

Flexible working

A guide for nursery managers

INTRODUCTION

Flexible working is the ability to adapt working patterns to meet individual needs and preferences and meeting the needs of our nurseries and services at the same time.

Being able to work flexibly is increasingly seen as a cornerstone for good work-life balance and it has been proven to improve health and wellbeing. In addition, research indicates that employees who can access flexible scheduling are better able to manage disability and long-term health conditions, as well as their mental health and stress during working days (CIPD, 2018).

The demand for flexibility continues to rise. Employees, and candidates, are increasingly looking for a degree of flexibility.

“*There is even growing evidence that flexibility is as or more important than salary for many people. With flexible recruitment lagging a long way behind candidate demand, hiring managers ignore this powerful talent attraction tool at their peril.*

***TIMEWISE FLEXIBLE JOBS INDEX**

It is not just individuals who benefit from working flexibly. Employers can gain from increased staff engagement and motivation, access to a wider pool of talent and a greater diversity of employees. The government is introducing new legislation around flexible working which places greater onus on us as employers to support our staff to work flexibly.

This guide has been designed to support you as a manager in creating and managing more flexibility within your team.



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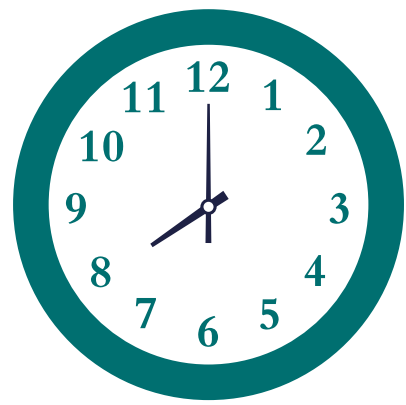
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WHAT IS FLEXIBLE WORKING?

A good definition of flexible working is this: 'working patterns that are different to the conventional 5-day a week, on-site way of working'. Flexible working can be either formal (in which there is a formal and usually contractual or written agreement) or informal (an agreement between manager and staff which requires no contractual change and is usually for an agreed period of time).



TYPES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

Job share: in which (typically) two people share the responsibilities of a role usually carried out by one person. Salary and benefits are on a pro rata basis.

Part-time: a reduction in workload and working hours. Salary and benefits are on a pro rata basis

Compressed week or fortnight: the five-day week (or ten-day fortnight) is reduced to fewer days (usually four, or nine, respectively) by working longer hours on the working days. The 'day off' can be a fixed day or agreed on a regular basis. Many people work slightly longer hours and take a half-day off – a 'lighter' form of a compressed week.

Staggered hours: the working day starts and ends at a different, agreed time to the conventional times. This is not the same as shift work where specific time slots are allocated to cover a business service.

Flexi-time: the employee can vary when they will complete their contracted hours, often with some core hours specified when they must work.

Annualised hours: in this arrangement, an employee's working hours are expressed as the total number of hours required during the course of the year, and when the hours are worked may vary according to business demands and the individual's desire to take extended time off.

Time off in lieu refers to paid time-off in recognition of overtime worked.

Hybrid working (or working from home): an agreed number of days/parts of a day are worked from home.

The ability to swap or choose shifts: by supporting staff to swap or choose shifts, for example offering a choice of early or later shift patters, they have greater control of when they work.

Short term adjustments to a working pattern: in order to support staff around specific circumstances e.g. to attend appointments / support family members.



CASE STUDY

Scarlett, a Level-3 Practitioner, joined the early years sector as an apprentice and is now a room leader. Scarlett initially worked 5 days but found that it was affecting her mental health and she was “drained all the time”. Scarlett spoke with her nursery manager about the impact it was having on her and they agreed to trial a compressed, 4-day a week working pattern. “Friday is for me and long days are fine. The mornings are nice. A lot of people say – you’re so lucky but nothing is stopping them from trying it, I shout really loudly about the four-day week”

NEW FLEXIBLE WORKING LEGISLATION!

The legislation around flexible working is changing to support workers in when and where they work. Changes include:

- the right to request a flexible working arrangement as soon as a new employee starts working
- employees can make 2 statutory requests in a 12-month period
- employers need to respond to a request within two months
- there will no longer be a requirement for employees to explain what the effect might be on the employer and how it can be dealt with.

This puts a lot more emphasis on the employer to support staff to work flexibly. More information can be found [here](#).



CASE STUDY

Alex is a level 2 practitioner who works a flexi-time, split-shift working pattern of 7.30am-11am and then 2.00pm - 6.00pm.

This working pattern was agreed with the nursery manager to enable the Alex to manage a personal commitment (in this case looking after horses) and the time was then covered by a part-time member of staff who worked 9.30-2.00pm.

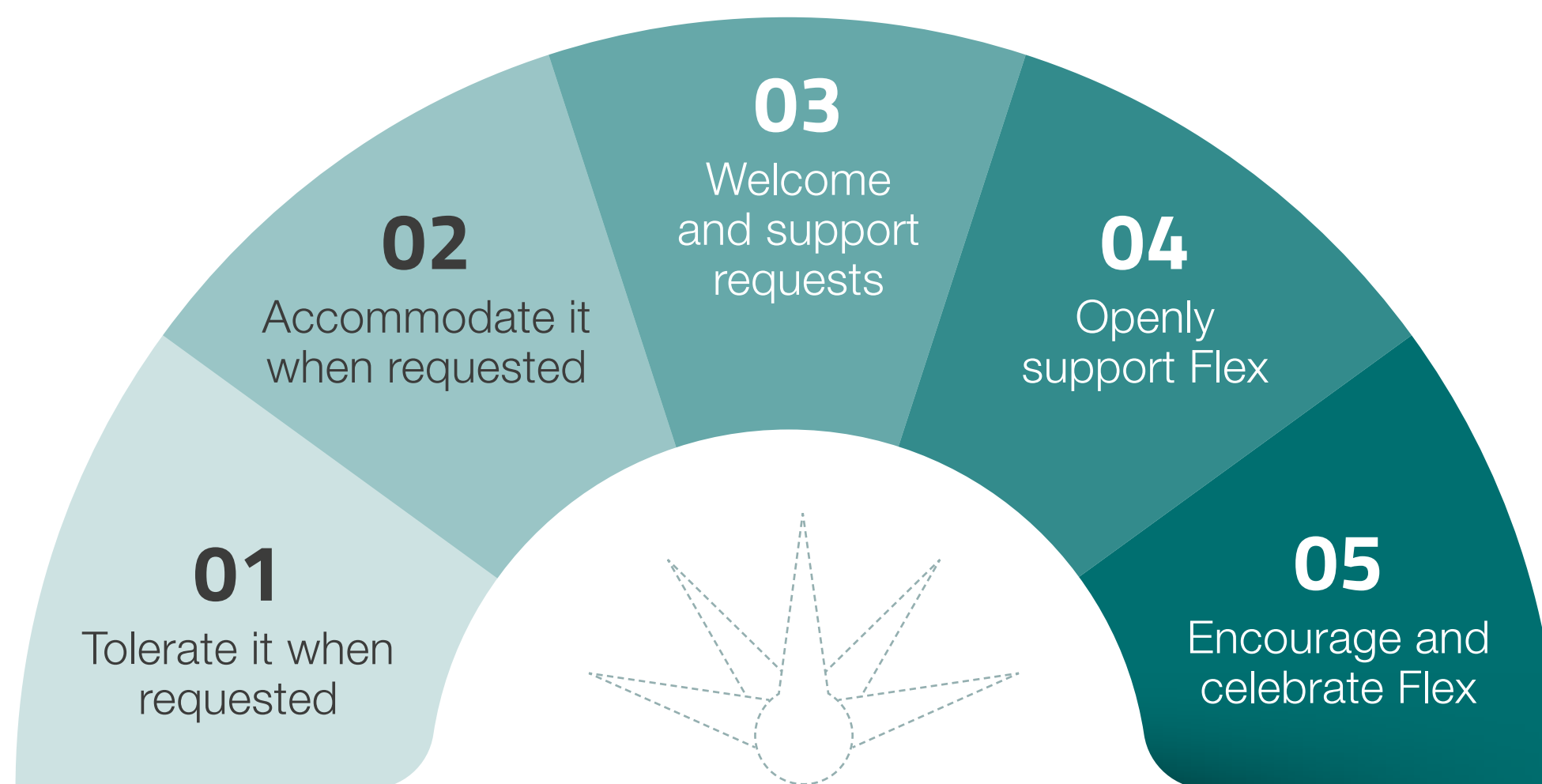
FLEXIBLE WORKING IN YOUR NURSERY

Take a moment to think about flexible working in your nursery and consider the following questions:

- How many part-time staff do you have?
- Are there examples of other flexible working arrangements?
- Are there regular, fixed times to talk about individuals' needs and preferences? Or do staff make a formal request and it often comes as a surprise?
- Do people feel comfortable talking about what they might need?
- Are staff able to swap shifts?
- Would it be possible to create an earlies/lates shift pattern and give people choice?
- How much notice / choice do staff have about if/when they work overtime?

- When interviewing applicants, do you talk about flexible working?
- Do people leave to do bank or agency work so they can have more flexibility?

Have a look at the curve below and think about where you would place your nursery.

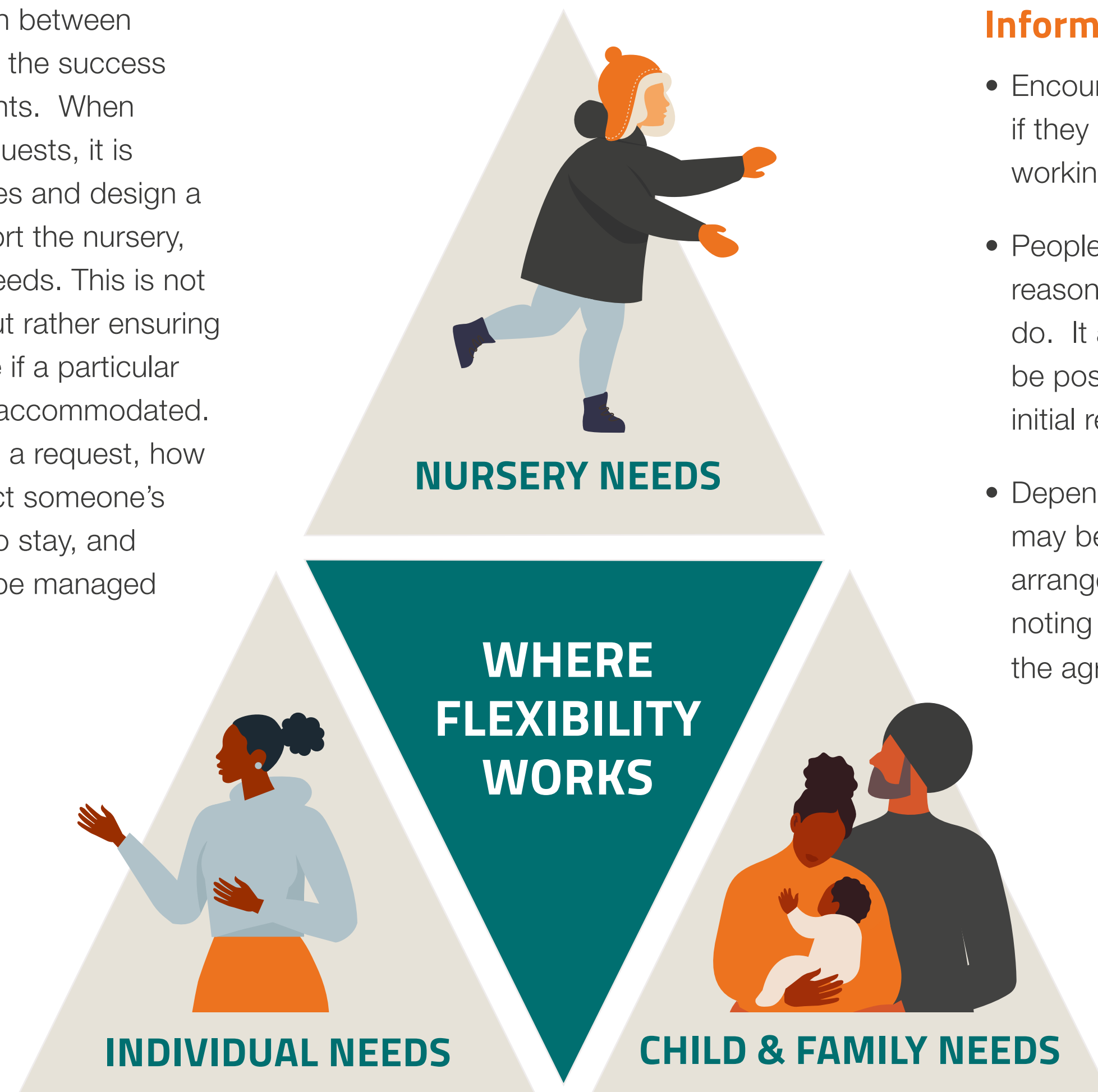


Do you think your staff would agree?

Being able to offer staff flexibility in a nursery or early years setting isn't always straightforward, but there are ways of approaching it to see what might be possible beyond what you are already doing.

HOW TO MANAGE FLEXIBLE WORKING REQUESTS

The quality of the conversation between you and your staff is critical to the success of flexible working arrangements. When evaluating flexible working requests, it is important to consider all parties and design a way of working that will support the nursery, child/family and individuals' needs. This is not about agreeing all requests but rather ensuring that you are able to determine if a particular working arrangement can be accommodated. If you are unable to say yes to a request, how you handle this will also impact someone's commitment and motivation to stay, and therefore any request should be managed appropriately and sensitively.



Informal discussions

- Encourage staff to talk to you informally if they are considering making a flexible working request.
- People have no obligation to provide a reason for a formal request, but many often do. It also helps to explore what else might be possible if you cannot say yes to their initial request.
- Depending on the nature of their request, you may be able to agree an informal, temporary arrangement. If this is the case, it's still worth noting it so that staff are clear of the nature of the agreement.

Receiving a formal flexible working request

When you have received a request, you will need to ensure you follow the correct procedure and you should refer to your organisation's HR process. Depending on the nature of the request, you should consider the following before you meet with the jobholder:

- What are the implications for the nursery?
- How will it impact you and the rest of the team?
- How will it impact the children?
- What options are available to address the impact of granting the request?
- If you cannot grant the request, do you think you might be able to in the future? Or are there other options to provide the person with some more flexibility?

Agreeing to trial

- Book a time to discuss their request.
- You may be able to agree what has been requested, or you may need to discuss other flexible options.
- It is usually a good idea to trial a new flexible arrangement for 2-3 months. This allows you both to assess whether it is working, and also to iron out difficulties.

Declining a request

- You may not be able to grant their request and there is a specific procedure you need to follow to do this for a formal request (please refer to your HR process). The important part of this discussion is to explain the decision from a team and business perspective, and also to listen to what they need.

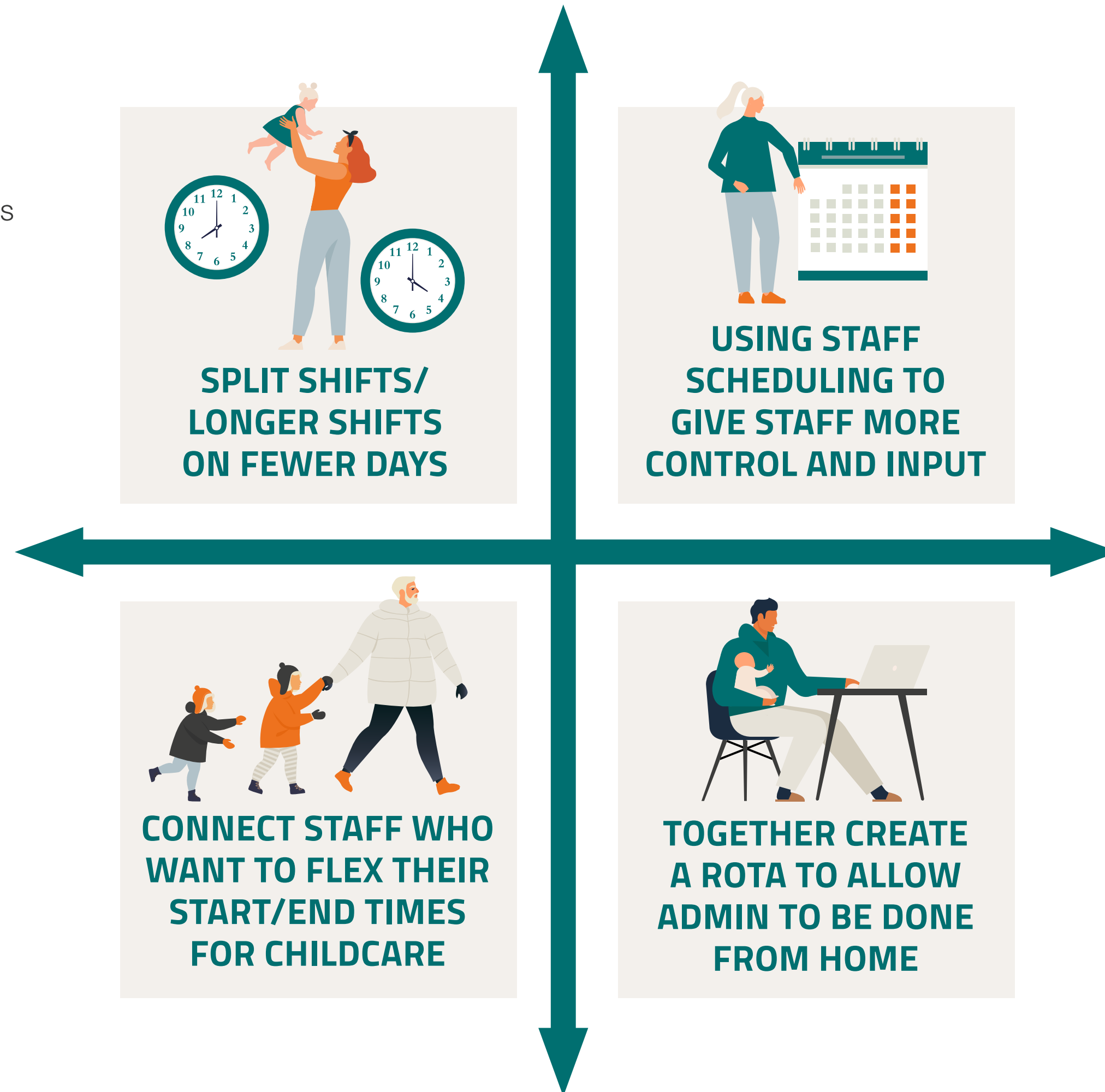
- Remember that an individual does not need to give you a reason for wanting to work flexibly. Flexible working should be available for all staff and as an employer you should have due regard for applications where the individual has additional protections from the Equality Act 2010 (for example: to meet childcare needs; as an adjustment to support a disability; or to meet religious requirements).
- However, there may be an opportunity to work with the person to see what else might work, now or in the future.
- It is really important for the staff member to feel heard. Even if it means they might become bank/flexi staff, because you cannot provide the flexibility they need as a permanent member of staff, supporting them through this decision making process will create greater loyalty and commitment.



OPTIONS TO INCREASE FLEXIBILITY IN YOUR NURSERY

If you had a fully staffed nursery, would you be able to give people the flexibility they needed, either informally or formally? Having constraints like ratios, restricted budgets and variation in occupancy means that it will always be difficult BUT there are ways to think creatively about what might be possible.

Here are some examples:



You may find that your team or managers in other nurseries have other ideas, perhaps because they've seen it work elsewhere or because it just came to them as a good idea worth trying.

One of the biggest steps you can take is to start talking about flexible working – with your team, your line manager and other nursery managers. Read below to find out more.



SHIFTING THE DIAL ON FLEXIBLE WORKING – GETTING PEOPLE TALKING

It can feel like a lot of responsibility is placed on you as the manager to make flexible working possible. You may be surprised how often people have ideas on what could be done differently AND how much they feel valued if they feel included in a conversation.

So why not start talking more openly to staff about flexibility?

The team template gives you some prompts and questions on how to start talking about this with your team. You can use this to run a team session on flexible working.



TEAM TEMPLATE

INTRODUCTION

Recognise that increasingly people need flexibility in how they work, and that this applies to our team as much as anyone else.

Explain what we mean by flexibility – using some of the language from this guide. People may immediately think of working from home, so you will need to explain that we are talking about a range of different types of ways to work flexibly.

Acknowledge that everyone understands the constraints in a nursery, but it doesn't mean that it's impossible to try and do things differently.

Discuss and remind everyone of the nursery's responsibilities and objectives – to families, to staff etc.

BENEFITS AND BARRIERS

Ask the group:

What would the benefits be of more flexibility in how we work? Consider this for the individual staff member, AND for the nursery?

What are the barriers in creating more flexibility? What gets in the way?

EXAMPLES OF WHERE IT WORKS WELL

Ask the group:

What examples are there of flex in a nursery working well? (here or somewhere else). If possible, have a couple of examples that you've already seen or thought of. If you share these it will encourage other people to come up with examples and ideas.

What made it possible?

Is it something we could try?

OTHER OPTIONS

Ask the group:

What other ideas do you have that we could discuss? (you could break people into pairs to talk about ideas)

What would we need to do differently to make it work? (think about consistency for children, performance standards, communication)

NEXT STEPS

Discuss and agree:

What can we do as a result of today? (this might be about agreeing a task group to look at it further, doing a survey, or trialling one idea)

How will we manage any potential risks? How will we know it's working?

Through this section the aim is to continue to involve and engage your team, so that this becomes a shared initiative for the group to continue to explore.

TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING A (FLEXIBLE) TEAM

It's likely that you are managing a team of flexible workers already! In your team, you're likely to have some part-time staff, people doing different shifts (eg - earlies, lates, and lunch covers), and using bank/flexi workers to ensure you are in ratio.

Here are some tips on how to manage your team, especially in a busy environment:

1

Spend time with your team reminding yourselves of what 'good' looks like, and make sure that expectations are very clear about standards and ways of working.

2

Plan and stick to essential team meeting times and support everyone to attend, using recordings where needed.

3

Use a range of communication tools to keep in touch, to encourage a sense of belonging. These should be two-way comms channels, allowing you to share information, but also allowing staff to contribute. This could be via apps such as slack or whatsapp, or more traditional methods such as a noticeboard or a suggestion box. What's most important is that they are accessible for everyone and easy for people to use, even when work is busy.

4

Make sure that praise is timely and vocal – it's easy to forget telling people they're doing a good job in a busy environment



TOP TIPS FOR LEADING A (FLEXIBLE) TEAM

To really look at what is possible and trial different ways of working in your nursery, you need to reflect on your own behaviours. People will look to see how you act, not just what you say.

Consider the ideas below:

1

Lead by example. Book out space in your own diary for family time or breaks and talk about the flexibility that you have and how you use it.

2

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

3

Be accessible. Let your team know they should contact you if they need support and how best to do this. Create spaces in your diary where you are available for people to catch up with you outside of a formal meeting.

4

Consciously reward and recognise people for the outcomes they are achieving.

5

Drive the conversation on flexible working. Bring it up with people in 1-2-1s, at end of year, during recruitment conversations. Even if the individual doesn't want to work flexibly right now, mentioning it proactively will say a lot about how your team works and what you value.

6

Consider flexible working options when you are advertising vacancies. If you can, be clear about the types of flexibility that would work well in the role.

7

Talk to other nurseries about what you're doing. Share your good practice and learn from theirs.

