

# IMPROVING FLEXIBLE WORKING IN CONSTRUCTION

## A TEN-POINT ACTION PLAN

Programme supported by:

Informed by our flexible working pilots with Build UK and four leading construction firms, and also by our extensive experience in other frontline sectors, Timewise has developed this 10 point plan to summarise the critical steps for employers to take when setting out to improve flexible working in their organisation.

The principles behind this approach could be used to improve flexible working across all roles in the construction sector, but these ten steps are designed primarily with a focus on site-based jobs. Our pilots

have highlighted that giving frontline workers some input and control into their working patterns improves their work-life balance, health and wellbeing. It can also make the work environment more inclusive and enable staff to be more engaged and productive, by bringing their best selves to work.

You will find it helpful to read this document alongside our report on the design and outcomes of the pilots: [“Making construction a great place to work: can flexible working help?”](#)





# 01. UNDERSTAND YOUR BASELINE

The first step is to understand where you are now, so that you can be clear about where you want to get to. Look at as much relevant data as you can, to assess how effective your current approach to flexible working is. For example, you may find it helpful to consider the demographics of your organisation, current flexible working arrangements, employee survey results, staff attrition and the reasons for leaving. Alongside this, it's important to gather qualitative data about how this all works in practice, by listening to people's experiences in interviews and focus groups.

## USEFUL QUESTIONS

- What is the current state of flexible working on sites vs head office?
- How comfortable do staff feel talking to their managers about flexibility?
- What are the reasons behind staff turnover?

Looking at all of this together will provide a real sense of where the gaps are, and the issues that can be addressed through improved flexible working.



## 02. ARTICULATE YOUR VISION AND CASE FOR ACTION

To win the hearts and minds of key stakeholders and budget holders, you will need to persuade them of the business benefits of flexible working. For your organisation, these could include how flex can help:

- retain existing talent
- attract new talent and tackle skills shortages
- enhance engagement and performance
- address gender balance and wider inclusion
- improve the health, wellbeing and work-life balance of your workforce.

It's important to provide clarity on your organisation's definition of flexibility and how this links to your vision, values and strategy. For example, making it a core pillar of your wellbeing, diversity, fairness, inclusion and respect strategies will help everyone understand its relevance and importance to the business.

### USEFUL QUESTIONS

- How will improving flexibility help us be a more attractive employer?
- What does flexible working mean in the organisation?
- Have all potential options for flexible working been given full and fair consideration?
- Is it clear to our managers what decisions they can make locally?
- Where do we see ourselves this time next year?

Including a distinction in your strategy between formal and informal flexibility can empower managers to make decisions based on the needs of their team and site, and encourage staff to manage the challenge of balancing home and work more effectively.



## 03. CREATE AN ACTION PLAN FOR YOUR PILOT

Once you are clear where you are now and where you want to get to, you can start to map out the key actions that will close the gap.

Our recommendation would be to pilot your ideas with one team or one site initially, to gain the learning and make any necessary tweaks ahead of rolling out. This will enable you to evaluate how much positive impact there is for workers' job quality and work-life balance, check that the site deliverables can still be fully met, and provide clear evidence for how to make flexibility work in practice.

When creating your action plan for your pilot, it's important to be clear what is in scope and what is not. For example, if a large proportion of your workforce is subcontracted, do you want to unlock flexibility for these workers too? It needs careful thought, as the working patterns of subcontractors are likely to have an impact of your directly employed workforce.

You will also need to think about the knock-on effect of your planned changes. For example, will an informal arrangement to leave early on Fridays, if the work is completed ahead of schedule, impact workers' pay because of a clocking-in system?

Another major issue to consider is WHEN to pilot new approaches to flexible working. Choosing a project that is just about to start, as opposed to well underway, will maximise the opportunity to embed change from the outset.

You will of course need to consider how to communicate your plans to your client, to explain your approach and reassure them that you do not intend your pilot to impact the project deliverables.

### USEFUL QUESTIONS

- What is in scope and what is not?
- Will our T2 and T3 contractors be included? And if not, how do we communicate the reasons for this.
- What will success look like and how will we measure it?
- How will we consult with clients about the planned trial?

Think about the changes you would like to see as a result of the pilot, and how long it will realistically take to be able to measure the difference. Running a survey pre and post pilot may be helpful - you could, for example, measure how much you have shifted the dial on workers' sense of wellbeing and work-life balance. (See section 8 below for more ideas on how to evaluate your pilot.)





## 04. TRAIN YOUR MANAGERS

One of the key barriers to improving flexible working can be the beliefs and behaviours of the site managers, and it's often underestimated how pivotal this is. Your managers are the gatekeepers to the success of new ways of working, so it's essential to ensure they have the support and training they need.

First, the managers at the pilot site need support to gain a clear understanding as to why the business wants to improve flexibility, and how this links to the vision and strategy. Then there is usually work that needs to be done to overcome ingrained perceptions. For example, it's a common concern that increasing flexibility will create more work for the line manager, but studies show the reverse is often true; when access to flexible working is organised collectively by the team, with individuals covering for each other, their engagement in the process can result in increased motivation, and the line manager's role is simply as facilitator.

Finally, managers need upskilling on the principles of flexible job design, particularly where working patterns are changing significantly (for example moving from 5 days to 3 days). They will also need training on how to have proactive conversations about flexibility, especially where team-based scheduling is being implemented.

### USEFUL QUESTIONS

- Have managers got the support of the wider peer group ie regional directors, the commercial team?
- Can someone from the planning team help managers to set up new resourcing schedules?
- Can managers upskill the supervisors to understand workers' preferences?
- Are managers able to access supporting tools and guidance?

Help the managers at the pilot site to be clear about what is in their gift, and empower them to have the conversations and own the decisions.

They could also role model flexible working themselves, to challenge perceptions and demonstrate what is possible.



# 05. DETERMINE THE APPROPRIATE FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS

The next step is to fine tune the precise types of flexible working that will be trialled at the pilot site. There are two perspectives to be considered:

- a)** How the site location, or any constraints to operating hours, affect workers' commuting times (for example restrictions due to s61 regulations in residential areas).
- b)** The preferences of the workers at the pilot site, which are best captured through anonymous surveys, or through honest and open one-on-one conversations, especially if there is a culture where flexible working is seen as a sign of lack of commitment.

After considering both these perspectives, managers can determine which flexible working patterns will benefit workers, at the same time as meeting business drivers.

For some sites, broad principles may be sufficient – even ‘anything goes, as long as there are two HSE authorised people on site at all times.’ Other sites may have a list of options that workers can request – for example, earlier start and earlier finish; later start and later finish; or earlier start and later finish from Monday to Thursday, in return for a 1pm finish on Friday. Even small changes can make a big difference, enabling your workers to feel more in control of their working patterns by giving them choices.

## USEFUL QUESTIONS

- Which flexible working practices can you trial?
- What are the site operating hours that all working patterns must keep within?
- Which key tasks must be covered on site, and which could be done remotely?
- Can the morning briefing be conducted in smaller groups at different times of the day, to allow staggered start times?

Different flexible working patterns may be possible, or not, for different roles and on different sites. However, while all options might not be on the table for all roles, everyone (frontline workers included) should have some form of flexibility available to them. The key to unlocking greater work-life balance and a better sense of wellbeing, is through giving workers more input and control into their ways of working.



## 06. COMMUNICATE THE PLAN TO ALL WORKERS AT YOUR PILOT SITE



A clear and thorough briefing session is vital to the smooth running of your pilot. Engaging teams in a discussion about its purpose, and the reasons why certain forms of flexibility have been chosen for the trial, will create understanding and acceptance. Workers will also need reassurance that their pay will not be affected, and that the aim is to improve their job quality and wellbeing.

It's important to explain from the start that the pilot will be collaborative and inclusive - there will be regular conversations about individuals' work preferences and how to ensure that the work stays on schedule.

### QUESTIONS THAT YOUR WORKERS MAY ASK YOU:

- If all workers have the same preferences, but cover is needed for the late shift, can this be rotated?
- Do I have to work in a different way? it's worked fine like this so far, so why change it?
- Will a change in my ways of working have a negative impact on my pay?
- If I work flexibly can I still take on additional shifts if they become available for over-time?

Everyone needs to understand that compromise may be necessary at times, but that the approach will be consistent and fair across the team.



## 07. RUN THE PILOT

At the outset of the pilot, you'll need to provide clarity of the 'big rules' and then empower managers to make decisions about ways of working for their team. It should be clear, to all those involved, who is responsible for trouble shooting any initial queries or concerns. This is likely to be the supervisor or foreman/woman, but it could be another designated project lead.

A successful team-based approach will require a shared understanding of protocols or ground rules that the team has signed up to, so these will need to be thought through. Examples include:

- Wednesday is team day each week and we all need to be together
- We use technology consistently - creating and storing data and documents to enable teams to collaborate and share knowledge
- Put WFH visibly in the shared calendar
- Ensure a clear handover to a colleague if you are taking a flexi-day.

### USEFUL QUESTIONS

- Do we have a person of the right qualification to meet the Health and Safety requirements throughout site operating hours?
- Could we train more staff to meet this requirement and enable more flexibility?
- How do we engage our client to ensure the arrangements are still in the spirit of our contract?

Determine at the outset how often to review changes in working patterns. The best approach is to integrate this into regular briefings, ideally reviewing on a weekly basis. Regular feedback loops everyone in and creates open channels of communication; giving people permission to talk about how the changes are affecting them will be key to the success of your pilot. It's also important to have open discussions about the work schedule and business needs, ensuring that flexible working is supporting the commercial considerations.



## 08. EVALUATE AND CODIFY LEARNING

Immediately on completion of the pilot, you'll need to revisit your goals and evaluate its success - being careful about the metrics that are appropriate for your pilot, as opposed to the longer term change that can only come from a much broader organisational approach.

### USEFUL QUESTIONS

- What worked well during the pilot and what positive changes did you see?
- If you did the pilot again tomorrow, what would you do differently?
- What extra support would you need to further improve flexible working?

Make the most of your learning from the pilot by creating content for guides and tools, to be used for future pilots or wider roll out. Try to include case studies of the positive difference flexible working made to individual workers.

Finally, following a successful pilot and a longer term roll-out, you may want to consider further metrics to track the impact flexible working can have on ED&I priorities and talent acquisition. These could include, for example:

- Measuring any shift in diversity (by role level/function/department)
- Improvements in the career progression of part-time and flexible workers
- Volume of job applications and time to hire, where flexible working is offered in recruitment advertising.

### EXAMPLES OF HOW TO EVALUATE YOUR PILOT

You will have chosen your metrics before the start of the pilot, and your methodology might include:

- Pre- and post-pilot surveys to measure self-reported improvements in input and control over working hours; or workers' sense of job quality, well-being and work-life balance; or wider shifts in culture, evidencing greater acceptance / less stigma around flexible working
- Re-running qualitative focus groups and interviews with workers and managers, to assess worker engagement, performance and behaviours
- Measuring staff turnover / retention / sickness absence
- Commercial data on project performance in terms of budget and timelines.

**As an example of the survey option**, in the pilots we ran with Build UK and four leading construction firms, we asked for ratings on a scale of 1-5 for statements such as: "My working hours give me enough time to look after my own health and well-being" and "In the past month I have regularly worked significantly more than my contracted hours." Always consider the language of your questions carefully, to make sure they are clearly understood by the workers you are surveying.

**When re-running focus groups and interviews** with workers and their managers, take the opportunity to understand the challenges they came up against in the pilot, and how they overcame them. This could help to shortcut similar issues during subsequent trials or roll-out.

# 09. DEVELOP AND COMMUNICATE GUIDANCE AND TOOLS

With the benefit of the insight and learning from your pilot, you may want to further develop your policies and guidance.

These should provide clarity on which flexible options are available, and share reason-neutral case studies and examples to show what is possible in different roles and at different levels within the organisation.

We particularly recommend that your guidance makes a clear distinction between formal and informal flexible working options - ie what is within the gift of the individual and can be agreed informally with their line manager; versus what requires a more formal process and potential changes to terms and conditions.

Make sure you have guidance and support available for employees/contractors as well as for managers, and that it is simple to understand and easy to access.

## USEFUL QUESTIONS

- Is your vision for flexibility clear and easy to understand for all your employees?
- Are you clear what flexibility you can offer for your wider sub-contracted workforce?
- Are the tools easily accessible, particularly for those employees who are not office-based?
- Who are your role models and what case studies do you have, to help others see what is possible?

To really get flexible working 'right', and experience its benefits, you need to move towards a culture that proactively encourages flex. Challenge those who don't embrace it; celebrate leadership role models who work flexibly, making them highly visible; shout loudly about flexible working in your employer branding; and ensure your processes for career progression and performance management are inclusive of flexible workers.





# 10. ROLL OUT AND REVIEW REGULARLY

With the benefit of experience from your pilot, including feedback from your leaders, managers and workers, you can now move on to conduct further trials, or go straight to roll-out if you feel you're ready.

Before doing so, make sure you revisit your vision and strategy, and the changes you hope to see through increased flexibility.

You will need to work with your HR team to ensure that flexibility is built into your organisational design principles, and that it is routinely raised

in critical employee experience conversations (such as performance reviews, development plans and recruitment interviews). This will help your organisation transition to a culture where flexible working is just part and parcel of what you do as an employer of choice.

The table below describes the four tangible goals we would hope to see in an organisation with a 'mature' approach to flexible working. We hope they help you on your flexible working journey.

	Goal	Activity	Measure
1.	Shift to a 'flex positive' culture – ensure all leaders and managers believe in the benefits of flexible working and take a proactive approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a clear vision that links to your organisation's values and is explicit within your strategy</li> <li>• Provide case studies and celebrate positive role models</li> <li>• Include actions on flexible working as part of your ED&amp;I plans and gender pay gap action plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include questions about flex culture in employee engagement surveys</li> <li>• Set KPIs for flexible hires and flexible career progression</li> </ul>
2.	Upskill managers to support flexible working for site-based teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training and develop clear guidance and accessible tools, to support great conversations</li> <li>• Build training on job design into core L&amp;D offerings for all people managers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put into 360 degree feedback tools – eg 'I feel comfortable to talk about my preferred ways of working with my manager' or 'My manager cares about my work-life balance'</li> </ul>
3.	Determine acceptable options for flexible working in every role, and ensure all employees understand the flexible options available to them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide employees with guidance and tools on how to manage their work-life balance and wellbeing, and how to build a business case for the flexible working arrangement they want</li> <li>• Provide support for frontline managers and employees via examples and case studies</li> <li>• Build working preferences into resourcing plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find a way to record instances of informal flex arrangements</li> <li>• Record growth in the number of people working outside the 'typical' working pattern</li> <li>• Track the ratio of part-time to full time workers, and monitor the proportion that progress internally</li> </ul>
4.	Unlock roles to flexible working at the point of hire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertise jobs as 'open to flexible working', specifying the types of flex that could work in the role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor the ratio of roles you advertise as flexible and track the proportion of workers hired with flexible working</li> </ul>

# SUPPORTING TOOL: **KEY POINTS FOR TRAINING SITE MANAGERS**

## **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

- Be open about your own flexibility and how you manage your own well-being
- Visibly book out non-work time in your diary
- Leave loudly or log off visibly
- Be clear you don't expect replies out of hours

## **TRUST**

- Trust people to do their jobs on a flexible basis
- Don't wait for them to 'earn' flexibility

## **BE ACCESSIBLE**

- Let your team know you are available if they need support, and how to contact you
- Create spaces in your diary where they can catch up with you outside of a formal meeting

## **REWARD & RECOGNISE**

- Consciously reward and recognise people for the outcomes they are achieving - not for their additional hours or always being present
- This will unconsciously reinforce the right behaviours

## **BE UPFRONT**

- Be open and honest about what priorities are shifting if budgets and resources are shrinking

## **DRIVE THE CONVERSATION**

- Talk about flexible working
- Bring it up in 121s, end of year reviews and recruitment
- Having the proactive conversation will say a lot about how your team works

## **ADVERTISE FLEXIBLE OPTIONS**

- Consider which flexible working options might be possible when you advertise vacancies
- The clearer, the better - share what specific types of flexibility would work in that role

## **LEARN & SHARE**

- Talk to other managers and teams about what you are doing
- Share your good practice
- Learn from others. How are they making their roles more flexible?

# SUPPORTING TOOL: LEADING A TEAM APPROACH TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

The best way to explore flexible working is across a team. This means getting each member of your team involved in agreeing the best ways to deliver the team’s work, whilst also supporting each other’s working patterns and preferences.

The tool below suggests a structure for facilitating a team discussion and creating a plan for the weeks or months ahead. You could run the conversations in one session, or break it down into two shorter ones to suit the time you and your team have available.

<b>“LET’S TALK ABOUT FLEX” - LINE MANAGER’S CONVERSATION STARTER</b>	
<b>CONVERSATION 1</b>	<b>CONVERSATION 2</b>
<p><b>AIMS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the benefits of building on our flexible working practices</li> <li>• Identify any barriers to working flexibly in our team</li> <li>• Agree how we will build on the benefits and minimise the barriers, to meet our needs as a business and as individuals</li> </ul>	<p><b>AIMS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agree how we will work flexibly together going forward</li> <li>• Agree our team’s flexible protocols</li> </ul> <p><b>QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE</b></p> <p>What working patterns do we have in our team?</p>
<p><b>Benefits (10mins)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the benefits of building on our flexible working practices?</li> <li>• What is currently working well, or worked well during the recent months?</li> <li>• What practices do we want to ensure we keep or introduce?</li> </ul>	<p>What are our client/stakeholder meetings and deadlines and how can we ensure these are met?</p> <p>How often, when and where do we want to meet as team?</p> <p>What tasks need to be done together?</p>
<p><b>Barriers (10mins)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have been the barriers to effective flexible working, in the past or recently?</li> <li>• What activities have we been unable to undertake effectively remotely?</li> <li>• What activities do we rely on other each other to deliver?</li> </ul>	<p>How can we ensure people are together when they need to be?</p> <p>How can we ensure those working remotely are fully included?</p> <p>How can we ensure we all know who is working when, and how to get in touch?</p>
<p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we build on the benefits?</li> <li>• How can we overcome the barriers?</li> <li>• What actions should we take?</li> </ul>	<p>What commitments can we make to response timescales, for each other and for our clients and stakeholders?</p> <p>What obstacles might we encounter and how will we overcome these?</p>



Following your conversations, record key points using the template below, and share with your team.

<b>BENEFITS</b>	<b>BARRIERS</b>
<b>ACTIONS</b>	
<b>OUR TEAM PROTOCOLS</b>	