

ADOPTING A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO FLEXIBLE WORKING

Guidance for headteachers



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INTRODUCTION



A recent *Teaching Pioneers' Programme*, led by Timewise in eight secondary schools across three multi-academy trusts, brought to light the benefits of a proactive 'whole school approach' to flexible working. Underpinned by a reason-neutral principle for agreeing flexible arrangements, the whole-school approach engages all staff and creates fairer access to flexibility, in a way that works for the school and its students, as well as meeting individuals' needs.

Moving towards this new approach involves a shift at a cultural and operational level over the course of a number of years. It is an evolving process of working out what is possible.

This guide provides a framework of the key steps to take. While our programme was conducted in secondary academy schools, the guidance will also be helpful for headteachers in the maintained sector and in primary schools.

HOW FLEXIBLE WORKING HELPS SCHOOLS

Giving teachers flexibility in their roles has many benefits, but perhaps chief amongst them is reducing stress and improving well-being. Flexible working can also make the school environment more inclusive and enable staff to be more engaged and productive, by bringing their best selves to work. Knock-on improvements on recruitment and retention will follow.

SIX STEPS TO FLEXIBLE SUCCESS

01

BUILD YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND ESTABLISH YOUR BUSINESS CASE

02

KNOW YOUR SCHOOL'S STARTING POINT

03

KNOW WHERE YOU WANT TO GET TO

04

CONSULT, COLLABORATE, COMMUNICATE

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INTEGRATE INTO THE TIMETABLE, AND KEEP EVOLVING

01 BUILD YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND ESTABLISH YOUR BUSINESS CASE

As headteacher, your commitment to ‘making flexibility work for your school’ is the single most important factor for a successful outcome. It is likely to involve significant operational and cultural change, constantly challenging yourself to think differently. So, before you start, make sure you are clear on why you want to change your approach to flexible working, what pitfalls to look out for, and what the rewards might be.

The list of resources opposite will help you familiarise yourself with the benefits of flexible working, case studies of what other schools are doing, research studies in the education sector, and a variety of guidance from different bodies.



MAKE IT YOURS

Go beyond reading the theory and evidence from other schools:

- Build **your** school’s business case for flexible working, looking at additional costs vs projected savings, likely impact on recruitment/retention etc
- Look at how it fits in with **your** school’s values and development plan
- Consider **your** school’s particular barriers and how they could be overcome; they might be structural, attitudinal or skills-based (eg a lack of knowledge of how to design flexible jobs).

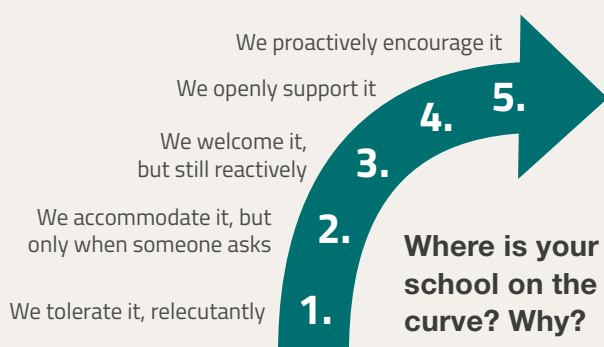
USEFUL RESOURCES AND GUIDANCE

- **DfE resources and case studies for schools**, around [different aspects of flexible working](#)
- You can access support from your [local Flexible Working Ambassador school](#)
- **The National Foundation for Educational Research** has conducted [useful research in schools](#)
- **Grassroots organisation WomenEd** actively [promotes and supports flexible working](#)
- **The Local Government Association** has been proactive in supporting both maintained sector and Academy HR professionals with [training and webinars](#)
- **The Chartered College of Teaching** has published [case studies to support flexible working](#)
- **Timewise’s Teaching Pioneers Programme** looks at the experiences of schools working towards a whole school, proactive approach.
- **A variety of books** have been published for school leaders, including Emma Turner’s ‘Lets talk about Flex-Flipping the Flexible Working Narrative in Education’ and Mandy Coalter’s ‘Talent Architects: How to Make your School a Great Place to Work’
- Headteachers in academy trusts can contact HR to ask for further resources and support, and to be put in touch with other schools in the trust who may be able to help. Headteachers of maintained schools may find that the HR person in your LEA can provide you with some ideas.

02 KNOW YOUR STARTING POINT

Your first step towards a proactive, whole-school approach to flexibility is to take an honest, self-critical look at where you are now. Use the Timewise Maturity Curve as a basis for discussions with your team, and to agree which step on the curve you can realistically aim for. At number 1 on the curve, you do the legal minimum; at number 5 you are openly publicising your commitment to flexible working, proactively asking all staff regularly about their work-life balance needs, raising the topic with candidates for new jobs, and tackling flexible timetabling across the whole school.

TIMEWISE MATURITY CURVE: A SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL



Now spend time getting a more informed perspective

Flesh out your thoughts on where you are on the maturity curve by looking for evidence:

- Examine your data. How many flexible arrangements do you have? Is it mainly about part-time or job share? Or for parents with young children? Or is there a wide range of flexible working arrangements?
- Perceptions matter too, so consider doing a short survey to find out how staff feel. Do they know what flexibility is available? Are they comfortable talking about it? How supportive do they find the leadership team?
- Get a sense of what the unmet demand for flexible working is amongst your staff. This could also be achieved via a survey, or through focus groups. (Make it clear that this is a litmus test to inform your thinking, not a vote.)
- What have you learnt from the covid pandemic that you can take forward?
- Articulate how flexible working aligns with your school's values, to tease out concerns and aspirations.

SET UP A PROJECT TEAM

A spirit of collaboration and honest dialogue is central to the whole-school approach to flexible working.

In this exploratory phase, start as you mean to go on by bringing together a group of enthusiasts and sceptics from a range of roles. Include the individual responsible for timetabling, members of the SLT, a head of department, a head of year and a classroom teacher, as well as perhaps governors or parents. They will bring a range of perspectives, ideas and challenge, as well as acting as advocates.

03 KNOW WHERE YOU WANT TO GET TO

Define your long-term vision

This is where your project team will be especially valuable, in thinking creatively about what might be possible.

It's likely that your school (like most others) currently follows a 'request-response' model of flexible working. This is defined in the panel below, and you can reflect on it alongside what's involved in a proactive, whole-school approach.

REQUEST-RESPONSE APPROACH

- Mainly formal requests, usually around childcare
- Onus on headteacher to manage
- Sense of finite number possible
- 'Merit' of reason
- Can feel unfair
- Legacy agreements
- Roles considered in isolation

PROACTIVE, WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

- A range of formal and informal arrangements
- Individual and school-wide arrangements
- Open and informal conversations about needs and preferences
- Different points/paths to discuss flexibility
- Lean towards reason-neutral
- Use flex job design (where and when) to look at parts of a job
- Shared accountability

Reaching your school's vision for flexible working will require you to challenge the status quo by asking yourself (and your project team) questions like these:

- What can we do as a senior team to work differently?
- What are the opportunities to change how we work? And will we work better?
- What are our cultural barriers to flexible working? Eg student outcomes, the perception that costs will increase, or a fear of opening the floodgates?

- How can we tackle these perceptions?
- Do we understand how the expectations of the UK workforce have changed, and the extent to which teachers want a share of new, more flexible ways of working?
- How can we surface latent demand for flexible working? By integrating discussion into the annual review process? By initiating and stimulating informal discussions?
- Can we offer flexibility to new teachers from the point of hire?
- Who needs to decide all of this?
- Can some decisions be made within smaller teams if we make the expectations clear?

Set achievable short-term goals

You will need to move forwards step by step, so look back at your thoughts on where your school sat on the Timewise Maturity Curve, and consider what you can do next to improve.

For schools that are high up on the curve, you are well-placed to become advocates for flexible working and can be thinking about how flexibility could help you achieve learning outcomes for students.

If you are around the middle, look at how you match up to the characteristics of the proactive, whole-school approach. You may want to think about how you can encourage open conversations about flexibility with the SLT or with line managers. Or, if a lot of your flexible workers are parents working part-time, how you can promote different types of flexibility for a range of reasons.

If you are lower down the curve, you will need to look at flexible working as a change project. Who do you need buy-in from, and who can work with you? Your initial aims should be around communication and getting open discussions started.

04 CONSULT, COLLABORATE, COMMUNICATE

Wherever you are on the Timewise Maturity Curve, now is the time to improve how you communicate your flexible working intentions to staff. This requires a greater step change than reviewing policy documents and what is said in emails; it's about adopting a consultative, collaborative style with open dialogue around flexible working.

Your aim should be that everyone in the school is aware of the options and support available to them – they shouldn't need to ask. And the single best message you can communicate, is that your approach is one of openness and collaboration.

THREE POSITIVE MESSAGES TO PRESENT TO STAFF

“ If you would like to discuss your working patterns, now or in the future, come and talk to us

“ We cannot promise we can make everything work, but we can work with you to see what is possible

“ Creating more flexibility around when, where and in how much time we work is not going to happen overnight in a school, but we believe it can make a better place for all, including our students.



POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

- Launching your approach as a new school-wide initiative
- Weaving it into the narrative of other initiatives (eg D&I, well-being, a recruitment drive)
- An annual headteacher's email inviting staff to request a discussion about their working pattern
- Reminders at staff meetings to speak to the leadership team – “we're here to listen and support you”
- A staff survey
- A formal, proactive discussion as part of the annual objective-setting conversation
- Informal conversations initiated by senior leaders and/or line managers.



05 LEAN TOWARDS BEING REASON NEUTRAL, AND CREATE NEW WORKING PATTERNS TO SUIT

Go beyond granting part-time arrangements for childcare reasons

Flexible working has always been most associated with part-time work to meet childcare commitments and, although home-working was forced on schools during the pandemic, there is generally much less practice of other forms of flexibility.

However, many people – and teachers are no exception – want to work full-time but have a degree of flexibility around when and where they work, in order to have a little more control over their work-life balance. There are many specific reasons – for example, wanting to improve mental well-being was found to be a key driver for staff in our Teaching Pioneers Programme.

Accepting other needs as valid reasons to request flexibility will create a fairer approach in which all staff can feel engaged.

Reframing flexible working in schools

Flexible working is much broader than part-time working or job-shares. Other forms and terms include (but are not limited to) home-working, flexible shifts, flexi-time, staggered hours, a compressed working week, annualised contracts, agile working.

There is also an important difference to be made between formal flexible working that needs to be in staff contracts (part-time and job shares, for example), and informal arrangements that can be agreed without a contractual change. Informal flexibility might include, for example, permission to leave early and work from home once the classroom schedule has finished for the day; or ad hoc time off to attend significant personal occasions.

You will need to upskill your team in ‘flexible job design’, so they can consider where, when and in how much time people might work – and also how any changes might affect the responsibilities, activities, outcomes, and skills of the whole team, not just the job holder.

Again, a fair and consistent approach is the way forward: what is possible for one person should hold for others in the same role.

REASONS TO WANT FLEXIBILITY



05 LEAN TOWARDS BEING REASON NEUTRAL, AND CREATE NEW WORKING PATTERNS TO SUIT

At Timewise, we believe the best way to describe flexible working is:

“ A way of working which allows variation in where, when or how much time people work

And the most successful flexible working always involves:

“ Working patterns which meet both individual needs and organisational requirements

EXAMPLES OF FLEXIBLE ARRANGEMENTS FROM THE TEACHING PIONEERS PROGRAMME

- **Individual flexible arrangements** eg early departures on a regular basis for childcare needs; a teacher on phased retirement, working part-time with core hours in the middle of day; a teacher taking Wednesday afternoon off every three weeks to attend a course
- **Team-based arrangements** eg shared form classes, to support teachers wanting a later start some days of the week; the SLT working through their flexibility preferences and agreeing how to share the workload to adjust their working patterns
- **Whole-school flexible initiatives** eg remote CPD; free period timetabled for all teaching staff at the start or end of the day, with the option to work-from-home; virtual meetings, scheduled later in the day so staff can go home and sign in remotely
- **Occasional flexibility** eg permission to leave early at short notice due to own child's illness; arranging a day off to go to a wedding.



06 INTEGRATE INTO THE TIMETABLE, AND KEEP EVOLVING



The complexity of the school timetable is perceived as a key stumbling block to flexible working in schools. And the key solution is to start the thinking well in advance of formal requests being made to change working patterns.

The best way to enable this is to encourage line managers to talk regularly to their reports, so they understand their feelings about their working patterns, and can anticipate their requests. In several of the schools involved in the Teaching Pioneers' Programme, informal conversations about needs and preferences started ahead of next academic year. This allowed the shape of the curriculum and timetable to develop over a longer period.

Timetabling for flexibility is not just about part-time staff. Other arrangements can be factored in – for example, tabling a free period at the start or end of the day, and encouraging staff to work from home; or sharing form teacher roles to help staff who request late starts. The first

of these is an example of a whole-school initiative, and the second of supporting individual arrangements.

Trial and evolve

We would always recommend testing new arrangements before offering them widely to all staff (making sure you communicate that you're undertaking a trial, to avoid any feelings of resentment amongst others).

It can be a lengthy process spanning more than a school year; robust new ways of working require you to constantly encourage ideas, interrogate their viability, test them in practice, evaluate and tweak them.

Your proactive, whole-school approach to flexible working will never stop evolving – it's all about promoting a collaborative approach that fosters new ideas, and then rigorously exploring their effectiveness and impact. Remember to keep the dialogue alive with all your staff.



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TALENT THROUGH FLEXIBILITY

Timewise delivers consultancy to help businesses attract and develop the best talent. We also conduct research and share market insights on flexible working and flexible hiring, and run Timewise Jobs, a jobs board for roles that are part-time or open to flexibility.

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