

Flexibility for the Childcare Sector – Five actions to attract and retain staff

INTRODUCTION

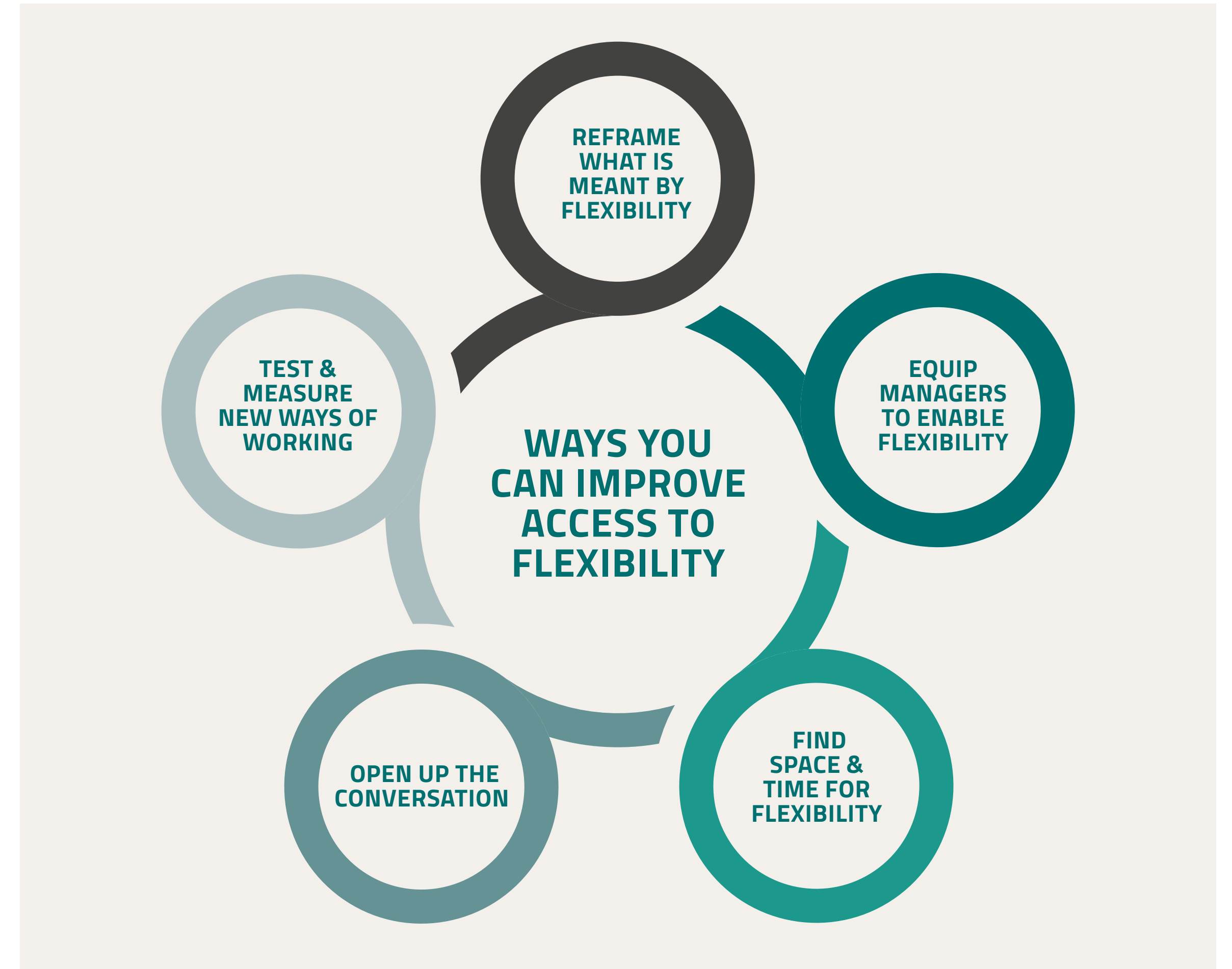
Working in Early Years education and the childcare sector is a rewarding experience. However, there is a lack of recognition about the importance of the role or the need for practitioners to also be able to balance work and life commitments. Long working hours and inflexible schedules mean that many practitioners are choosing to leave the sector and it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit.

Informed by our Childcare Pioneers Action-Research Project, working with the Early Years Alliance and London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) to develop more flexible

ways of working, and also by our extensive experience in other frontline sectors, Timewise has developed this guide to summarise five actions employers can take when setting out to improve flexible working in their nursery settings.

Our Action-Research Project has highlighted that giving Early Years practitioners opportunities to work more flexibly can improve staff wellbeing and engagement, overcome recruitment challenges and increase retention.

Here are five ways you can improve access to flexibility for your setting(s):



REFRAME WHAT IS MEANT BY FLEXIBLE WORKING FOR THE EARLY YEARS

It's important in Early Years to think differently about flexibility – it's not only working from home. And it's not just part-time working, although this type of flexibility is more visible. Flexible working is the ability to adapt working patterns to meet individual needs and preferences, whilst balancing the needs of nurseries, children and parents at the same time.

In this context, we need to think about flexibility as being about where, when and how much we work.

For most practitioners, the 'where' will be the nursery setting, almost all of the time. There may be activities which could be carried out remotely, but the majority of roles are setting-based.

Time-based flexibility is about 'when' the work can be undertaken. This could be compressed hours, staggered start and finish times or flexi-time where working times are varied around a set of core hours.

Reduced-hours flexibility is about 'how much' people work. This covers part-time, reduced hours and job-share arrangements and could also include arrangements such as term-time 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 on occasion or take longer lunch breaks or ad hoc time off.

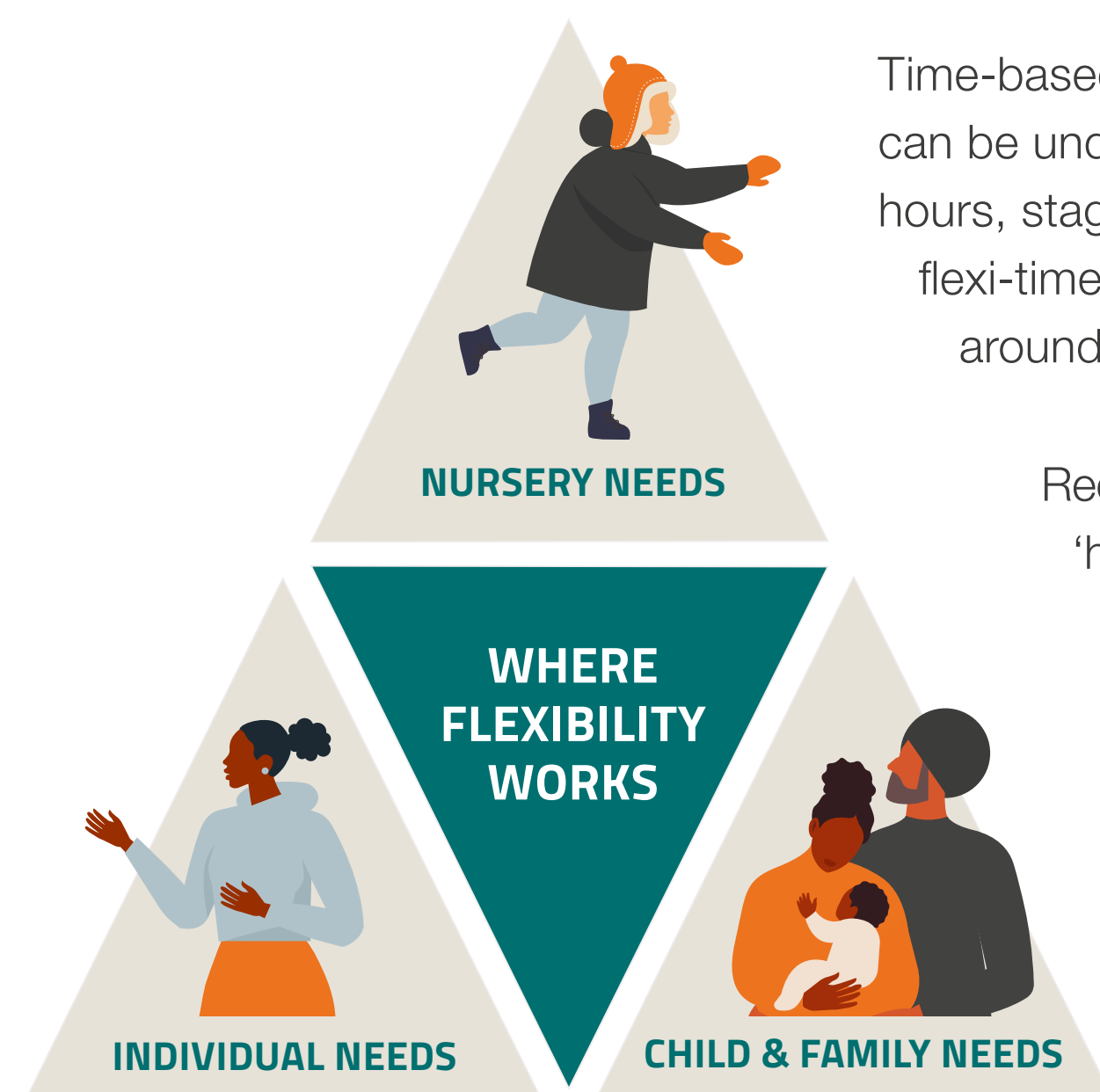
The need to ensure the correct staffing ratios is perceived as a barrier to flexibility. However, with careful planning of schedules it is possible to offer staff more flexible options. For example, consider whether a full-shift could be covered by two similarly qualified practitioners or whether children could have a principal and secondary Key Worker to enable both members of staff to have flexibility, whilst maintaining consistency for the child and parents.

Offering informal flexibility lends itself to a more team-based approach, whereby staff members are able to voice their preferences and work

together to find solutions. In our work in other frontline sectors such as nursing, this has proven to be a very successful way of giving employees more control over their working patterns whilst recognising the needs of the service. More information on team-based rostering across 3 NHS Trusts can be found [here](#).

Reframing what flexibility is and thinking more broadly than part time and working from home, will open up more opportunities for staff who want or need alternative working patterns.

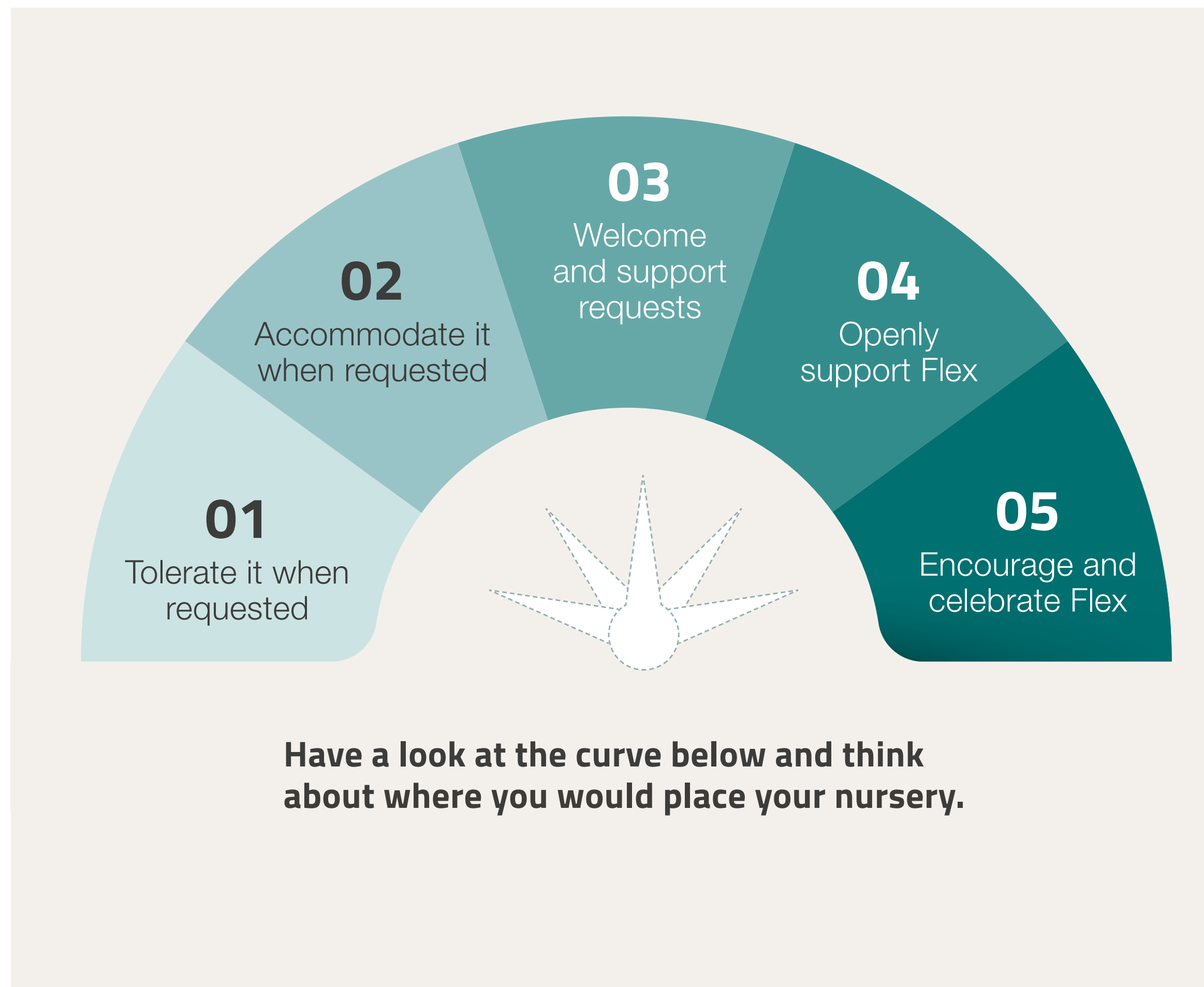
Consider how you talk about flexibility in this context – do you tend to revert to the language of part-time working or working from home? How is flexible working defined in your policies and procedures? Are you openly discussing opportunities for formal and informal flexibility?



EQUIP MANAGERS AND ROOM LEADERS TO ENABLE FLEXIBILITY

Managers and room leaders play a vital role in the adoption of more flexible working practices. In the Action-Research Project, manager attitude and approach to flexibility was identified as a critical success factor. The Timewise Flexibility Maturity Curve[®] can be used to assess levels of support for flexibility, ranging from “tolerate it when requested” to “encourage and celebrate flex”.

Recognising that management teams in Early Years are operating in a very challenging environment, it is not realistic to move from level 1 to level 5 overnight. However, incremental shifts in mindset and approach can have a big impact, and there are resources you can access to help.



Here are some simple ways to equip managers and room leaders to move along the maturity curve:

- Start by understanding what flexibility can and does look like in Early Years [here](#).
- Consider the benefits of flexibility for the setting – how could flexibility improve recruitment and retention? How could flexibility improve staff wellbeing? How could flexibility benefit children?
- Discuss with peers from other settings or across the provider group what has been tried successfully or how others have approached flexible ways of working.
- Use the Flexible Working a Guide for Nursery Managers Tool, available [here](#).



FIND SPACE & TIME FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING

In a context of staffing shortages, increased demands and requirements placed on settings and the needs-led nature of working in childcare, finding time to think about flexibility can be difficult. However, the benefits to both staff and the childcare setting mean that it is important to do so.

Often the difficulty is in considering how flexibility could be built into existing ways of working at a time when everyone is working to their full capacity. In other frontline sectors, Timewise has proven that introducing more flexibility not only improves employee engagement but also has a positive impact on productivity at work (see our report **Construction Pioneers Programme – One Year On**). This is because taking time to consider different ways of working also reveals other efficiencies we can make - such as reducing the number of meetings, using technology to support ways of working, and reducing management time through self or team-based rostering processes.

Here are three simple ways you could re-think how work is currently undertaken and see where there are opportunities to be both more efficient and flexible:



Review activities such as handovers, reports, rostering, planning and set-up, and consider where & when they can be carried out. For example, is it possible for rostering or reports to be written at home? Could handovers be shared between two Key Workers? Do Practitioners have time for planning & set-up or is there an expectation that they do it before or after their working day? How could these activities be done differently to allow more flexibility?



Which of them are manual and time-consuming? How could technology help to free up time? For example, during the pandemic many schools moved to virtual parents' consultations which allowed for greater flexibility over times offered, and benefitted both parents and teachers. How much time is spent on administrative tasks? Are there areas of duplication where it is possible to reduce the amount of time spent on specific tasks?



How much notice do staff have about their working patterns? If this is less than 2 weeks' notice, consider how this could be changed to give better advance notice. Best practice shows that in shift-based working systems, 6 weeks' notice is optimal. This enables staff to plan their work and home commitments to strike a better balance, and makes last-minute changes or unplanned absences less likely.



OPEN UP THE CONVERSATION

One key action you can take to enable greater flexibility is to move away from just thinking about flexibility in response to an individual employee's request and towards a more proactive, whole-setting, team-based approach to flexibility.

The request-response model of flexibility means that you are dealing with individual, usually formal requests for flexible working. Whilst there may be a need for individual requests for those who need specific working arrangements, a more holistic approach will mean that you can provide access to flexibility for all staff rather than just those who request it.

This means opening up the conversation on flexibility – seeking to understand team and individual preferences about how people want to work and discussing how to collectively balance individual preferences with the overall needs of the nursery and children.

Use the template in the 'Flexible working a guide for nursery managers' report (available [here](#)) to structure your conversations.



This proactive approach brings teams together to find solutions. Some examples are agreements on shift-swaps or providing cover support for different rooms to enable a member of staff to come in later one day per week. Allowing teams to input and have more control over their own working patterns creates improved engagement and effectiveness.

TEST & MEASURE

Don't be afraid to try out new working patterns, new ways of rostering or new recruitment campaigns. Taking a test-and-measure approach will give you useful insight into what works before committing to a permanent change to working arrangements.

Prior to any trial, first consider your measures of success – how will you know if this achieves what you want it to? For example, if this is about recruiting more qualified staff through offering an alternative shift pattern, such as 10am-2pm, you will want to measure how many applications you receive versus previous advertisements for roles at the same level.

Secondly, consider how you communicate your plans – with staff and with parents and guardians. Explain openly what you are trialling, why you are trialling it and what benefits you are hoping to achieve. Bring parents and guardians with you by addressing any worries they may have about continuity or attachment.

Parents and guardians will share your concerns about challenges with recruitment and retention of staff, and the disruptive effect this can have – and are likely to understand your reasons for wanting to innovate with regard to working arrangements.

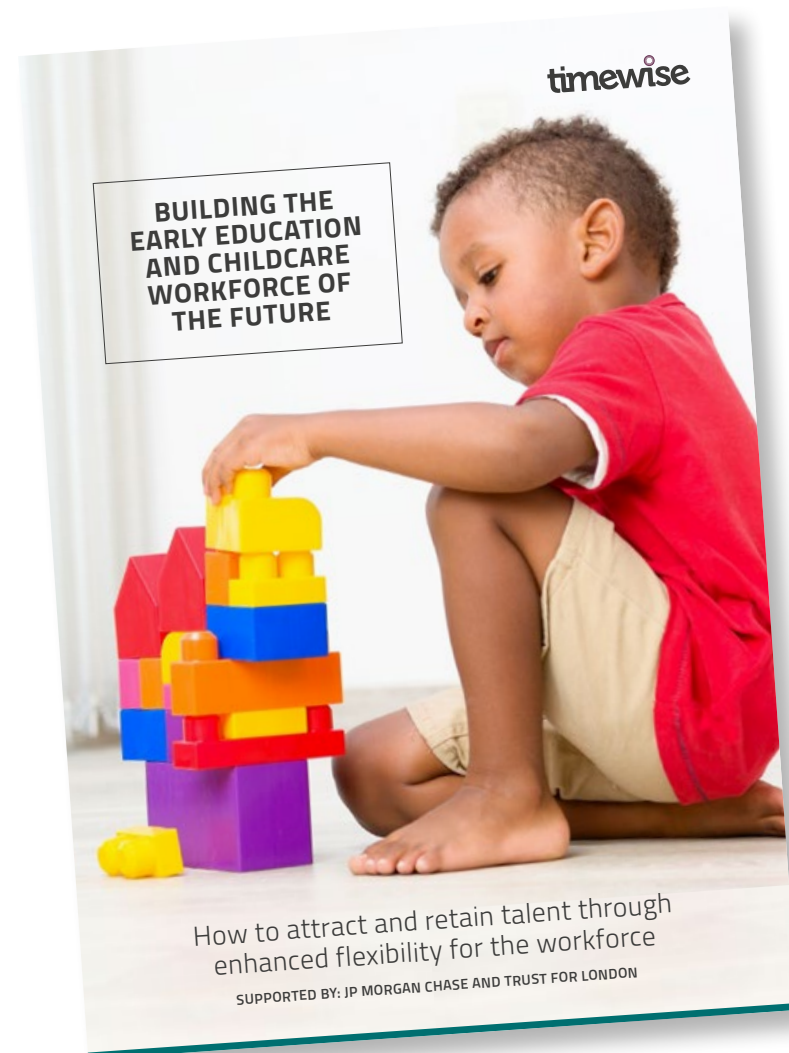
And finally, test and then evaluate the impact of the changes – on staff, on management and for children and parents & guardians. Gather feedback from those who have taken part in the trial to understand what has worked well and what hasn't worked so well. Use this to consider any changes to be made for longer-term flexibility.



IN SUMMARY

The five actions set out in this guide are designed to empower you to improve flexibility for your nursery teams. You don't need to follow them sequentially or undertake them all – choose those which feel most relevant to your setting(s) and have a go.

For further support and guidance on Flexibility in Early Years click [here](#) to view our latest report.



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