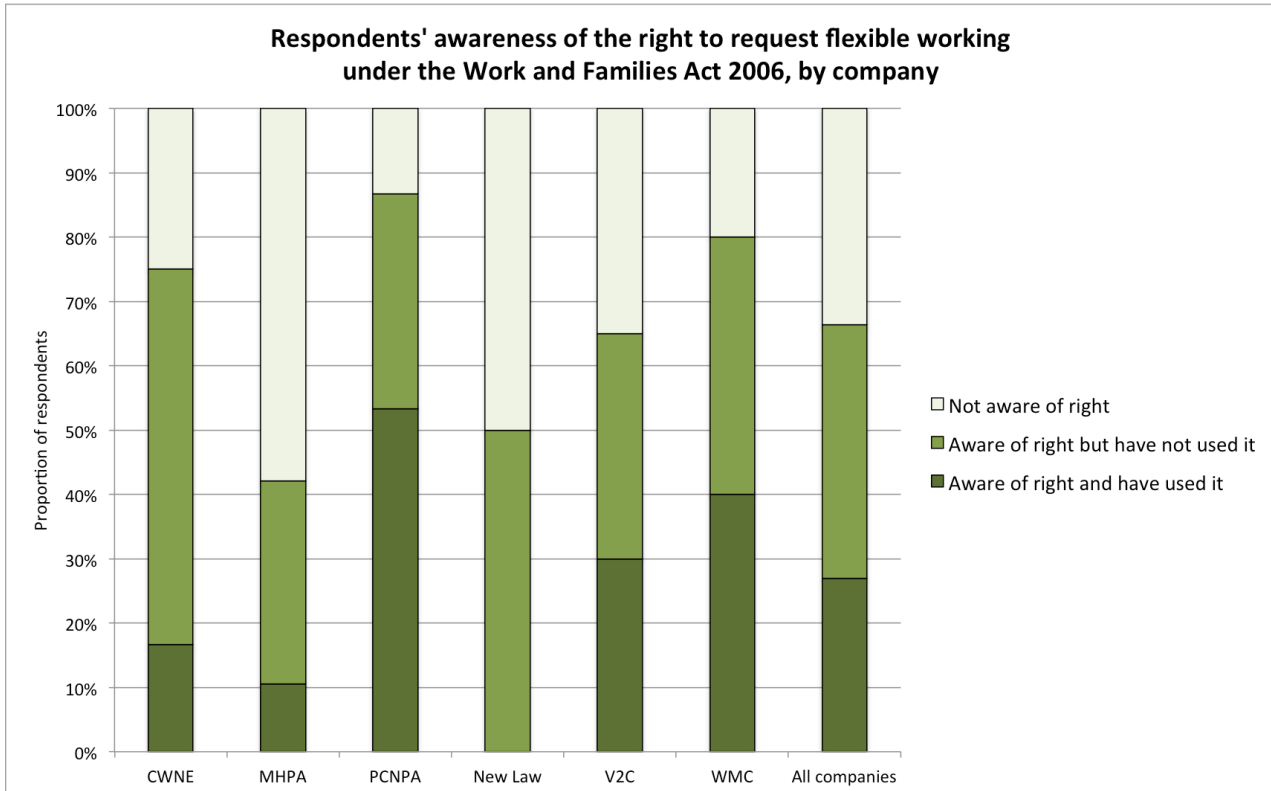

Respondents' use of different forms of informal flexible working arrangements
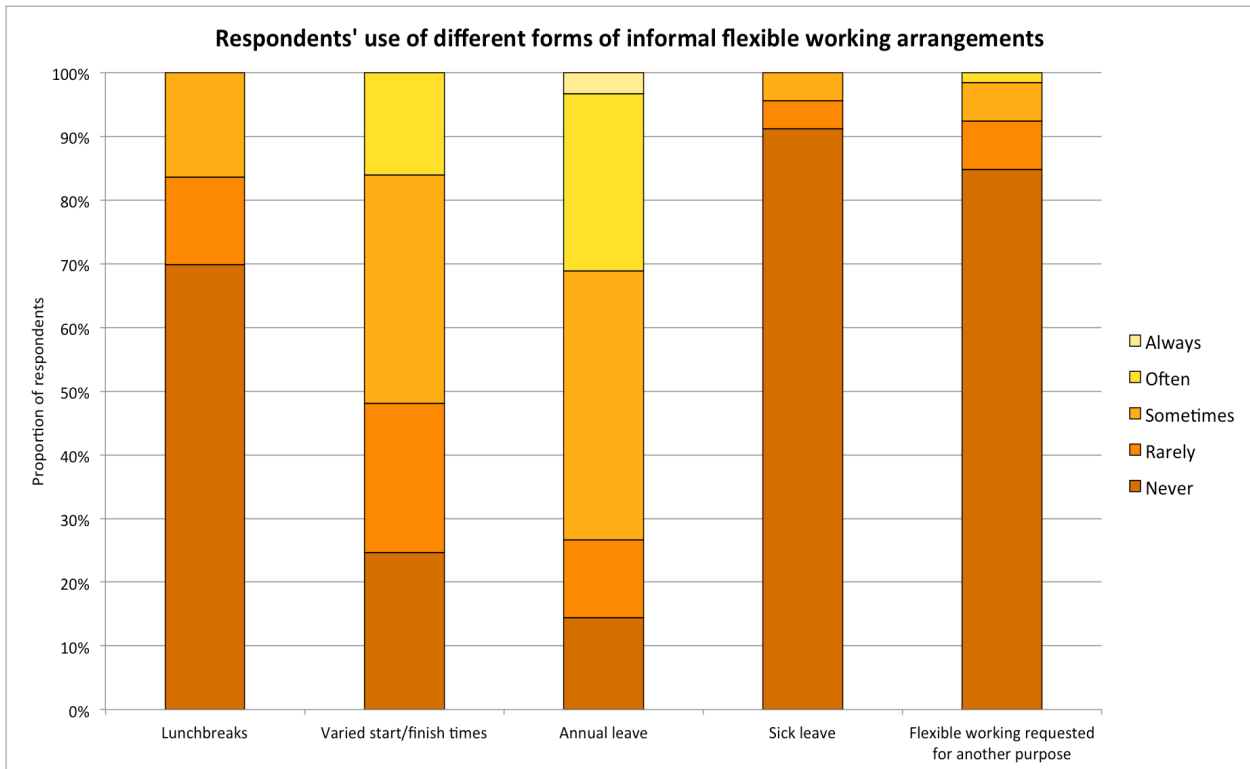
	Overall % responding	% citing response				
		Never	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Often**	**Always**
Lunch breaks	70	70	14	16	0	0
Varied start/finish times	78	25	23	36	16	0
Annual leave	87	14	12	43	28	3
Sick leave	65	92	4	4	0	0
Flexible working given for another purpose	63	85	7	6	2	0

Thirty percent of those responding to the question had used lunch breaks at least "rarely" for the purpose of caring for a family member. This figure rose to 75% for varied start and finish times, and to 86% for annual leave. Only 15% of respondents had ever cared for family members using flexible working arrangements requested for another purpose. Even fewer (8%) had ever used sick leave. This suggests that staff have not misused the benefits available to them, but rather have worked in line with company policy.
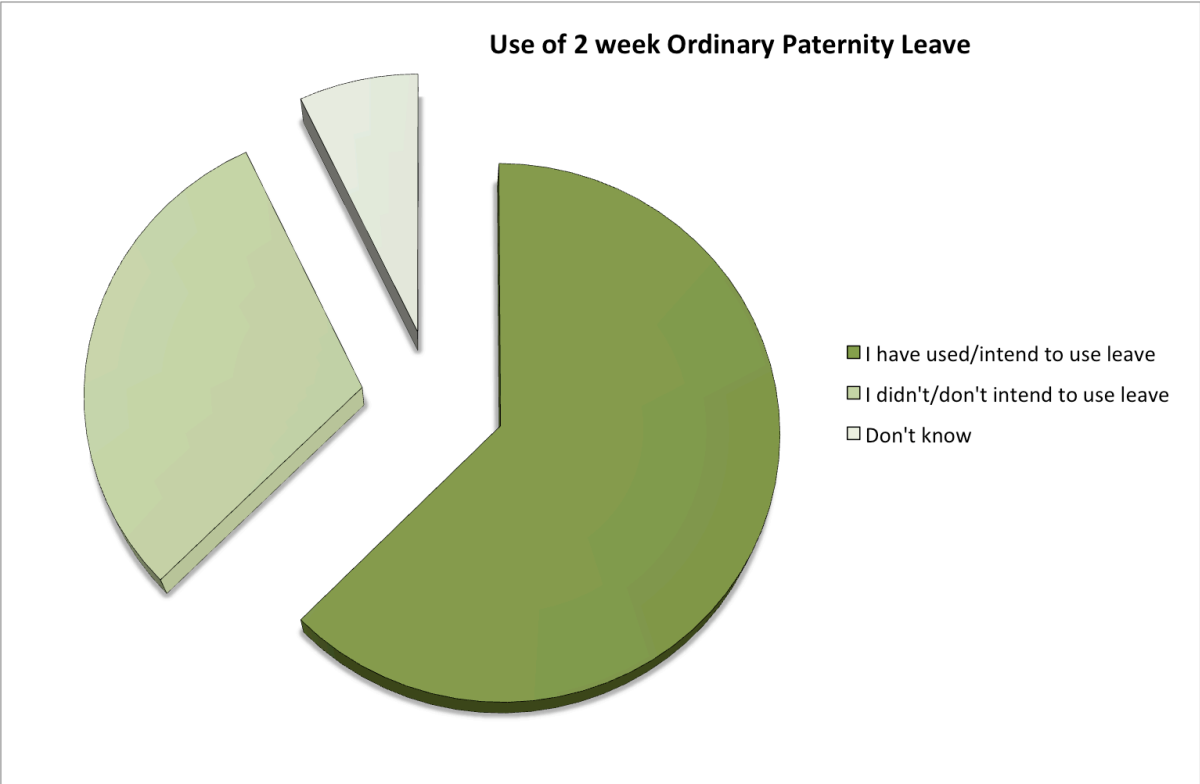
Rights to flexible working

When compared with the DTI's 2006 survey on work-life balance, this study found good awareness of employees' right to request flexible working for the purpose of caring for a family member. Two thirds of respondents were aware of the right. This is ten percentage points higher than in the DTI survey[iii].

Respondents' awareness of the right to request flexible working under the Work and Families Act 2006, by company

Proportion of respondents

Legend:
- Not aware of right
- Aware of right but have not used it
- Aware of right and have used it

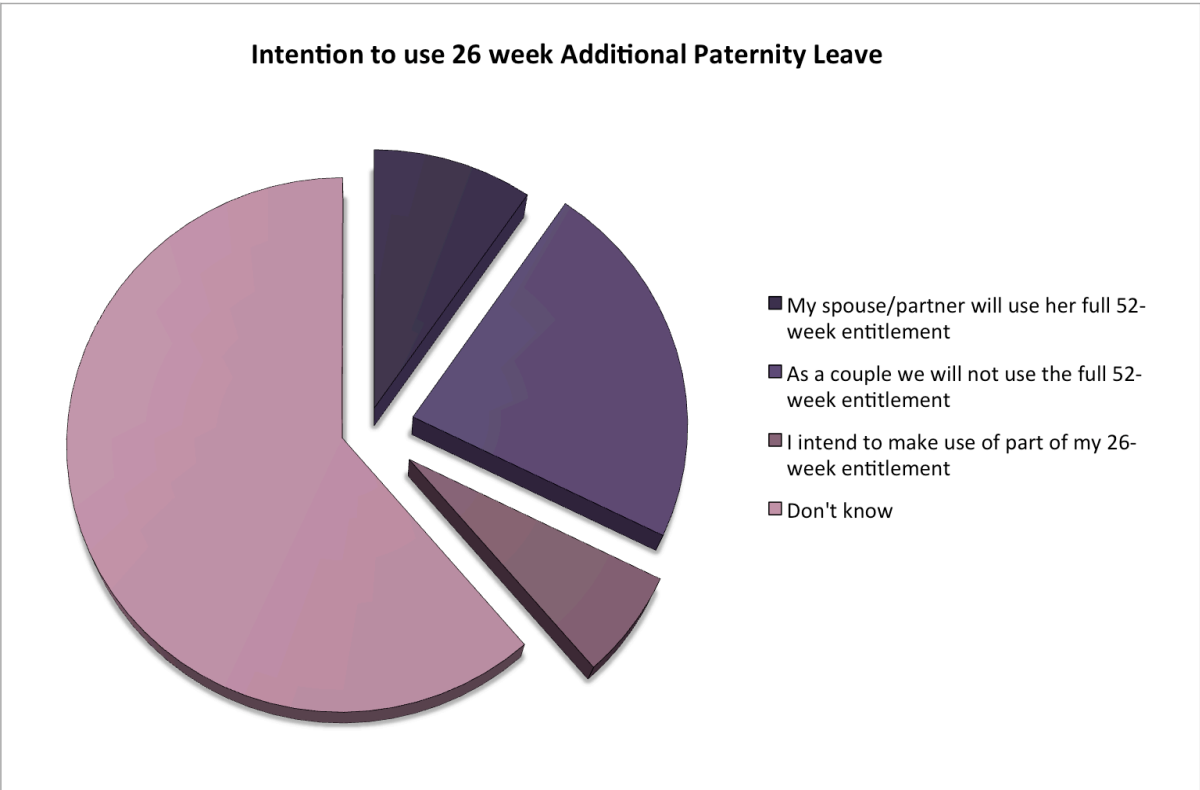Companies: CWNE, MHPA, PCNPA, New Law, V2C, WMC, All companies

Variations in awareness between companies followed a very similar pattern to that for use of flexible working. At Careers Wales North East, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority and Valleys to Coast Housing, the proportion of staff aware of the right to request flexible working exactly matched the proportion of staff who work flexibly. At Milford Haven Port Authority and the Wales Millennium Centre, the proportion of staff using flexible working was equal to the proportion who were aware of the right *and* have made use of it; in both cases an additional 30% or more of respondents were aware of the right but had not used it.
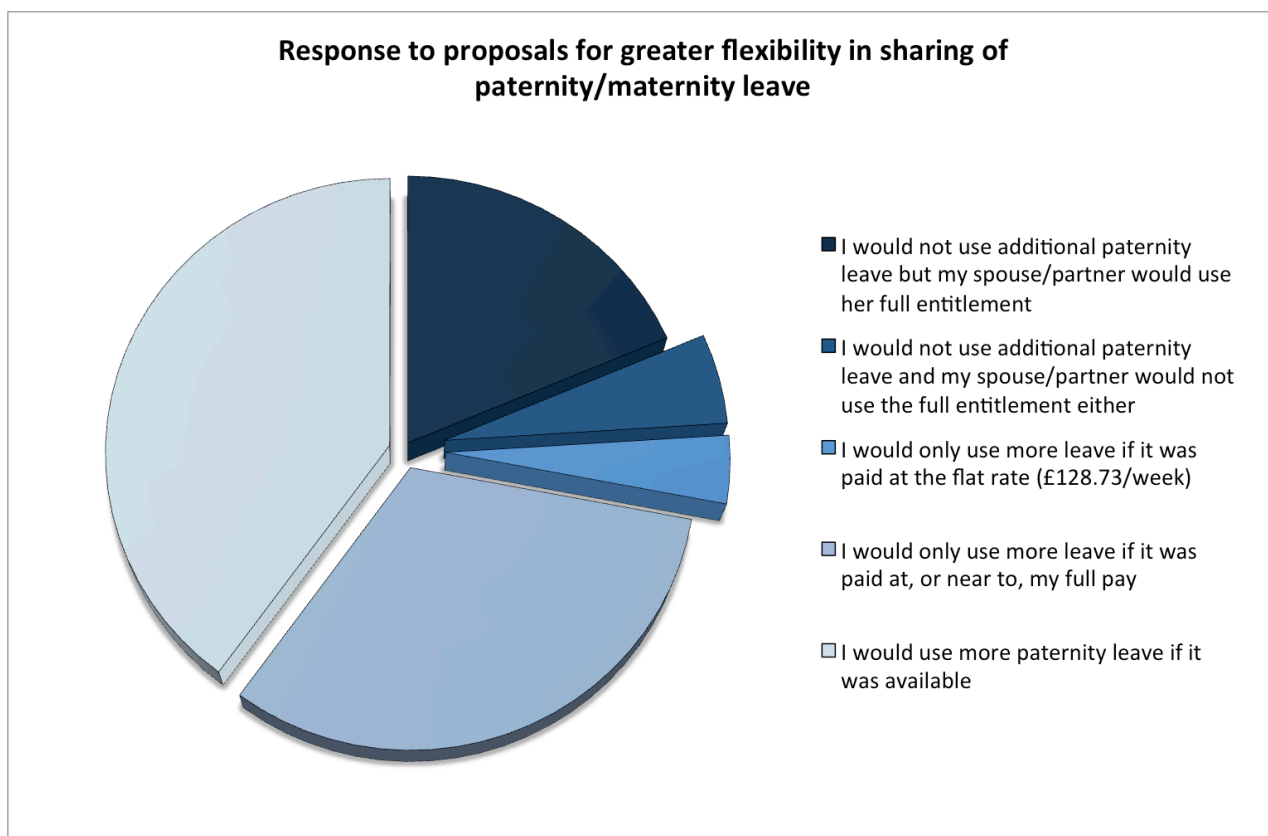
Respondents were also asked about their use of Ordinary and Additional Paternity Leave, and about their response to the Government's proposals to allow greater flexibility in the sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers.

Use of 2 week Ordinary Paternity Leave

- I have used/intend to use leave
- I didn't/don't intend to use leave
- Don't know

Asked about use of their two week Ordinary Paternity Leave entitlement, nearly two thirds of respondents to the question (which was answered by 54% of all respondents) either had used or intended to use their entitlement. A full 30% had not used or did not intend to use it, whilst only 7% were unsure.

Intention to use 26 week Additional Paternity Leave

- My spouse/partner will use her full 52-week entitlement
- As a couple we will not use the full 52-week entitlement
- I intend to make use of part of my 26-week entitlement
- Don't know

This low level of uncertainty is in stark contrast to responses on uptake of the right to up to 26 weeks of Additional Paternity Leave. Of the 30% of respondents who answered the question, nearly two thirds (61%) did not know whether or not they would use their entitlement. Almost one quarter (23%) of respondents stated that neither they nor their partner would make full use of the 52 weeks available to them. One in ten respondents would not use any Additional Paternity Leave because their spouse or partner would use the full 52 week maternity leave. Only 6% intended to use part of their entitlement.

Response to proposals for greater flexibility in sharing of paternity/maternity leave

- I would not use additional paternity leave but my spouse/partner would use her full entitlement
- I would not use additional paternity leave and my spouse/partner would not use the full entitlement either
- I would only use more leave if it was paid at the flat rate (£128.73/week)
- I would only use more leave if it was paid at, or near to, my full pay
- I would use more paternity leave if it was available

Given these responses, the large proportion of respondents who would wish to make use of additional paternity leave under the proposed new, more flexible arrangements[2] is noteworthy. Three quarters of those answering the question would use more paternity leave: forty percent stated that they would do so without making reference to the level of financial remuneration, but a further 32% would need to be paid at, or near to, their full pay before taking up their entitlement.

The apparent mismatch between the proportions wishing to make use of the current Additional Paternity Leave arrangements and those who would make use of the planned new arrangements might well be accounted for by the inclusion in the latter case of the views of a further 42% of respondents. (This

[2] Proposed reforms to maternity and paternity leave will allow parents greater flexibility in deciding how to share the 52 week leave entitlement.

latter question achieved a 72% response rate, compared with 30% for the question on Additional Paternity Leave.)

Whether dominated by uncertainty or a more definite response, responses to both questions suggest an openness among men towards taking paternity leave. However, responses which highlight the need for paternity pay in line with current earnings and those which suggest that neither partner would make full use of the entitlements also point towards a financial barrier to putting this into practice. This is an issue which would bear further scrutiny.

Summary of employee findings

Questionnaires were sent to all male employees in the six organisations included in the study. Responses were requested from men with family members requiring care for all or part of the respondent's working day. Completed questionnaires were submitted by 104 men.

Overall use of flexible working practices
- 89% of respondents said that they provided at least some of the care required by their family member.
- In all six study organisations some men used flexible working to care for family members.
- In total, 52% of respondents made use of flexible working practices.
- Use of flexible working practices varied significantly across the six organisations. Organisational culture appeared to have a greater impact on use of flexible working than age, seniority or level of qualification.
- Men in the lowest monthly household income band, £901-£1600, were far less likely to use flexible working than the average (13% compared to 52%). Despite some indication of a link with organisational culture, low absolute income emerged as a likely barrier to uptake in its own right.

Types of flexible working used
- A range of flexible working options was in use across the organisations. These include flexitime and time off in lieu (the most commonly used forms of flexible working), working from home, purchase of additional hours and use of paid special leave.
- Non-office based staff were the least likely to have flexitime available to them.

Attitudes towards and barriers to flexible working
- Two thirds of all respondents were aware of their right to request flexible working.
- The respondents who had not requested flexible working arrangements were asked why not. Whilst 56% indicated that they had made a positive choice not to, 44% said they had experienced barriers to flexible working. These included a lack of opportunity, financial pressures and pressure from work colleagues.
- 40% of respondents said that they were not providing enough of the care for their family.
- This group identified a number of barriers to them providing more care, including: the non-availability of flexible working opportunities (32.5%), financial pressures (27.5%) and lack of time (20%).
- Men from high and low income households perceived a drop in income to be a barrier to flexible working. A majority of the men identifying this barrier were from middle or high income, dual earner households.

3   The employer perspective

Provision of flexible working opportunities
The case study organisations were chosen not only according to employee numbers, but also to represent a geographical and sectoral cross-section. The organisations are located in the south-west, south-east and north-east of Wales, and each is drawn from a distinct division of the UK Standard Industrial Classification of Economic Activities 2007.

At the time of selection their approach to flexible working was not known. From interviews conducted with representatives of each organisation, it emerged that five of the organisations have formal flexible working policies in place. Three of these adhere to the guidelines on statutory flexible working provision. A further two have supplemented these with a more comprehensive policy, aimed at all employees and encompassing a broad range of flexible working opportunities. Three organisations operate a formal flexitime system – one for all staff, and two for those staff, largely office based, for whom flexitime can be most readily implemented.

Additionally, all organisations employ various ad hoc and informal arrangements, on a case-by-case basis as the need arises. This includes the Wales Millennium Centre, which has no existing formal flexible working arrangements. In this organisation, plans are currently being developed to give *all* staff access to appropriate flexible working opportunities. As described below, efforts to date have centred on setting in place the foundations on which a flexible working policy can be built. That internal discussions have not yet explicitly focused on flexible working is one possible reason for the low (8%) WMC employee survey response rate – awareness has not yet been raised and current uptake, being informal and ad hoc, is almost certainly low. (A similar relationship between non-promotion of flexible working and low awareness emerged at V2C. Only 20% of employees in the trades, who currently have more restricted access to flexible working than do their office-based colleagues, knew about their right to request flexible working, compared with 65% of their colleagues.)

The full range of flexible working options offered to staff by the study organisations is set out in the following table. It is striking that every organisation makes available a variety of types of flexible working.

	CWNE	MHPA	NewLaw	PCNPA	V2C	WMC
Flexitime	Yes	Partial[3] & Informal[1]	No	Partial[3]	Partial[3]	
Time off in lieu	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Compressed working week	Yes	No	No	Partial[3]	No	
Annualised hours	Yes	Partial[3]	No	No	No	
Part-time working	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Term-time working	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	
Job sharing	Informal[1]	Informal[1]	No	Yes	Informal[1]	
Working from home	Yes[2]	No	Yes	Yes	Yes[2]	
Career break	Yes	Informal[1]	No	Yes	Yes[2]	
Reduced hours for limited time	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Paid special leave	No	Informal[1]	Yes[2]	Yes	Yes	
Unpaid special leave	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Purchase of additional leave	No	No	No	Yes	No	
Flexible annual leave	No	No	Yes	No	No	

Policy currently under consideration

[1] Not available as part of formal policy but either does or could operate informally

[2] Available in exceptional circumstances/at manager's discretion

[3] Available for request by <100% of staff

From the table above it is clear that each of the organisations has developed its own distinct approach to statutory and non-statutory elements of flexible working policy. Arrangements vary from largely informal and ad hoc – as at MHPA and the WMC – to more comprehensive, policy based systems – as, for example, at PCNPA.

Whilst the specific cultures and circumstances that have led to these differences are noted in the following discussion, emphasis is placed on drawing out those challenges, and the responses to them, that were most consistently identified by respondents. The headings under which the following findings are presented are those which emerged as being of greatest import during analysis of the data. They did not form the basis on which the interviews were conducted.

Acknowledged benefits of flexible working

Senior managers and HR officers from all of the organisations surveyed stated that allowing employees to work flexibly can bring benefits to the organisation. Bearing in mind that the organisations were not chosen because of a known positive attitude towards flexible working, this is a telling response. The specific benefits cited hold added weight because they were volunteered rather than prompted.

Each of the following benefits of allowing employees to work flexibly was cited in half or more of the organisations:

- **Greater focus and motivation** among employees, both as a direct result of not having to worry about how to balance work and caring commitments and as an indirect consequence of feeling valued by their employer.
- **Reciprocation of flexibility**, with employees being more willing to undertake additional work or to work unusual hours when the need arises.
- As a result of these two factors, employers had observed **improvements in productivity**.
- Whilst none reported an increase, some employers with flexitime schemes had seen a **decrease in the administrative burden**.
- This decrease, together with reductions in unplanned absences as a result of flexible working, had led to **financial savings**. Savings had also been obtained by allowing staff to purchase additional leave or to reduce their working hours.
- Flexible working can also aid staff **recruitment and retention**, as many employees value the benefits arising from flexible working's inclusion in their terms of employment.

> **"Yes you're looking after the bottom line. But to look after the bottom line you've got to look after your workforce."**
>
> - Team leader

In addition to these main benefits, employers also cited:

- the contribution of flexible working arrangements to maintaining equality and diversity in the workplace;
- benefits to customers arising from the organisation's ability to provide an immediate service for a greater proportion of the day; and
- their ability to use flexitime monitoring arrangements as a managerial tool.

> **"When we get staff from other organisations they come in and say 'gosh, this is effective – this is a surprisingly effective team'. I've just been talking to a colleague recently who joined from the private sector, who said 'I'm amazed how hard people here work'."**
>
> - Team leader

"It's not about being woolly or fuzzy. We could describe ourselves in terms of hard outcomes. All of our hard outcomes are improving all of the time. So we know we're a better business. And I think our values and our flexibility are vindicated because we perform well."

- Senior manager

As the preceding statements – from managers at two of the organisations with the greatest uptake of flexible working – suggest, far from compromising productivity, employing flexible working practices can complement and contribute to it. This is not to pretend that implementation of flexible working policies is not, on occasion, extremely challenging. In the sections that follow, some of the principal challenges encountered by the study organisations are addressed.

Making the system fair

A key concern within the study organisations was that any flexible working scheme should be seen by staff to be fair. In particular, managers and personnel staff were concerned that flexible working should not be seen as a perk available to some (often those in office based positions for whom arranging flexible working is relatively more straightforward) but not others. Such divisions were regarded as liable to generate ill will.

Where a partial scheme is in place, it can cause staff outside the scheme to feel that they are missing out on an important benefit. At Valleys to Coast Housing flexitime is available to office based staff but not to the trades, because callouts to fix problems in V2C's housing stock can come at any time. This differential provision is having a significant impact on uptake of flexible working. Survey responses for trades-based V2C employees show that 56% of those not using flexible working do not do so because suitable flexible working is unavailable to them. Of the 58% of respondents who would like to provide more care for family members, almost two thirds list non-availability of flexible working as the principal barrier to doing so. To enhance equitability and prevent what they termed an "us and them" situation, V2C is in the process of developing alternative flexible working arrangements for the trades.

As an alternative to partial implementation of flexible working practices organisations might, because they cannot be made available to all, avoid certain forms altogether – as at the Port Authority where a formal flexitime scheme has not been implemented, even for office based staff. This situation means that a potentially beneficial system is not available even among those for whom it would be suitable, and also introduces the possibility of inequitable informal arrangements emerging to take their place.

Informal flexible working arrangements have a place in all of the study organisations. At their best, they have enabled organisations to be responsive

at short notice to unexpected requests from staff. As one personnel manager noted:

"Even with 180 staff, you'd be surprised at how many of the things that happen are outside of policy."

- HR officer

While policies help to make systems more equitable, the case studies demonstrate the benefits of building flexibility into the implementation of flexible working arrangements. An element of informality serves to keep the administrative and managerial burden to a minimum, and can help to engender trust between employers and the workforce. At the Port Authority, experience suggests that *too* much formality would spoil flexible working arrangements: "If they [staff] have got to start writing things down and applying for things, they don't trust that." Instead negotiation is built on a relationship developed between managers and their workforce.

However, as one respondent from the Port Authority noted, this is a balance which needs to be carefully managed. The good will generated by a manager being able to send staff home early on a quiet Friday afternoon often pays dividends when that same manager calls for all hands on deck. But if that manager is replaced by another who is less flexible, or where other teams are not accorded the same flexibility, there is a risk that bad feeling will arise. Thus even informal arrangements require management.

An example of this management at work in practice is NewLaw Solicitors in Cardiff, where staff are required to work one of two core shifts on a rota basis. Although a staff member who was expected in the office at 9am could not simply choose to arrive at ten, one team leader observed that "if that same person turned around to us a week before and said 'can I start at 10 o'clock?' – absolutely". This flexibility is controlled and managed by the team leaders, who are responsible for teams of six or seven and who take responsibility for ensuring that staffing levels are maintained throughout a shift.

A distinction can be drawn between informal flexible working practices which are designed to allow responsiveness to requests made at short notice and those which emerge in response to a lack of formal arrangements. The former can serve to enhance staff morale and effectiveness, whilst the latter, being generally ad hoc, risk undermining them. Even within each case study organisation staff are employed in a variety of working environments, not all of which lend themselves to the same forms of flexible working. To avoid negative feeling arising from perceived inequalities in provision, some have recognised the importance of carefully tailoring the forms of flexible working available to suit different working patterns.

This is seen to particularly good effect at Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, which has a large range of options available for different staff. Office staff work under a flexitime system. This offers up to one day flexi-leave per 4-week cycle for time accrued. It has also been found to negate much of the need for additional flexible working requests, which can be accommodated

through time taken outside core hours. By contrast, the outdoor workforce cannot work flexitime – owing to the team-based nature of much of this work – but here uptake of nine day fortnights is high.

> **"I worked for a District Council before, and nobody could ever see how a refuse collector could work flexibly: 'what do you want them to do, run and catch up with the van that's half way down the road or something?'."**
>
> - HR officer

Through provision of nine day fortnights, the option to purchase additional leave and ad hoc flexibility at school pick-up time, PCNPA shows that flexible working can be made available to staff whatever their working pattern.

Consultation was undertaken with all employees by the National Park Authority prior to the introduction of the current flexible working policy, and is a process being planned by the Wales Millennium Centre as it looks to formalise its flexible working policy. To identify viable alternatives to flexitime for its trades staff, consultation is also underway at Valleys to Coast Housing. The V2C consultation will seek to determine not only *what* staff would like to see, but *how* they envisage it working. This has the benefit of obtaining suggestions from those best placed to understand how flexible working would impact on fulfilment of work requirements, and should also allow staff to feel engaged in the process.

Examples also emerged of organisations negotiating with individuals on their personal flexible working arrangements, to ensure that staff feel that their needs have been taken into consideration alongside those of the business. This acts as a further way of maintaining motivation and good will. Within organisations, individual team leaders have developed their own strategies for formalising the negotiation process:

- At Careers Wales North East, staff in one team have been offered the opportunity to submit three options for flexible working that would suit their need, in order of preference. The team leader and human resources staff then work to provide the best possible match, within business requirements.

- At NewLaw Solicitors, one team leader writes down each of the flexible working options suitable to a given situation, along with potential problems with the new working arrangements and solutions to them. This ensures that all eventualities have been considered, by all parties, prior to a decision being made, making the arrangements more likely to succeed.

Each of the study organisations agreed that making some form of flexible working available to all staff was an important goal. For PCNPA and V2C it is already described as a core element of the working environment. For other organisations – Milford Haven Port Authority, for example – increasing the

available options is an aspiration, albeit one that is acknowledged as having a lower priority than other business development goals.

As to the question of introducing policies wholesale versus phasing them in team by team, the picture is more complex. Where it has suited PCNPA to roll out policy in one go – an approach which served to improve staff morale during the relocation of head office – staff at the Millennium Centre plan to trial the anticipated new arrangements and make any necessary alterations before their organisation-wide introduction.

Minimising the administrative workload
From the chart on page 8 it is apparent that the majority of respondents who work flexibly make use of a relatively small number of flexible working options. Whilst flexitime cannot accommodate all flexible working needs – particularly those requiring more than a few hours' leave – managers in organisations operating a flexitime scheme reported that it covers many eventualities. As an apparent consequence of this, additional requests for flexible working are few and far between.

In addition, even those organisations which make available a large number of different forms of flexible working reported stability of arrangements over time. Introduction of flexible working practices does not necessarily introduce unmanageable complexity to an organisation. The evidence is that most staff keep to "normal" working patterns (broadly 9am-5pm for office based jobs, for instance) and that those who do make alternative arrangements do not seek to alter them on a frequent basis.

> **"I don't think people do anything very radical. They mostly just stick to their hours."**
>
> - HR officer

In the most flexible of the study organisations, examples emerged of the active promotion by managers of flexible working[3]. Interestingly, even in these organisations most staff continue to work standard hours for the majority of their time. Despite some organisations having had concerns to this effect, there has been no evidence of a flexible working free-for-all resulting from the introduction of organisation-wide policy.

Nor does increased awareness and uptake of flexible working have to lead to an increased administrative burden. In the study organisations administrative costs have been kept to a minimum through the implementation of effective management systems. There are undoubtedly initial costs – in terms of both finances, where new online management tools are employed, and time needed

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[3] At Valleys to Coast Housing, for instance, an example was given of a male employee who had been encouraged by his line manager to take additional leave to care for his children during a period of family upheaval.

by management and personnel staff to adopt the new systems. However, the organisations in which flexible working is most embedded argued that the benefits of flexible working outweigh these costs, and also noted how costs are often offset elsewhere in the administrative process. Flexitime systems, for instance, require hours worked to be checked but remove the need for late arrivals to be monitored. At the Wales Millennium Centre, the introduction of an online system for recording hours and booking leave is expected to further streamline the administrative process. Therefore rather than administrative time increasing there is either, at best, a decrease or, at worst, simply a change in the activities on which time is spent.

Administrative costs are also kept to a minimum by the appropriate delegation of decision-making responsibilities. Some of the organisations have flatter hierarchies than others, but in all cases team leaders have the power to decide the outcomes of at least some flexible working requests. Where senior managers are involved in determining flexible working requests it tends to be in an oversight capacity, ensuring that policy is applied consistently across the whole organisation. Personnel departments' role is to advise on statutory requirements and, in some cases, to keep records of new working arrangements. This latter role is by no means universal but, where undertaken, plays an important role in the monitoring of flexible working, as discussed in the following section.

Preventing abuse of the system
All of the study organisations were in agreement that flexible working is a matter of give and take. This is not only in the sense that employees work well when they feel well treated, but also that negotiation is the key to obtaining a mutually desirable outcome. It is not always possible to offer an employee his first choice of flexible working arrangement, but managers and HR officers in each organisation do try to find alternative solutions. Three reasons for doing so were highlighted in the course of the interviews:

- Respondents expressed their desire to ensure that colleagues who are under pressure, even for non-work related reasons, can use flexible working to alleviate that pressure wherever possible, and their willingness to negotiate to achieve that end.
- Negotiation was also described as providing an opportunity to explain decisions to staff, helping to prevent disillusionment on those occasions – proclaimed to be rare – when a request is refused.
- Finally, engaging staff in this negotiation process helps managers to secure their buy-in to the agreed arrangements, effectively creating a moral contract that limits subsequent abuse of those arrangements.

Evidently this final point relies in part on trust. Respondents at Valleys to Coast Housing, Careers Wales North East and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, for example, stated that for the system to work there is a need to expect the best, not assume the worst. This is particularly the case where different employees are starting and finishing at different times, as under the flexitime system, or are not working within view of their manager. In large

measure this trust is rewarded. There was across-the-board agreement that most staff can be relied upon to behave reasonably. Fear that abuse of the system will occur appears to be unjustified for all but a tiny minority.

Whilst trust is important, the organisations do not manage by this alone. At Valleys to Coast Housing and the Wales Millennium Centre, respondents detailed their use of performance management techniques. These techniques have a particular strength in relation to flexible working, in that they can help to prevent abuse of the flexible working system. At the core of performance management is the identification of key performance indicators for each staff member; these set out what that person is expected to achieve over a given timeframe. Performance against those targets is monitored through regular professional development reviews. This process has been combined at Valleys to Coast Housing with an explicit focus on developing a culture of leadership and shared values. Engaging all staff in development of a shared mission, taking time to talk about and reinforce that message at staff meetings, and rewarding staff who contribute to V2C's culture through their actions and enthusiasm all contribute to the creation of a more productive working environment. Performance is driven up through the widespread use of rewards, tied to the meeting of clear performance targets, coupled with sanctions for those not performing sufficiently well.

The use of performance targets enables these organisations to measure employee productivity more accurately than if they were simply to measure the hours worked. ('Hours worked' is an unhelpful measure, given that, as one HR officer acknowledged, "even if somebody's sat at their desk, there's nothing to say that they're not looking at another website".) Effective performance management can also be a powerful way to facilitate greater flexible working, by allowing the organisation to move away from a presenteeist culture in which staff are expected to be seen at work from 9am to 5pm. Focus on outputs rather than hours allows a more relaxed approach to be taken to the specific hours worked. As one team leader explained: "I would hope that we give more emphasis to getting the job done than to being on site for exactly 37 hours".

"People can work from home and should be encouraged to do so. But that doesn't mean to say that they should be working from 9am to 5pm. They may choose to work only a few hours during the day and a few hours in the evening, or maybe a few hours at the weekend. It's that flexibility that we need to show managers can work and has worked."

- HR officer

Although, once in place, performance management forms an effective means of enabling flexible working whilst still driving productivity, two potential barriers to its implementation were identified by the study organisations. The first is cultural. Where managers still subscribe to presenteeism, the types of culture-changing activity described by V2C can serve to change attitudes over the longer term. Sharing examples of good practice in other organisations was

also recommended as a means of convincing managers of the benefits of performance management.

The second barrier is more practical and relates to the identification of appropriate targets – identified by one personnel manager as "measurable, achievable and realistic", and to which we might usefully add "challenging". To combat the setting of overly simplistic targets, the Wales Millennium Centre encourages managers to set up to four significant annual targets (linked, for example, to major projects) from which smaller projects and outputs flow.

In addition to monitoring performance across the whole organisation, some organisations conduct reviews of specific flexible working arrangements with the staff in question. This can vary from a single review conducted after the first six months under the new arrangement, at which any necessary adjustments can be made (as at NewLaw Solicitors), to a review every six months (as at Valleys to Coast Housing). The latter approach is of particular interest given that some of the more flexible organisations expressed some concern about becoming *too* flexible. This they described less as a major tension and more as a need to retain a balance: whilst wanting to facilitate flexible working, they must still ensure that business needs are met. Regular review of non-standard flexible working arrangements serves to remind employees that, in one PCNPA respondent's words, their "fundamental contractual arrangement is still 'normal' working" and to prevent a situation where flexible working becomes the expected norm, to the detriment of the business. It also provides an opportunity for the organisation to renegotiate arrangements where they are detrimental.

Encouraging men's uptake of flexible working opportunities
Respondents from a number of the case study organisations made reference to a culture within society at large which tends to regard women, rather than men, as carers. This they saw reflected in a greater tendency among women to request flexible working, whether as a longer-term arrangement or on an ad hoc basis in response to emergencies. Nevertheless, managers and HR officers in the most flexible organisations also acknowledged that their policies serve to create an environment that is more conducive to men's uptake of flexible working.

> **"Men here probably are more comfortable about asking for flexibility, about recognising some of their roles and responsibilities in the family and around childcare or other caring responsibilities."**
>
> - Senior manager

Furthermore, they reported uptake of flexible working among men, including those in traditionally "male" occupations such as manual labouring positions, that exceeded their expectations. That men actively desire to be involved in

caring for family members is a view supported by the survey evidence presented earlier. However, not all organisations are currently offering a range of flexible working options to their entire workforce. The survey evidence shows that men's wish to work flexibly for the purpose of caring for family members consequently remains partly unmet.

Summary of employer findings

Senior managers, team leaders and HR officers from the six organisations were interviewed.

- Employers identified a range of benefits associated with flexible working policies and practices. These included: greater employee focus and motivation; reciprocation of flexibility by employees; improvements in productivity; a decrease in the administrative burden; financial savings; and improved recruitment and retention.

- Managers and HR officers were concerned to make sure that flexible working policies and practices were seen as fair. Tailoring the forms of flexibility available has allowed some organisations to provide flexible working to staff with diverse working patterns. However, availability of flexible working remains uneven.

- Some employers found it helpful to consult employees on the content of their flexible working policy and to negotiate over the details of individual flexible working arrangements.

- In some cases the administrative burden was being kept to a minimum through appropriate delegation of decision making responsibilities.

- Employers were in agreement that most staff can be relied upon not to abuse their flexible working arrangements.

- Performance management techniques were identified as an effective way of managing flexible working systems.

- All of the case study organisations permitted some informal flexible working arrangements. A mix of formal policies and informal practices was reported to be the most effective approach to flexible working.

4   Commentary

It is a positive feature of all of the case study organisations that a range of flexible working opportunities is offered to staff, and that men have taken advantage of these opportunities. Uptake is particularly high in those organisations with the most developed formal flexible working policies. Also notable is that management and HR respondents from every organisation were able to list benefits that accrue from allowing employees to work flexibly.

Nevertheless, 40% of employee respondents felt that they currently do not provide as much care as they would like. The principal barriers to providing more care for family members were listed by survey respondents as being non-availability of flexible working opportunities, financial pressures and lack of time. This issue with non-availability highlights an important caveat with regard to the finding that all employers offer flexible working opportunities. Certain forms of flexible working are not offered by all of the employers and, even where offered, are not available to all employees.

Employers noted the need to balance the needs of the business with those of their employees. Where staff are required to work in teams or to be present for set shifts, managing flexible working requests is especially challenging. However, respondents also drew attention to the benefits to their organisations of allowing employees to work flexibly. In some cases employers are going so far as to promote the use of flexible working to meet family care needs. Even in these instances no significant disruption to the business was reported. Indeed, respondents found that employees were more focused on their jobs if other concerns had been taken care of; thus although they might be present for fewer hours in total, those hours were more likely to be productive ones.

Whilst flexitime systems negate much of the need for additional flexible working requests – as non-work commitments can be accommodated through leave taken outside core hours – they are not suitable for all forms of working. Tailoring the available forms of flexible working to suit different working patterns therefore serves to ensure that all staff have the opportunity to work flexibly. This can, in turn, improve staff morale and effectiveness across the whole of an organisation. Consultation with staff on not only *what* flexible working they would like to see but also *how* they envisage it working contributes to the implementation of effective policy and enhances staff buy-in.

When flexible working requests are made, negotiation is key to ensuring that individuals feel that their needs have been taken into consideration alongside those of the business. Negotiation practices can take many forms: at CWNE, for example, one manager requests that, as a basis for negotiation, colleagues submit, in order of preference, options for flexible working that would suit their need; to maximise chances of flexible working being successful, one NewLaw team leader ensures that potential pitfalls of an arrangement, and solutions to them, are fully discussed and recorded at its inception.

Such processes need not introduce unmanageable administrative demands to an organisation. Drawing a distinction between ad hoc requests and more permanent arrangements, it is clear that the former lend themselves to more informal decision-making processes than the latter. Recognising that team leaders need not always escalate a flexible working request to higher levels minimises the administrative cost of requests. For delegation to be effective, middle and senior managers alike need to be made aware of the benefits of flexible working, for individuals and the organisation, and of the most suitable mechanisms for monitoring it. The training of managers can also serve to promote culture change: as flexible working requests become more favourably received, so staff can be encouraged to make them.

Since a new approach to flexible working cannot readily be adopted overnight, it can be prudent to introduce the necessary systems over a period of time. At the Wales Millennium Centre, for instance, performance management practices were put in place two years ago. This was recently followed by implementation of a new HR and payroll system. This system will integrate attendance monitoring, leave requests and payroll, much of which will not need to be centrally controlled, but rather will be managed by employees and their managers. With these two innovations – performance management and an integrated HR system – in place, the Centre has placed itself in a strong position to adopt flexible working practices with minimum disruption to the business.

The relative stability of flexible working arrangements over time, coupled with the fact that requests tend to relate to only a small number of types of flexibility, points to flexible working being a relatively straightforward process to manage once implemented. Moreover, organisations that actively promote use of flexible working are no more likely to report negative effects on their operations than those that do not.

The evidence is that most staff exhibit reasonable behaviour in relation to their use of flexible working. They do not abuse the arrangements made available to them, and are open to negotiation. Employers therefore need to exhibit a certain amount of trust in their employees – to expect the best, not assume the worst. Whilst trust is important, performance management techniques which use key performance indicators have been shown to be a powerful monitoring tool. The benefit of these techniques is twofold. Underperformance can be readily identified and, once measures are set in place to address it, performance can be driven up across the organisation. The shift in management focus from hours worked to outputs also moves organisations away from a presenteeist culture, making flexible working a more acceptable option. Regular reviews covering not only performance but an individual's flexible working arrangements, in place in several of the study organisations, ensure that arrangements remain suitable for both employee and employer.

Although the case studies highlight a number of strategies for overcoming barriers to flexible working, even in these organisations barriers evidently remain. Not all of the case study organisations are currently offering a full

range of flexible working options to their entire workforce. The survey evidence shows that men's wish to work flexibly for the purpose of caring for family members consequently remains partly unmet. It follows that uptake of flexible working could be expected to rise if further opportunities were made available.

It is apparent from the case studies presented here that the disbenefits to an organisation of implementing a flexible working policy can be exaggerated. Making flexible working available does not inevitably introduce unfairness, administrative complexity or productivity losses. As the V2C case demonstrates, even *promotion* of flexible working can be incorporated into an organisation's working practices without a detrimental effect on business outcomes.

Financial barriers to an individual's uptake of flexible working are potentially considerably more complicated to overcome. The survey evidence suggests that it is not low absolute household income that presents a barrier, but rather an anticipated loss of income relative to the norm. Certainly the fact that many men remain the principal earners in their families is likely to militate against complete parity in flexible working uptake between men and women. Addressing this imbalance will require action at more than just the level of the individual organisation.

There is also a need to encourage men who are faced with a decision between working more flexibly at the potential cost of some income, or taking the more lucrative option at the expense of their ability to provide more care, to see the former as a viable and attractive proposition. Although achieving this through a widespread culture change would be desirable, it can evidently be achieved through promotion within individual organisations. Given the observed benefits of flexible working and the fact that, if managed correctly, these benefits outweigh any costs, the most flexible of the study organisations would argue that it is far better to develop a culture supportive of flexible working than not to do so. This can only benefit all employees, both men and women.

Scope of the study

Why focus on men's uptake of flexible working opportunities? A 2009 study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that fathers believed they spent too much time at work and too little time with their children[i]. Yet uptake of parental leave is low in the UK when compared with levels in other European countries[ii], and remains lower for fathers than for mothers[iv]. And whilst the business case for allowing flexible working is supported by a large body of evidence, a taskforce established recently by the Department for Work and Pensions determined that "there is a greater acceptance of the needs of women to be able to work flexibly than of men" and that men consequently find it harder to access flexible working than do women[v]. Moreover, unequal uptake of flexible working opportunities is not only detrimental to men – preventing them from sharing fully in the care of family members – but also risks exacerbating the very gender inequalities which flexible working might be expected to reduce, by leading to a far higher proportion of women than men occupying part-time, lower paid and lower status jobs[ii].

Given strong personal, business and gender equality cases in favour of flexible working for male employees, there is a pressing need to understand the personal and institutional barriers that prevent greater use of flexible working by men.

What factors influence the creation and uptake of flexible working opportunities for the purpose of fulfilling caring commitments?

How can barriers be overcome?

The conclusions presented here are based on the findings of research conducted in six organisations from across Wales:

- Careers Wales North East (CWNE)
- Milford Haven Port Authority (MHPA)
- NewLaw Solicitors
- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA)
- Valleys to Coast Housing (V2C)
- Wales Millennium Centre (WMC)

These constitute a geographical and sectoral cross-section of medium sized Welsh employers, but are intended to be an illustrative, rather than representative, sample. Accordingly, the research findings should be read as an illustration of attitudes towards, barriers to and strategies for flexible working in Wales at the present time. To enable the research to be undertaken within a short timeframe, the organisations were identified through pre-existing IWA and Chwarae Teg contacts.

Employee questionnaire

To understand personal attitudes and behaviours in respect of flexible working, questionnaires were sent to all male employees of these organisations. Responses were requested from all men with family members requiring care for all or part of the respondent's working day.

Response rates for completed surveys ranged from 8% to 41%. In total, 104 completed surveys were received. This equates to a response rate for all male employees (n=597) of 17%. Since the survey was open only to male employees with family members who need to be cared for during all or part of the respondent's working day, the actual number of potential respondents can be assumed to be somewhat below the total number of male employees. The given response rates therefore represent a conservative estimate.

Organisation	Number of completed surveys received	Response rate (%)
CWNE	12	41
MHPA	19	11
NewLaw	18	18
PCNPA	30	32
V2C[4]	20	14
WMC	5	8

The majority of the survey responses quoted in this report are aggregated across all organisations. Where distinctions are made between organisations, the respective response rates should be taken into consideration. Not all questions in the survey were mandatory. Unless otherwise stated, in the employee response charts "proportion of respondents" refers to those responding to the given question.

Individual records were edited for completeness and consistency. Missing or inconsistent responses were, wherever possible, corrected using imputation from other responses within the record. The exception to this is where a respondent stated that he provided "all" the care for a family member, but also listed other carers; in this case "all" was consistently altered to "most". The principle of minimum change was applied throughout this process.

Since the survey findings presented here are intended as illustrative rather than representative, they should not be used to draw inferences about the institutional and national populations from which the respondents are drawn.

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[4] Following completion of analysis of the surveys, a further 25 completed surveys were received from V2C, taking the total response rate to 32%. Analysis of these surveys showed that the responses supported the existing findings, except in respect of uptake of flexible working and awareness of rights. These findings illuminate certain comments made in the employer interviews, and are therefore discussed in the Employer Perspective section.

Employer interviews

The employee survey was supplemented by interviews with at least one representative of each organisation. This allowed the questionnaire responses to be set within their institutional contexts and for institutional factors to be explored alongside the personal. To obtain information on both company policy and its operationalisation, interviews were sought with a senior manager, a team leader and a human resources officer in each organisation. Although it proved impossible to secure three interviews in every case, sufficient interviews were conducted to give a good indication of policy and practice in all six organisations.

The interview schedule was as follows:

- Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, 9 August 2011
    - Senior manager, team leader, HR officer

- Milford Haven Port Authority, 23 August 2011
    - Team leader, HR officer

- Careers Wales North East, 1 September 2011
    - Team leader, HR officer

- Valleys to Coast Housing, 5 September 2011
    - Senior manager, team leader, HR officer

- NewLaw Solicitors, 30 September 2011
    - Team leader

- Wales Millennium Centre, 7 October 2011
    - HR officer

Size of organisation

Each of the case study organisations has between 150 and 260 employees, approximating to the upper end of the "small and medium enterprise" bracket. The majority (59.6%[vi]) of employees in Wales work in small and medium enterprises[5], making an understanding of behaviours in this segment of the employment market particularly important. Although "medium" sized firms, with 50-249 employees, account for only 11.9% of total employment (20% of employment in SMEs)[vi] in Wales, this study's focus on the upper end of the SME sector has been taken for two reasons, the first pragmatic and the second policy-related.

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[5] Organisations with fewer than 250 employees are classified as small and medium enterprises, or SMEs.

Firstly, the questionnaire survey needed to be of sufficient coverage to allow defensible conclusions to be drawn. To obtain this coverage, and given resource constraints limiting the overall size of the study, the favoured option was to survey as large a number of employees as possible across a limited number of organisations. This option was preferred as, when compared with a survey of a more limited number of employees in a larger number of companies, it reduces the impact of outlier responses on any conclusions drawn for each organisation. It was identified as providing the best balance between i) ensuring reliability of the conclusions drawn from aggregated responses at the company level, and ii) allowing comparisons to be made between different types of working environment.

The second reason for studying organisations at the upper end of the SME range is that previous research suggests that flexible working opportunities increase in line with company size[vii]. This being the case, one might reasonably expect these larger organisations to have dealt with a greater range of flexible working opportunities than their smaller counterparts, and hence to have the most to offer in terms of successful strategies.

Definition of flexible working terminology

Annualised hours – the number of contracted hours is specified across the whole year rather than by the week, and actual hours worked are monitored accordingly

Compressed working week – working of full-time hours in fewer days than the standard working week (e.g. 4-day week or 9-day fortnight)

Flexible annual leave – annual leave that can be taken by the hour, not just by the day or half-day

Flexitime – system permitting employees to vary the start and end times of their working day

Special leave – pre-arranged leave for a specific purpose

Time off in lieu (TOIL) – leave given to compensate for additional hours worked

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[vi] *www.statswales.wales.gov.uk*, Economy and Labour Market > Statistics on Businesses > Business Structure Statistics > Headline Data > Business structure analysis by size-band, Wales and UK (2010 data)
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