Guidance on flexible working approaches

Flexible working approaches in adult social care can significantly benefit both employers and employees by increasing job satisfaction, work-life balance, and productivity. Drawing from best practices in social care, the NHS and other industries, this guidance aims to provide adult social care employers with practical examples to help implement flexible working arrangements effectively.

Flexible working is about more than just retention. It can unlock new opportunities to meet the needs of different workers and contribute to people's mental health, wellbeing and engagement with their role, and we know that more engaged staff leads to better care. It can also be an important option to help improve the diversity of your workforce. A lack of flexible working is most likely to negatively impact unpaid carers, people with disabilities, and parents.

Flexible working is for everyone, regardless of role or reason for wanting to work flexibly. Employees can make a flexible working request from day one of their employment – see the flexible working guidance at gov.uk for more information regarding legal rights.

Flexible working approaches can play a crucial role in improving the work-life balance and job satisfaction of employees in the adult social care sector.

Find more information and a code of practice for handling flexible working requests at ACAS.

Understanding flexible working

Flexible working refers to any arrangement that allows employees to have some control over when, where, and how they work. The key principles include:

- remote working: allowing employees to work from home or other suitable locations, supported by technology
- flexible hours: permitting employees to vary their start and finish times to better suit their personal needs
- part-time work: offering reduced hours to employees while maintaining flexibility
- job sharing: allowing two or more employees to share one full-time role
- compressed hours: condensing the workweek into fewer but longer days
- flexitime: allowing employees to choose their daily work hours within certain set limits.

Informal flexible working arrangements

These arrangements are usually agreed between the individual and their line manager (or equivalent) as and when needed and don't normally require a formal contractual change. Examples of informal arrangements could include:

- swapping shifts/sessions
- mixing shifts/sessions (e.g. working some long and some short shifts/sessions)
- time off in lieu (TOIL)
- flexi-time, allowing employees to choose their daily work hours within certain set limits.
- staggered hours where start, finish and lunch/break times can be variable (usually set around a period of 'core hours')
- working from home (a role in which the individual has a defined office base but can work at home for part of their working week).

Understand the needs of your workforce

Before implementing flexible working arrangements, it's essential to understand the needs and preferences of your employees and the current and future workforce needs of your organisation. Workforce planning is an important part of the process. It can also help you understand where people are excluded from the roles you have available because of a lack of flexibility in your organisation.

Conducting surveys or one-on-one discussions with your current employees can help to identify the types of flexibility that would be most beneficial to them. This will enable you to tailor your approach and address specific concerns.

Implementing flexible working

Develop a comprehensive flexible working policy

Create a clear and comprehensive flexible working policy that outlines the various options available to employees. The policy should also detail the process for requesting and approving flexible working arrangements, as well as any expectations regarding communication, performance evaluation, and data security. It's important to apply the policy consistently across your organisation. ACAS has a template that employers can use to help them develop a flexible working policy.

Encourage open communication:

Foster a culture of open communication where employees feel comfortable discussing their needs and preferences for flexible working. Encourage managers to have regular check-ins with their team members to address any concerns and ensure that the arrangements are working effectively.

Provide necessary technology and support

Ensure that employees have access to the technology and resources required to work flexibly. This may include providing laptops or tablets for remote work, setting up secure communications channels, and offering training on using remote collaboration tools.

Be flexible in approving requests

When employees submit requests for flexible working arrangements, assess them on an individual basis. Be open to different types of flexibility, such as remote work, flexible hours, or job sharing, depending on the employee's role and responsibilities.

Checklist

Implementing a flexible working policy in social care settings requires careful planning, consideration of the unique needs of the sector, and adherence to regulatory requirements. Here is a checklist of things social care employers should consider when implementing flexible working arrangements:

1. **Needs assessment**
   Conduct a needs assessment to identify where flexible working could be most beneficial. For instance, in a residential care setting, night shifts might not be flexible, but administrative roles or community outreach roles could accommodate flexible hours.

2. **Communication and education**
   Hold training sessions or workshops for employees and supervisors to educate them on the benefits and process of flexible working. Explain how it aligns with the organisation's mission of providing high-quality care.

3. **Policy customisation**
   Customise the flexible working policy to address the specific challenges and needs of social care workers. Ensure that the policy always considers the need for adequate staffing levels to maintain client safety.

4. **Supportive culture**
   Promote a culture that supports work-life balance. Encourage open communication between supervisors and employees to address concerns and adjustments to schedules. Share success stories of employees who have benefited from flexible working arrangements.

5. **Technology enablement**
   Invest in technology that enables remote work or flexible hours, such as virtual consultations or mobile apps for staff scheduling and communication.

6. **Trial periods**
   Implement trial periods for flexible working arrangements to assess their impact on service delivery. For instance, a home care agency could allow care workers to adjust their schedules for a few months to gauge client satisfaction and employee productivity.

7. **Regular review**
   Periodically review the effectiveness of flexible working arrangements and seek feedback from both employees and clients. Use this feedback to make necessary adjustments to the policy.

8. **Legal compliance**
   Ensure compliance with UK laws and regulations related to working hours, breaks, and compensation. For example, ensure that overtime and break policies are applied correctly for employees on flexible schedules.

9. **Equity and inclusivity**
   Consider the diverse needs of the workforce. Some employees may have caring responsibilities, while others may prefer compressed workweeks. Be inclusive in accommodating various requests.

10. **Emergency and contingency plans**
    Develop contingency plans for situations where flexible working might not be feasible, such as during emergencies or natural disasters. Define clear expectations for employees during such situations.

11. **Person-centred approach**
    Prioritise the needs of people who draw on care and support and safety. Ensure that flexible working arrangements do not compromise the quality of care provided. For instance, maintain adequate staffing levels during peak service times.

12. **Recognition and rewards**
    Recognise and reward employees who excel while working under flexible arrangements. This can motivate others and create a positive work environment.

13. **Monitoring and reporting**
    Regularly monitor the impact of flexible working on employee morale, client satisfaction, and overall service quality. Adjust the policy and implementation based on the data collected.

By taking these practical steps and customising them to the specific needs of social care settings, employers can successfully implement flexible working arrangements while maintaining high-quality care services and complying with regulations.
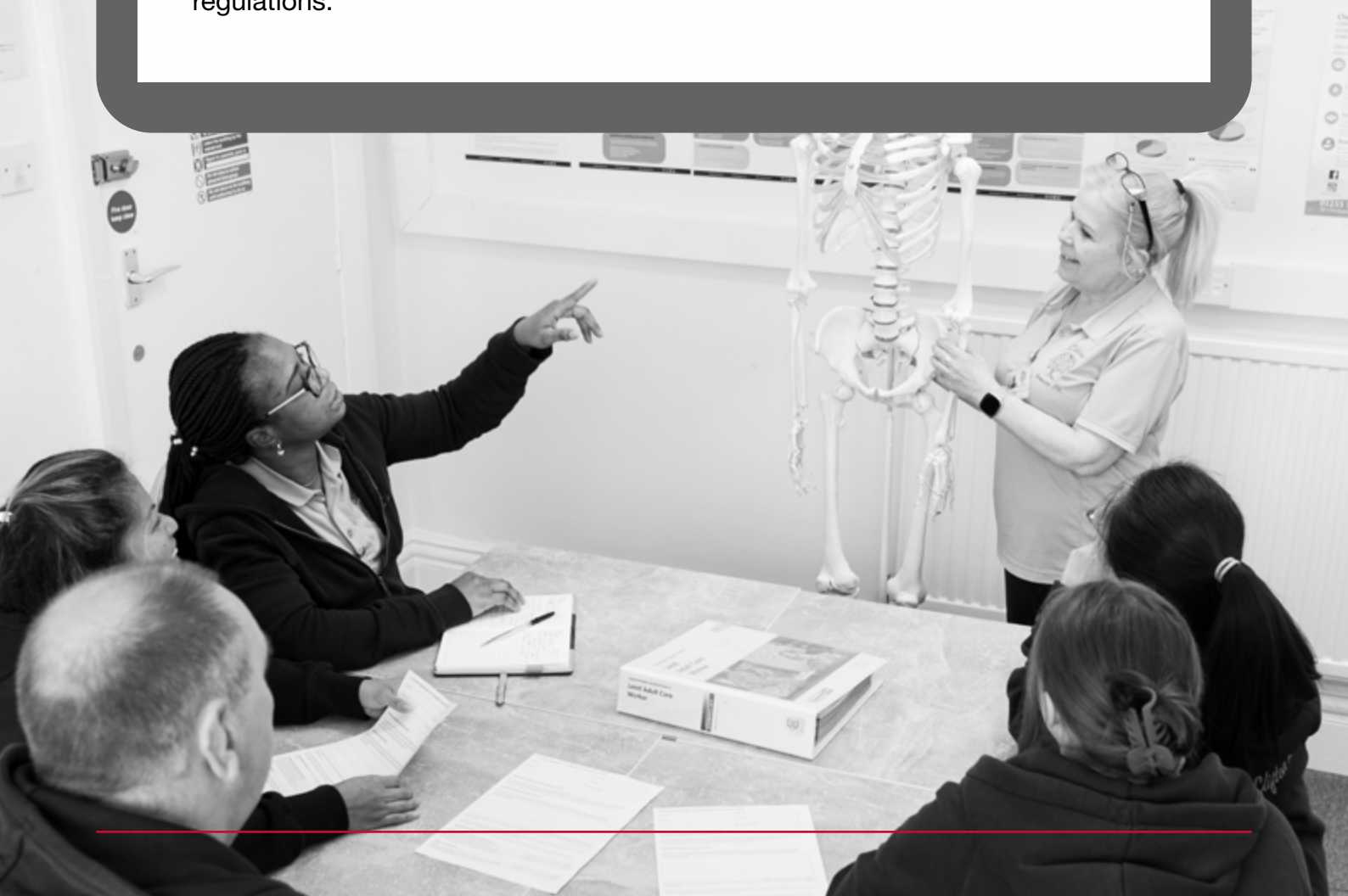
Practical examples

There are a range of ways to adapt to flexible working in the adult social care sector, such as:

Remote working

Allow experienced social workers to work remotely when conducting assessments and follow-ups for clients. Regular check-ins can be held via video conferencing, and secure databases can be used for record-keeping.

Consider allowing remote working for administrative and planning roles. This flexibility can help reduce commute times and provide a better work-life balance.

Flexible hours for care workers

Offer flexible hours to care workers who need to balance their work with providing care to their loved ones. Implement flexitime or staggered shifts to accommodate their responsibilities.

For example, care workers with childcare responsibilities may prefer to work fixed rather than rotating shifts (early, late and nights). This may be the same daily shift, with a rotating rest day pattern (where the day off each week is different), or the same daily shift where the rest days stay the same (e.g. every Monday and Tuesday off).

Job sharing

Allow job sharing where two employees split the responsibilities of one full-time position. This way, they can both enjoy the benefits of employment while accommodating personal needs.

Shift rotations

Implement rotating shifts that allow care workers to have flexible hours while ensuring 24/7 coverage. For example, a care setting can have three shifts (morning, afternoon, and night), and employees can rotate through them on a schedule that suits their preferences and life commitments.

Part-time positions

Offer part-time positions for individuals who cannot commit to full-time work. This can be particularly helpful for students or those with other part-time jobs.

On-call and relief staff

Have a pool of on-call or relief staff who can fill in when regular employees are unavailable or during peak demand periods. This ensures that critical care is always available.

Flexible scheduling tools

Implement scheduling tools that allow employees to indicate their availability and preferences. Managers can then use these tools to create schedules that meet both the needs of the organisation and the employees.

Compressed workweeks

Allow employees to work longer hours on fewer days, such as a four-day workweek with 10-hour shifts. This can provide extended periods of time off for rest and personal commitments.

Phased retirement

Encourage older employees to transition into retirement gradually by offering flexible work arrangements. This can help retain experienced workers while allowing them to reduce their hours.

Floating holidays and paid time off

Offer floating holidays and paid time off that employees can use for personal and family needs. This allows them to manage their work schedules more effectively.

Family-friendly policies

Implement policies that support employees with caregiving responsibilities, such as paid family leave, flexible start and end times, and the option to work from home when necessary.

Cross-training

Cross-train employees to handle multiple roles within social care. This flexibility enables staff to cover different positions during emergencies or staffing gaps.

Technology and automation

Invest in technology and automation to streamline administrative tasks, reducing the workload and allowing care workers to focus more on direct care.

Feedback mechanisms

Continuously gather feedback from employees to understand their needs and concerns regarding flexible working arrangements. Adjust policies accordingly to ensure they remain effective and sustainable.

Skills development

Offer training and development opportunities to help employees acquire new skills and advance in their careers within social care. This can motivate them to stay with the organisation and contribute to its sustainability.

Incorporating these flexible working practices into the social care industry can help ensure that care is consistently provided to people who need it while also promoting the wellbeing and job satisfaction of care workers. It's crucial to balance the needs of the organisation with those of the employees to create a sustainable and supportive work environment.

Things to watch out for

Maintaining service continuity issue

Flexible schedules can disrupt service continuity, particularly in care organisations where people who draw on care and support rely on consistent care and set hours of the service need to be defined.

Solutions

- Cross-train employees so that they can cover for each other during absences.
- Create clear handover procedures and documentation for shifts.
- Implement contingency plans for unexpected shortages in staffing.
- Prioritise client needs and establish minimum staffing requirements.

Contingency plans

Emergency or lead decision making contact and line of reporting, if a member of staff is not available in your core hours or who needs contacting out of their core hours (delegation rota in emergency).

Co-ordination and communication challenges

When employees work remotely or have varying schedules, it can sometimes be challenging to maintain effective communication. Misunderstandings, missed messages, and reduced face-to-face interaction can hinder collaboration and teamwork.

Solutions

- Implement robust communication tools and platforms to facilitate easy information sharing.
- Establish regular team meetings or huddles to ensure everyone is on the same page.
- Encourage the use of collaborative tools and project management software.
- Designate a communications coordinator or supervisor to keep everyone informed.

Isolation and loneliness

Employees working remotely may experience feelings of isolation and loneliness due to reduced social interaction with colleagues. This can affect their mental health and job satisfaction.

Solutions

- Establish regular virtual team meetings and social gatherings to maintain connections and combat feelings of isolation.
- Encourage the use of team collaboration tools and instant messaging platforms for ongoing communication.
- Implement a buddy or mentor system where remote workers can connect with colleagues for support and guidance.
- Offer mental health resources and promote their accessibility for employees struggling with isolation.
- Organise virtual coffee breaks or casual chat sessions to foster informal interactions among remote team members.
- Consider occasional in-person meet-ups or retreats when feasible to build stronger team bonds.
- Provide opportunities for skills development and career growth to keep remote employees engaged and motivated.

Difficulty in monitoring performance

For some roles, it can be challenging to monitor employee performance when they are not physically present in their place of work. Managers may worry about employees not being as productive as they would be in their place of work.

Solutions

- Set clear performance metrics and expectations for all employees.
- Implement regular check-ins and performance reviews.
- Use technology to track tasks and outcomes.
- Focus on results and deliverables rather than hours worked.

Security and data privacy concerns

Remote work can pose security risks, especially if sensitive data is involved. Ensuring that employees follow security protocols and use secure networks can be a challenge.

Solutions

- Implement strict security protocols and encryption for remote access.
- Train employees on data security best practices.
- Conduct regular security audits and updates.
- Develop clear policies on handling sensitive data.

Inequity and unfairness

In organisations where flexible working is not applied consistently or fairly, some employees may feel disadvantaged or resentful. This can lead to morale issues and conflicts and potentially legal challenges.

Solutions

- Develop comprehensive, clear and inclusive flexible working policies applicable to all employees.
- Ensure that all employees, regardless of role or level, have equal access to flexible work arrangements.
- Be transparent about the criteria used to approve or deny flexible work requests and the decision-making process.
- Evaluate employee performance based on outcomes and results, rather than the time spent undertaking tasks.
- Maintain open and regular communication with employees to understand their needs and preferences related to flexibility.

Lack of work-life balance

Flexible working can sometimes lead to overwork. Employees may find it challenging to disconnect from work when it's always accessible through remote access, leading to burnout.

Solutions

- Establish clear boundaries between work and personal life. Define specific work hours and stick to them.
- Establish clear communication and expectations.
- Establish transparent channels for discussing workloads.
- Promote time management skills and productivity.
- Implement employee assistance programmes for counseling and support.
- Create wellness programs for physical and mental health.

Loss of company culture

A strong company culture can be challenging to maintain when employees are not physically present. Casual interactions, team-building activities, and shared experiences may decline.

Solutions

- Foster virtual team-building activities and social events to maintain a sense of camaraderie.
- Clearly communicate and reinforce company values, mission, and goals through virtual channels.
- Establish regular video meetings and check-ins to maintain face-to-face connections.
- Encourage open communication and feedback to keep remote employees engaged.
- Provide opportunities for skills development and career growth, even in a remote setting.
- Recognise and reward remote employees for their contributions and achievements.
- Use collaboration tools and technology to facilitate teamwork and information sharing.
- Develop a remote working policy that aligns with the company's culture and expectations.

Managerial skills gap

Managers may need training and development in managing remote or flexible teams effectively. Some may struggle with the shift from traditional supervision to a results-based approach.

Solutions

- Provide training and resources to help managers effectively lead remote and flexible teams.
- Foster strong communication skills, including active listening and clear virtual communication.
- Encourage adaptability and flexibility in management styles to accommodate diverse work arrangements.
- Emphasise goal setting and performance metrics to measure productivity.
- Promote trust and accountability between managers and flexible workers.
- Train managers to recognise and address potential isolation or disconnection issues among team members.
- Implement regular feedback and coaching processes to support career development for flexible workers.
- Encourage managers to lead by example in embracing work flexibility and work-life balance.

Uneven distribution of workload

In teams with a mix of flexible and non-flexible workers, there's a risk of an uneven distribution of workload. Some employees may be perceived as doing more or less work than others, leading to resentment. Make sure non-flexible workers aren't adversely affected by accommodating flexible workers, for example by having to cover for colleagues who are on a non-working day.

Solutions

- Set limits on working hours and encourage employees to take breaks.
- Monitor workload distribution and adjust as needed.
- Implement time-tracking tools to ensure accurate reporting.
- Educate employees on the importance of work-life balance.

Legal and compliance issues

Employers must ensure they comply with UK laws, especially regarding overtime, rest breaks, and employee rights.

Solutions

- Consult with legal experts to ensure policies align with relevant laws.
- Maintain thorough documentation of all agreements and requests.
- Communicate clearly with employees about their rights and responsibilities.
- Regularly review and update policies to remain compliant.

Technological challenges

Not all employees may have access to the necessary technology or a suitable home office environment. This can limit their ability to work effectively from home.

Solutions

- Provide essential technology like laptops and internet access.
- Offer loan equipment for employees lacking necessary tech.
- Support employees in creating suitable home office environments.
- Offer training and resources to enhance digital literacy.
- Redistribute tasks to accommodate employees with technology challenges.

Resistance to change

Some employees and managers may be resistant to adopting flexible working arrangements due to a preference for traditional work setups. Resistance to change can hinder successful implementation.

Solutions

- Provide clear explanations of the benefits of flexible working.
- Offer training and support to help employees adapt to new ways of working.
- Address concerns and feedback from employees.
- Lead by example and demonstrate the advantages of flexibility.

Loss of innovation and creativity

In-person collaboration can spark innovation and creativity. In flexible working environments, spontaneous idea generation and creative sessions may be reduced.

Solutions

- Utilise virtual collaboration tools like video conferencing and virtual whiteboards to facilitate remote creative sessions.
- Schedule regular virtual sessions where team members can share ideas and collaborate in real-time.
- Form cross-functional teams that bring together diverse skills and perspectives to stimulate innovation.
- Create an open culture of idea sharing and encourage employees to contribute their thoughts and suggestions.
- Invest in digital platforms designed for ideas generation and innovation management.
- Establish feedback loops where employees can share their thoughts on current processes and suggest improvements.

To overcome these pitfalls, organisations should carefully plan and implement flexible working arrangements, provide appropriate training and support, and continuously evaluate and adapt their strategies to address emerging challenges. Successful flexible working requires a balance between employee autonomy and accountability, effective communication, and a culture that values work-life balance and diversity in work arrangements.

Conclusion

Incorporating these flexible working practices into the social care industry can help ensure that care is consistently provided to people who draw on care and support while also promoting the wellbeing and job satisfaction of care workers. It's crucial to balance the needs of the organisation with those of the employees to create a sustainable and supportive work environment.

Resources

Flexible working in social care | Local Government Association ↗

Flexible working | Acas ↗