Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Home-based working

This is a joint response from Professor Clare Kelliher and Visiting Professor Sarah Jackson, Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University. Professor Kelliher has researched the implementation and outcomes of various forms of flexible working over several decades and has advised governments, NGOs and employers. Professor Jackson led the charity Working Families for almost 25 years, giving her extensive insight into both sides of the worklife equation: workers' experiences via the charity's legal advice service, and employer experience via best practice development and research. They have worked together for many years and through their combined perspectives have a deep understanding of the practical realities of developing and delivering flexible working practice.

Our response focuses specifically on hybrid working. Although similar to remote working, it is distinguished by being considered at organisational, rather than individual level. Its introduction escalated dealing with flexible working from the accommodation of an individual request (often relying on the individual and/or their work group to coordinate amongst different working patterns), to a management-led, organisation-wide framework for line managers and workers to operate in. Being organisation-wide, it opened up the opportunity for remote working to a greater number of workers. ONS figures for late 2024 show that 28%[1] of the UK workforce reported that they had a hybrid working arrangements and, in spite of high-profile return to office (RTO) mandates, this percentage appears to have remained relatively steady.

The shift to hybrid working has significant implications for how organisations operate, but also provides opportunities. We contend that with a greater proportion of the workforce accessing remote working, managers need to reconsider both how they manage work and manage people. This requires a more in-depth analysis of work and more sophistication in implementation, but can enable more effective management, leading in turn to more productive organisations.

Note on definitions

A universally agreed definition of hybrid working has not yet emerged and observations of practice show many variations. As a result caution should be exercised in dealing with the available evidence, because findings may not be directly comparable.

At a general level hybrid working refers to an arrangement where employees are able to exercise a degree of choice over where they work, within the constraints of a standardised framework. However, in practice we see hybrid arrangements ranging from circumstances where the employee has complete discretion over where they work; frameworks offering a range of time they are expected be onsite; through to

---

[1] https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whoarethehybridworkers/2024-11-11

mandates about the percentage of time to be worked onsite, often including designated days and subject to formal monitoring. Hybrid working policies in organisations tend to sit alongside flexible working policies, with the latter based on the 'Right to Request' offering workers the opportunity to request additional variations to when, or how long, they work.

Note on the consideration of evidence

We note that the Committee has indicated a strong preference for evidence that is post-pandemic and understand the desire to have evidence that is likely to be of most relevance. However, we feel that it is important to highlight a number of limitations of relying exclusively on evidence from this time.

First, given the long lead times for publication in peer-review academic journals in the social sciences, to date there is only a limited amount of evidence published based on data collected post-pandemic. Much of that relates to studies using data collected during, or shortly after, the lockdown periods when working from home was mandated. This represents a very specific set of circumstances, since working from home was required and not specifically initiated in either the interests of the employer or the employee. Thus, while the physical aspects of working remotely workplace may have been similar, the relational aspects[2] differed. This is important since the relational aspects (particularly reciprocal behaviours from employees for having the demands of their non-work lives accommodated by their employer) have been used to explain many of the positive outcomes from various forms of flexible working, including remote and hybrid working. Furthermore, the years immediately following the Covid-19 restrictions were something of a transition period and therefore may not be a good indicator of likely future developments. Consequently, there is a strong argument for recognising the limitations of this time period and also considering the substantial body of evidence from research conducted pre-pandemic, which may, in practice, be more relevant for informing future proposals.

Question 3

Employers can benefit from allowing employees discretion over working arrangements through both direct and indirect effects[3]. Directly, employee performance can be improved because of the alternative location (e.g. a quiet remote location can allow for greater focus and concentration avoiding distractions of the workplace; employees working extended hours during what would have been commuting time). The indirect route concerns how employee attitudes are shaped by being able to exercise discretion

---

[2] Anderson, D. & Kelliher, C. (2020), 'Enforced remote working and the work-life interface during lockdown', Gender in Management, Vol. 35 No. 7/8, pp. 677-683.

[3] Kelliher, C. & De Menezes, L. (2019) Flexible Working in Organisations: A Research Overview, Routledge.

over their working arrangement and include positive associations with job satisfaction, commitment/engagement and loyalty, which in turn are associated with enhanced performance. However, to achieve these it is important to recognise that the discretion available needs to be matched to employees' needs and be seen as a means to achieve a better work-life balance. Studies of uptake of flexible working arrangements have shown a lack of uptake may not be a lack of demand for flexibility, but rather that what is offered is unsuitable[4]. As such remote and hybrid working require careful design to ensure they do not 'miss the mark', together with clear communication about availability and a supportive work culture to ensure the available benefits for employers are maximised.

Question 4

Greater awareness among workers and managers of disparities in access to hybrid working appears to have been a driver to open up access to other forms of flexible working to frontline and lower paid workers, in addition to the existing evidence of managers of frontline services being motivated by the potential benefits of providing greater choice over working arrangements to workers via appropriate flexibility.

Current evidence consistently shows that hybrid working (in line with flexible working more generally) is more available to higher income and office workers.

Since the pandemic, there is some evidence of attitudes shifting.   For example, a 2016 study[5] showed that lower income workers had less awareness of flexible working, or believed that it was intended for managerial staff rather than them. A study commissioned by the Scottish Government (and worked on by one of us) reporting in 2021 showed, even among lower paid workers, there was general awareness of the business case for flexible working and a shift in beliefs that flexible working need not be restricted to working parents. Participants were sensitive to the risks for employers, and also pragmatic about the potential for flexible working in their roles – including location-tied roles. Notably, they asked why workers should have to justify a request to work flexibly, suggesting that the employer should have to justify a refusal.

Two years later, interviews with a range of employers in Scotland[6] revealed that perceived unfairness (hybrid working offered opportunities for greater work life balance and budget savings only to some of the workforce) was prompting new forms of

[4] (Lott, Yvonne, and Abendroth, Anja-Kristin (2020): The non-use of telework in an ideal worker culture: why women perceive more cultural barriers. Community, Work & Family, 23(5), 593–611.

[5] Family friendly working needs of low income family households, quantitative and qualitative analysis report, Dean, Knudsen, Biggar and Hinchliffe, ScotCen for Family Friendly Working Scotland 2016

[6] How we work now: the enduring impact of Covid lockdown on flexible working. Sarah Jackson for Flexibility Works 2023

flexibility for site-specific roles. Recent evidence from the annual *Flex for Life*[7] survey of workers in Scotland shows flexible working for frontline workers steadily increasing:

	2023	**2024**	**2025**
Frontline	57%	63%	64%
Desk	67%	74%	73%

Question 5

A win-win situation where both employers and employees benefit is the ultimate goal of flexible working and there is good evidence to show that this is achievable.

Employees benefit from being able to achieve a better work-life balance and as noted in response to 3 above employers can benefit in both direct and indirect ways. However, when allowing employees some freedom over their place of work, employers also have to be mindful of operational needs.

Careful implementation is key to achieving mutual benefit. From the outset, reflecting a pluralistic perspective, it is important that employers and employees recognise and respect their differing interests and the need to compromise in order to achieve a satisfactory arrangement for all. This calls for open dialogue between managers and their employees to help understand the range of priorities which need to be taken into account. Importantly, it cannot be assumed that all employees have the same needs and priorities for balancing their work and life commitments[8]. Equally, some may not want to work remotely at all and if their choice *not* to work remotely is not accommodated in a hybrid scheme, this may impact negatively on their job satisfaction, commitment and loyalty and in turn performance. For managers there is need to analyse the work itself to identify, for example, which aspects of work benefit from co-location of employees and which can be done equally well when they are in remote locations. Consideration needs to be given to appropriate means of assessing and managing performance of remote workers and also what activities are needed to build and reinforce a positive working culture when staff work remotely for some of the time.

The work of the Agile Futures Forum[9][10], a business-to-business collaboration, explored the intersection between employee and employer interests in flexibility and the how these can be matched for mutual benefit, and published a series of case studies illustrating successful implementation.

---

[7] Flex for Life 2025, Flexibility Works

[8] Kelliher, C., Richardson, J. & Boiarintseva, G. (2019) All of Work? All of Life? Reconceptualising Work-Life Balance for the 21st Century, Human Resource Management Journal: https://rdcu.be/8RKQ

[9] AGILE FUTURE FORUM. (2013) The benefits of flexible working arrangements: A future of work report

[10] Cannon, F. (2017) The Agility Mindset: How reframing flexible working delivers competitive advantage, Palgrave Macmillan

Question 6

Recent media attention has focused on a number of high-profile, return to office (RTO) fulltime mandates. However, most RTOs are shift to a more prescriptive form (e.g. a set number of days in the office and monitoring of entry via swipe cards). Notably only a small proportion of employers do not offer hybrid working (9% in autumn 2024[11]).

Media reports tend to focus on concerns about negative impacts on communication, collaboration and innovation. It appears that many full time RTOs have been driven by a 'command and control' style of leaders and business owners.   It is important to recognise that traditional ways of working do not represent a 'gold standard' in terms of worker performance, as evidenced by international comparisons.

We believe that there may be lost opportunities where employers simply return to 'what they know' with enforced full-time RTOs. During and since the Covid-19 pandemic line managers in particular have gained experience in managing remote workers and learnt how to do this effectively. This learning can be harnessed to help organisations ensure that they gain maximum benefit from giving employees some flexibility over where they work. Many studies demonstrate the key role of line managers in successful flexible working and studies during the pandemic show how 'enforced experiments' can challenge perceptions and foster more effective management[12].

Some employers may be motivated to enforce RTOs from a perception of fairness. Reasoning from managers has been reported that if frontline or site-based staff cannot work remotely it is unfair for others to be able to do so. Site-based workers understand the location-specific nature of their jobs and as a result do not expect to be able to work remotely. Fairness can however be achieved in different ways and as noted in our response to Q4, a more effective response to concerns over fairness might be to make other forms of flexibility available instead.

Question 7

It should be noted that productivity at the individual level is often not measured by organisations, partly because it is hard to do in a meaningful way and this is particularly so for the types of jobs which are suitable for remote working. It is difficult to attribute outputs to the work of individuals since it is often the result of collaborative efforts. Broader measures of performance are more common, such as how objectives set through the performance management were met. It is also hard to isolate the effect of one element, such as where work is done, on productivity. Any changes observed are likely to be from a combination of factors.

---

[11] CIPD Workforce Trends https://www.cipd.org/uk/views-and-insights/thought-leadership/insight/employers-return-to-office-plans/

[12] Gascoigne, C., Kelliher, C. & Walthery, P. (2022) *Part-time Working After the Pandemic: the impact of the Flexible Furlough Scheme*, Cranfield University

However, as noted in section 3, there is good evidence to show that there are both direct and indirect influences on performance more generally, which can be attributed to both the environment in which work is done and to giving employees some choice over their place of work. However, it is important to note that where a hybrid scheme, by setting proportions of time to be spent on site/remotely, reduces the degree of discretion for those who previously had wider flexibility, there may be a negative association with performance.

Studies we carried out in 2005[13] and 2008[14] showed early on the positive impact, as reported by managers and by workers themselves, of flexible working arrangements and individual performance and this association has been consistently evidenced in subsequent studies.

We suggest that this underlines the opportunity for employers to think innovatively about the type of work organisation that supports more effective work. Work with employers has demonstrated the value of delegating the implementation of hybrid working, within a framework, to line managers and we would advocate taking this down the organisational hierarchy as close to the person doing the work as possible.

Question 11

Hybrid is binary in the way it has been operationalised. It would be helpful to refine the questions that surveys (e.g. ONS, CIPD etc) ask, in order to understand more about the different varieties of hybrid working. For example, questions might be asked about whether the hybrid framework specifies amount of time to be spent on-site or working from home and which parameter is flexible where staff have to work in a different location (e.g. client premises).

It would be useful to track the amount of time spent onsite in comparison the required amount of time (some workers may prefer to be present).

Policy recommendations (questions 14, 15 and 16)

a   Government offers many forms of encouragement to businesses to innovate in terms of developing products and services, but tends not to relate to management practices. We see a role for government to lean into the innovation remit of The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills by encouraging businesses to experiment and innovate in how work is designed and managed.

---

[13] Is less more? Productivity, flexibility and management. J Swan, Working Families 2005 ISBN: 1 870878 39 6

[14] Flexible working and performance, Cranfield University and Working Families 2008

We recall the investment provided by the then Department for Trade and Industry via the Worklife Balance Challenge Fund, which provided financial aid to employers to help them develop work-life balance policies and practices. Evaluation[15] of the fund indicated that employers were enabled "to introduce significant changes in their employment practices so as to create greater awareness of, and develop policies to support, work-life balance". More than twenty years on, we see the fund as having fostered an important and increasing normalisation of concepts around, awareness of, and the development and implementation of policy and practice in work-life balance, including flexible working.

A similar investment in support of hybrid working and the skills managers require to maximise benefits for employers and workers could open up innovative practice and contribute to the government's objectives of boosting economic growth.

b   We note that refusals of worker requests for flexible working under the 'Right to Request' legislation continue to run at a high rate (25-30%). Given the evidence we cited in Q4 about the realistic attitudes that workers have about the suitability of their roles for flexible working, and noting too the low numbers of cases challenging a refusal heard by Employment Tribunals, we conclude that there is a strong case in support of the proposed change in the Employment Rights Bill that the employer should have to justify a refusal, in addition to following the appropriate process.

c   We support calls made by others that employers should be encouraged more actively to consider the potential for flexible working in any role that is to be advertised. There is widespread and longstanding evidence of the gap between the demand for flexible working and the numbers of roles that advertise its availability; and of the reluctance of jobseekers requiring flexible working arrangements to apply to roles which do not specify its availability. We also see a benefit to the employer: if hiring managers are required to revisit and review the design of the role, this is likely to result in reflection on what the role is actually for, how it contributes to business objectives and any changes to context since its previous design.

---

[15] EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS RESEARCH SERIES NO.32 *The evaluation of the Work-Life Balance Challenge Fund*, Adrian Nelson, Kathryn Nemec, Pernille Solvik And Chris Ramsden, The Tavistock Institute 2004