



timewise

TIMWISE SECTOR GUIDE

Secure and Flexible Work in the **Construction Sector**

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this short guide is to provide an introduction to promoting flexible and secure work for employers and industry actors. It offers snapshot insights into the sector-specific challenges and barriers to flexible and secure work, shares opportunities for good practice and identifies priority actions that can be taken by employers and sector bodies to better promote and implement flexible and secure work. It will help you to answer:

- What is the state of play in your industry?
- What can good look like?
- How can you take action now?

The guide has been developed following a 12-month engagement programme with employers, workers, experts and sector representatives.

This guide has been created as part of the Industry Voices for Better Frontline Work programme, supported by the abrdn Financial Fairness Trust, which is seeking to increase the supply of good flexible jobs for low and middle-income workers across key frontline sectors.



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WHAT IS THE STATE OF PLAY?

SECTOR INSIGHTS

Construction is a critical sector for the UK, employing more than 2.2 million workers¹ and contributing approximately 6.4 per cent of GDP.

Despite expected increases in demand for construction workers to build key infrastructure and clean energy programmes, the industry continues to experience a critical skills shortage. The Construction Skills Network Report 2024 forecasts that an additional 251,500 extra construction workers are needed by 2028 to meet demand.

With more workers leaving the industry than joining, now is the time to look at how to make the industry more attractive, particularly to younger workers. According to the UK Trade Skills Index 2023, the construction and trades industry needs 937,000 new recruits over the next decade, known as “the missing million”.

Although the pandemic forced the construction sector to re-think working practices for some, many site-based workers continue to work inflexibly.

With a culture of long working hours, the need to work away from home and instability of work, it’s no wonder there are high levels of physical and mental ill-health within the sector. The Timewise Flexible Jobs Index 2023 highlighted that the sector has the lowest ratio of flexible working across all sectors – with only 10 per cent of roles advertised with some form of flexible working.

¹. ONS, Workforce jobs by region and industry, March 2024





CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Some of the key challenges to the greater provision of secure and flexible work across the construction sector discussed in our roundtable discussions include:

- Contracting and commissioning models that drive low margins and the need to deliver more for less – “clients want it fast and cheap”. This exacerbates the long-hours nature of the work and provides less opportunity for flexibility. There is a real and genuine fear that enabling flexible working will drive up costs and therefore increase the risks of insolvency as companies are out-bid for work by those who are more willing to ‘sweat’ their human resources.
- The high proportion of SMEs, particularly amongst trades where flexibility is not understood or considered. Whilst some Tier 1s have taken steps to introduce various flexible working arrangements, this is not filtering down through the supply chain. “How does it trickle down to every site? Where you have a small contractor, they might not even know they can request it”.
- Leadership culture and attitudes towards flexibility were mentioned several times as a barrier to flexibility – there remains an attitude of “it’s what you signed up for”. A lack of diversity at senior levels was highlighted as a potential factor: “In an industry dominated by white men, do they even see this as a problem?”
- Rigid planning and scheduling of work was highlighted as a barrier to flexibility – the interdependency of roles required on site at any one time, together with the requirements for supervision and specific skill sets, often results in an “all or nothing” approach to working times which leaves little space for flexibility.

WHAT CAN GOOD LOOK LIKE?

VISION FOR WHAT GOOD COULD LOOK LIKE

The panel of industry stakeholders that we consulted had a very clear vision for how flexible working could be embedded into the industry:

“Flexibility needs to be normalised. We want to see an industry-wide movement where flexible working is where you start from – we want to see conversations about flexibility happening at individual, project and organisational levels.”

Two key features underpin this vision:

- Ensuring open dialogue with workers. There was clear evidence that open dialogue about flexibility has been successful in supporting better work-life balance and improving health and wellbeing for workers across the sector. Timewise’s Construction Pioneers programme reported significant gains to employee wellbeing through the introduction of flexibility.²

². Timewise Construction Pioneers programme - One Year On (2022)
<https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Construction-pioneer-programme-one-year-on.pdf>

- Flexible working becomes part of everyday team practice and culture. An example cited by industry leaders was Roberts in Australia, where every employee had what was called “the deal”. This is an individual flexible arrangement that is agreed at team level to enable better flexibility in the working day. As everyone had a “deal” it became the norm and was accepted as a standard practice.

In order for this vision to be realised there was also a desire for work to be better planned and organised through:

- taking a less rigid approach to planning
- reducing the work that must be carried out on-site, in particular opportunities to utilise technology, improve modularisation and off-site fabrication activities
- allowing more time for planning and pre-construction phases of work.

CASE STUDY

Engaging managers to promote flexible work

GRAHAM implemented a top-down approach by engaging the team managers, enabling them to adapt their learnings to their own teams’ circumstances and overall objectives. Through a series of workshops for site-based managers and an internal communications campaign which highlighted case studies and examples of where flexibility was already taking place, managers were able to overcome their initial concerns about whether this could work in reality. The workshops really helped overcome negative preconceptions of flexible working, with the majority of attendees immediately seeing the value of offering it to their teams and understanding how even small changes can make a big difference to individuals.

“We are an innovative employer and recognise that creating a modern working environment leads to personal and business benefits. Creating change won’t happen overnight, but with the ongoing support, innovation and advice, a modern working culture will emerge.”

MICHAEL SMYTH, HR DIRECTOR GRAHAM GROUP

OPPORTUNITIES AND GOOD PRACTICE

There are already examples of construction firms who have adopted initiatives to try and improve the flexibility available to their staff, introducing different working, contractual and rostering arrangements to achieve this.

Some of the examples of good practice we've noted after working with employers are:

- Team-based rostering arrangements – taking a two-team approach to rostering enables multidisciplinary teams to be created and scheduled to do the work on an alternating working pattern. This ensures that those roles and skills that are required on site are always covered, but, by splitting the site into teams, more flexible patterns can be introduced so that not everyone is working all the time.
- As part of a project start-up, teams are openly discussing any needs or preferences around working patterns with localised agreements about ways of working – this can include agreements on how late nights / weekends will be rostered, specific patterns such as earlier starts / later finishes or agreements on choice of break times.

- Inspection Teams moving to output-based working – setting a target for survey completion over the week with Inspectors & Surveyors having autonomy about when these are completed. This enables them to compress the week, start earlier or later or spread the work out over a longer period (working less hours each day).
- Introducing a flexible framework and supporting guidance, training & resources to empower Project Directors to implement flexible working for their teams. The framework provides a number of options to be considered and locally agreed and includes compressed hours (1 non-working day in a 3-week period) and agreeing core hours and/or core days to be co-located (office or site).

In terms of opportunities more broadly across the sector there were three key areas highlighted by the panel:

1. Technology should be an enabler of better flexibility by passing productivity gains to workers and not being used as a way to increase workload.

2. Modern methods of construction, including off-site fabrication, can enable organisations to take the work to where the people are rather than the other way round which would reduce the reliance on those who are willing and able to work away from home for large parts of the working week.
3. Education on flexible working – embedded throughout the supply chain and educational lifecycle to increase awareness and acceptance.

CASE STUDY

Operationalising flexible working through pilots

Willmott Dixon used pilots and trials as a way of spreading their approach to frontline flexible working across their business sites. The company refers to this as “agile working”, distinct from formal flexible working because it is arranged informally with line managers. The pilots, conducted in a handful of sites, allowed workers to agree different rotas and work schedules directly with their line managers. The trials provided a proof of concept, finding a significant boost to workforce morale and increased productivity on site. The model was then rolled out by operations managers across the business. Rather than being an HR initiative, managing directors and operational leads are key to the roll-out, demonstrating the importance of finding ways to operationalise new practices.

CASE STUDY

Kier Highways piloted flexible working solutions for both operational and non-operational staff on its Birmingham Highways contract. They recognised that the size of the contract gave them an opportunity to demonstrate the feasibility of flexible working at scale. And they were clear that a mindset shift was needed at both leadership and middle-manager level in order to make this happen. Through a series of co-design workshops it was agreed to trial a compressed fortnight for both operational and office-based teams, in which teams worked additional hours over nine days to get the tenth day off and to implement a consistent framework for team-based agile working for office-based staff.

- **Compressed fortnight pilot** - 23 employees from three teams agreed to take part, choosing working patterns to suit their needs as well as those of the business. For example, some started earlier to gain the extra time across the nine days, while others finished later.

- **Agile working for office-based staff** – An agile working framework was created that could be applied consistently across all office staff. Each team completed an agile working plan, which was then trialled and evaluated.

The pilots were a success, with KPIs indicating that there was no dip in the quality of work, safety or performance. Wellbeing improved overall, there was a small reduction in sickness absence (0.2%) and overtime hours were reduced by 2 hours per participant. The responses from the teams who took part were also positive, with 90% of those who piloted agile working, and 100% of those piloted the compressed fortnight pilot, wanting to continue.

“It’s proven that new flexible working options can be introduced to the workplace, and I am confident we can continue to make this work on a larger scale going forward.”

OPERATIONS MANAGER

HOW CAN YOU TAKE ACTION NOW?

For the construction sector to continue to progress, we have identified key actions to take at national level, across the sector bodies, and for individual organisations. This is based on the ideas of and discussion held by our sector panel group.

EMPLOYER PRIORITIES

1. ENGAGE WITH LEADERSHIP TO SHIFT MINDSETS ON FLEXIBILITY

The panel felt strongly that leadership buy-in was crucial in order to embed flexible working as a norm within the industry and shift the dial towards an approach which is “we can if...”.

This starts with ensuring that leaders understand the business case for flexibility and how it can benefit not just individuals but also the organisation.

Draw on examples from the Timewise Construction Pioneers Programme and explore the specific business case for your workforce – if you are struggling with challenges linked to attraction, retention, absence and wellbeing, share the insights from the Pioneers programme and how enabling more flexibility addressed these.

Consider the costs and benefits of investing in flexible and secure work. Our evidence of a positive financial return on investment in flexible working demonstrates that the benefits outweigh the costs within a short time period.

Bringing the business case to life for your leadership teams will enable you to create the right environment for change – where leaders understand how flexibility can impact employee engagement and business outcomes. Determine a clear vision that starts at the top, with senior leaders advocating the benefits of flexibility and taking a proactive approach.

2. DEMONSTRATE THAT FLEXIBILITY IS POSSIBLE FOR SITE-BASED ROLES

Share messaging internally on the value of flexible working for all individuals and for the organisation across internal communications channels and employee networks. Showcase stories and promote role modelling to disrupt the prevailing idea that flexible working is synonymous with home-based or hybrid working.

Clearly articulate what flexibility is within your organisation – it’s about the where, when and how much we work and can be both formal and informal.

Use case studies and seek out those within your own organisations who work flexibly to share openly and transparently how they overcame any perceived obstacles.

Share the evidence from other organisations, industry bodies or research to demonstrate the art of the possible for site-based roles.

3. LISTEN TO YOUR EMPLOYEES' VOICE

Employee voice and engagement are key to cultivate a healthy workplace where people are empowered to have more input and control over their working patterns. One of the barriers to implementing flexibility that was highlighted by the panel is the fear that “everyone will want it” but the reality is that, for most people, what they really want or need is more input or control into their working schedules.

Facilitate discussions and create opportunities to understand what your employees want or need when it comes to flexibility – it is often small changes that can have the biggest impact.

Open discussions on flexibility build awareness of what is possible for all roles and acceptance that not everyone can work in the same way. These conversations will also bring to light reasons for flexibility and demonstrate that it is not just a way of working that works for parents or carers.

4. EQUIP MANAGERS TO TAKE A TEAM-BASED, PROACTIVE APPROACH TO FLEXIBILITY

Build manager capability through training, mentoring, guidance and resources to feel confident in having conversations about flexibility as a team. To normalise flexibility within the industry, there is a need to move away from an individual request-response model and instead towards a more proactive, team-based approach.

This requires managers to be equipped to both understand the principles of job design and to manage flexible team schedules. Managers need to be supported to better organise and schedule work so that roles can be matched to both business and individual needs.

Managers who are equipped with the knowledge of why flexibility is important (via the business case and clear vision for their organisation) and how this can be implemented in practice will be empowered to make decisions about ways of working that are right for their site, team or project.

And the evidence has shown that where teams are enabled to have input and control over their own working patterns, they will collectively find a solution that ensures the project runs smoothly. Take Roberts as an example – every individual on a team or project had their own “deal” which gave them flexibility, but these deals were collectively protected and supported by all other members of the team so that neither the programme nor their colleagues were negatively impacted.



SECTOR PRIORITIES

FOR TRADE ASSOCIATIONS, SECTOR BODIES AND UNIONS

1. ADVOCATE FOR FLEXIBILITY

Industry bodies, trade associations and trade unions can support the normalisation of flexibility by using their platforms to advocate for more secure, stable and flexible work across the sector.

Showcasing the evidence for flexibility, demonstrating it is possible through case studies and shouting loudly about the impact that flexibility can have on the health and wellbeing of workers across the industry is key. Utilise the Timewise 10 Point Plan to encourage action.³

We saw evidence of this in the roundtable discussion, where Trade Unions were taking a proactive approach to building flexibility into a new project, which was based on a combination of understanding worker voice, securing fair working conditions and creating an attractive proposition for new candidates – a win-win for both employees and employers.

³ Timewise 10 Point Plan <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/TW-Construction-10-point-plan-for-flexible-working.pdf>

2. SUPPORT SMES TO BETTER UNDERSTAND FLEXIBILITY

In a sector where SMEs make up the majority of the workforce, it was noted that there is very little support, guidance or tools available for these employers when it comes to flexibility.

Industry bodies and Trade Associations can play a role in ensuring that knowledge of flexible working and the impact it can have on worker health and wellbeing is spread throughout the industry.

By sharing resources, disseminating guidance and educating members on what flexibility is, why it is important and how it can be implemented for smaller businesses, sector bodies can enable flexibility to be scaled out fully across the industry, as there are still significant barriers when it comes to the subcontracted workforce.

There is a need to create practical toolkits for smaller businesses across the industry. It was noted that government guidance on flexibility tends to focus on Tier 1 contractors and can feel irrelevant to the smaller, subcontracted workforce.

3. CREATE SECTOR-WIDE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES ON FLEXIBILITY

There remains a lack of knowledge, understanding and capability about how flexible working can be applied to site-based and trades roles in particular. Industry educational and training bodies could play a key role in developing a learning framework which would fill this gap.

This could include skills for managers, such as flexible job design, managing flexible teams, work scheduling or balancing the needs of the business with the individual. Or skills for the individual, such as understanding flexibility in construction or how to request flexible working.

It could also include standardised definitions on what flexibility is for the sector, which feels especially important in the post-pandemic world where much of the conversation is about the ability to work from home and therefore excludes site-based roles.

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- Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB)
- National Federation of Demolition Contractors
- Constructing Excellence
- BRE Group
- JLL UK
- SJD Electrical
- E3 Consulting
- Shared Apprenticeships
- NOCN
- National Federation of Roofing Contractors
- GMB Union
- Knowledge Mentoring Global
- Construction Industry Training Board (CITB)
- The Circle Partnership
- Joint Industry Board
- Infrastructure and Projects Authority
- The Installation Assurance Authority
- Supply Chain Sustainability School



Timewise's mission is to create healthy, equitable and inclusive workplaces for all by widening access to good quality, flexible work. We are the UK's leading experts on job design and we tackle barriers to change with both policymakers and employers. Through our research, we evidence the need for good flexible and predictable work to boost the living standards of low and middle earners. We believe good flexible jobs enable employees to gain increased autonomy and control over how much, when or where they work. Through our programmes, we trial practical solutions and scale these through consultancy and campaigns.

If you would like more information on this guide or to work with us, please email: info@timewise.co.uk.