

timewise

Timewise consultation
response

Keep Britain Working Review

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Introduction to Timewise

Timewise is a non-profit organisation dedicated to creating healthier working lives by working with employers to increase access to fair, secure, flexible work. We believe everyone should have greater autonomy and control over how much, when or where they work, for better health, job satisfaction and living standards. We are the UK's leading experts on job design. Through our research, we evidence the need for good flexible and predictable work to boost the living standards of low and middle earners. Through our programmes, we trial practical solutions and scale these through consultancy and campaigns.

Over the past two decades, Timewise has campaigned for work that better reflects modern working lives through high-profile advocacy and pioneering action research. In the last two years alone we have worked directly with over 50 employers and engaged over 430 employers, generating a positive impact for hundreds of thousands of workers in sectors as varied as construction, childcare and finance. We have helped over 600 people in low to middle income households to access better quality flexible work and raise their living standards. Since 2018, we have adopted a sectoral approach to improving quality work in the UK. A key plank of this work has been a series of Pioneer Pilots that test and develop practical solutions to improving work-life balance in shift-based and site-based environments.

In this response we set out evidence gathered from our pilots in sectors including retail, health and social care, construction, transport and childcare. Our findings suggests that greater choice, input and control over working hours and patterns can significantly reduce sickness absence and staff turnover, improve wellbeing and work-life balance and improve the predictability of shift-based work. Increasing people's control over their working patterns is a key factor in preventing rising ill-health at work – supporting wellbeing at work alongside pay, job security, voice, work intensity, autonomy.

In 2024, in order to scale up our work and effect systems change within these sectors we established new **Industry Coalitions** of employers, sector bodies, unions and workers in four sectors with a large frontline workforce: **health and care, retail, transport and logistics, and construction**. Chairs of these panels are Danny Mortimer of NHS Employers, Helen Dickinson of the British Retail Consortium, Kim Sides of BAM UK and Kevin Green of First Bus. Together with our industry coalition and panel chairs

we have called for greater industry coordination at the sector level to improve work design, job quality and to strengthen the institutional environment for healthier work. This response sets out options for the **Keep Britain Working Review led by Sir Charlie Mayfield** to consider in promoting these changes. We argue that wider interventions are required to support employers to adapt jobs and drive a step change in the creation and adaptation of jobs across different sectors, particularly where this is likely to require wider changes in the organisation of work and efforts to tackle cultural and sector-based constraints.

1. What workplace interventions have you seen or implemented that effectively prevent ill health from developing or worsening at work?

Evidence suggests that job security and having a degree of control over working patterns (including hours and location) has a strong correlation with reducing sickness absence and improving health and retention at work. Consequently, improving working conditions through better job design can have beneficial health and mental health impacts, particularly for workers in high-demand, low-control jobs, through a focus on task discretion, working schedules, work intensity and flexibility, and physical environment.

Over the past decade, Timewise has run workplace pilots across some of the UK's biggest frontline sectors: retail, construction, health, social care, and education, which collectively employ over eight million people and include sectors with among the highest rates of economic inactivity due to sickness (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Inactivity due to sickness is not equal among industries

Workers inactive due to health by former industry, where in work within last two years, rate per 1,000 current workers

Industry	Long-term sickness rate
Wholesale and retail	10.4
Transportation and storage	10.0
Accommodation and food service	9.2
Human health and social work	7.8
Construction	7.6
Manufacturing	6.8
Education	4.7
Professional, scientific and technical	3.3
Public administration and defence	3.1
Information and communication	2.8

Source: IPPR, Getting better?: Health and the labour market¹, based on ONS analysis, December 2022

¹ <https://www.ippr.org/articles/getting-better-health-and-labour-market>

Nurses, carers and retail workers all work in shift-based environments. They typically face high levels of unpredictability from week to week, with the added challenges in social care and retail of short advance notice for shifts and, for many workers, low pay. In all three sectors, poor work-life balance has been identified as a factor driving problems in staff recruitment, retention and sickness absence. In addition to an appropriate workload, the Timewise model identifies three further elements that are critical to **‘shift-life balance’**:

- the amount of input staff have into their shift pattern;
- the amount of advance notice they have of their shift pattern; and
- the stability or predictability of the pattern from week to week.

In our workplace pilots we take a multi-stranded approach within each participating organisation: identifying the gap between the scheduling patterns and flexibility that people can access in their jobs, and what they need; undertaking in-depth analysis of the operational and cultural barriers to this; and working with the employers and their teams to co-design and test solutions that work for both the organisation and the individual. Selected key insights and results in these sectors are shared below.

- In **health**, our work to date has focused on nursing staff. It is broadly accepted that the unpredictable and unsocial working patterns of nurses are a significant contributing factor to staff turnover. Timewise has worked with well over 100 NHS Trusts to create a workplace where its workforce are able to thrive. These pilots have demonstrated improvements through giving nursing staff greater involvement in their work scheduling, through team-based rostering. For example, we worked with NHS Royal Free Hospital to introduce self-rostering and give greater input into working patterns and reduce the number of fixed arrangements: **staff turnover reduced from just under 30% to just over 17% after implementing self-rostering within their wards. With the same self-rostering approach UCLH hospital found a saving of six hours on average per roster period for management time.**
- In **retail**, Timewise has worked to promote understanding of the benefits of, and opportunities for, flexible working in all roles, including improved employee engagement through increased input, control, and autonomy over working lives. For example, we worked with **Wickes** to redesign managerial roles in stores and to give store, duty and ops managers more flexibility, input and control over their working patterns. A range of working arrangements were trialled and adopted by the managers, including compressed weeks and shorter days. **HR data provided by Wickes showed that the pilot cohort had a lower rate of sickness absence than that experienced at comparative stores not participating in the pilot.** Wickes have now rolled out flexible working options to

all store management roles across their 230 stores nationwide². Timewise also supported **Tesco** to conduct pilots with shift-based managers in three large format stores. We trialled team-based scheduling and outputs and flexible hiring: satisfaction with work-home life balance increased from 44% to 91%, satisfaction with flexibility increased from 61% to 91% and advance notice of shift patterns improved from 2 weeks to 6 weeks.

- In **construction**, Timewise found a range of barriers to flexible working including an hourly pay structure which rewards long hours, a reliance on stretching staff resource to meet project demands and a perceived lack of career progression for people who were not prepared to work long hours. We worked with a number of large construction companies to trial various approaches to flexible working from staggered start and finish times, to output based work to team based rostering. A move to a more output based approach to pay, changes to how shifts were arranged and an increase in homeworking (for non-manual roles) led to improvements in well-being and increased productivity. **For example, at BAM Construction and Willmott Dixon, sickness absence reduced by a third, and levels of wellbeing and mental health improved by over a third³.**
- For **social care** staff in community and domiciliary settings, Timewise found that poor retention rates were directly linked to scheduling and the unpredictability of rotas, the absence of slack in the system, unsocial hours, downtime in the middle of the working day and the need to travel long distances between clients. Timewise trialled a move to more advance notice of rotas coupled with a team-based, geographic approach. The pilot led to a reduction in overheads, by reducing the size of the central administration team and savings made on travel time. There was also a slight reduction in sickness absence rates⁴.
- In **education**, the unique nature of how the curriculum is delivered in schools, with the complexity of the timetable and the need for continuity for students, makes flexible working more challenging than in most other sectors. Despite this, reported benefits of increased flexible working in the sector include improved recruitment and retention, reduced sickness and absence rates, and better management of succession planning⁵. Timewise ran a pilot over 16 months with eight secondary schools, within three MATs, which showed that headteachers can overcome the barriers and develop a proactive and whole-school approach to flexibility. By the end of the programme, the majority of staff felt their school had become more supportive; they felt more confident to raise

² <https://timewise.co.uk/article/flex-for-all/>

³ <https://timewise.co.uk/article/construction-pioneers-pilot-one-year-on-whats-new/>

⁴ <https://timewise.co.uk/article/caring-by-design/>

⁵ <https://timewise.co.uk/article/developing-a-whole-school-approach-to-flexible-working/>

the question of flexible working, and that their request could be made for any reason.

Economic analysis carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies based on workplace pilots run by Timewise, together with indicative modelling, suggests that these interventions are highly likely to provide a positive return on investment in a relatively short space of time at firm-level. Analysis found that only modest improvements are needed in either reduced sickness absence or reduced staff turnover for the benefits of a flexible working programme to outweigh the costs within three years⁶.

2. What workplace interventions have you seen or implemented that effectively help employees stay in work when they become sick or develop a disability, preventing sickness absence?

While some disabled people need specific aids, adaptations, or equipment in order to facilitate their ability to work, the vast majority require changes in the way in which work is organised. A common complaint made by disabled people and those with health conditions is a lack of employer flexibility in terms of where, when, and how work can be performed. This is made worse by the contingency of flexibility on job status and the attitude of line managers – otherwise known as the ‘manager lottery’.

As set out above, our evidence suggests that when employers do make these changes, they can drive significant benefits for employers as well as employees, including to help prevent sickness absence or help employees to stay in work when they become sick or develop a disability.

However, many employers lack the knowledge or skills to support changes to work design that meet the needs of people who need to work flexibly. And while the Employment Rights Bill will provide stronger day one rights, the legislative framework promotes an individual, case-by-case approach to change rather than systemic approaches that could increase the availability of flexible and part-time work more broadly within a team or organisation (see more in response to question four below).

3. What workplace interventions have you seen or implemented that effectively help employees return to work after sickness absence?

Prevention and retention are not significant features of the current approach to improving employment outcomes for economic inactivity. The government’s new employment programmes targeting people who are economically inactive have a

⁶ <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Reaching-positive-ROI-flexible-working.pdf>

limited focus on in-work support and do not currently allow financial incentives to encourage employers to hire people with additional needs.

Employers seeking to make adjustments for disabled employees can access resources from *Access to Work*. However, employers are facing huge delays in accessing *Access to Work* due to high demand and backlogs. *Access to Work* also doesn't support employers with *how* to adapt and design jobs to meet employees' needs, while ensuring that roles are still able to meet organisational demands. This is exacerbated by a general lack of expertise in job design in the UK with limited academic focus, and the business support landscape in the UK is patchy, lacks funding and tends to offer generic advice on business planning with a disproportionate focus on start-ups rather than business improvement or sector-specific support.

However bespoke adaptations to job design are critical to retaining people when they fall ill, and to enabling people who are economically inactive as a result of long-term health conditions and disabilities to re-enter the labour market, including:

- Supported Employment models, where jobs are carved according to individual needs and abilities, which have a proven track record in supporting employment of people with learning disabilities and other complex needs.
- Part-time work and remote working to enable people to manage their conditions alongside other reasonable adjustments – and for improving employment rates among people with caring responsibilities.
- Active labour market programmes with employer incentives including for workplace adaptations to encourage employers to consider candidates with long term health conditions or disabilities.
- Interventions at critical points from occupational health/work design experts.

Timewise has advocated for a paradigm shift towards a more 'demand-side' focused employment support system and set of active labour market policies. However there is currently a lack of institutions, policy initiatives and human resource expertise to build employer capability in this area. Job design is not a core part of HR training, and government-led solutions have focused on individuals, offering education and advice to help people navigate the UK's flexible labour market. In order to maximise productivity, employers in low-pay sectors need to engage with the work-health compatibility of their workforce, as well as their skills development.

There needs to be a concerted effort to improve the *availability* of flexible and part-time work for those who need it, the *quality* and *suitability* of jobs for those with limited capacity to work and to *build capability* in core skills of work design and job

brokerage within existing systems. We have argued for the following changes to existing employment, skills and business support to achieve this:

- Embedding a stronger employer-facing dimension into the *Pathways to Work* and *Work Well* schemes and building a stronger offer on job retention and work design into *Access to Work*.
- A ‘change agent’ model introduced at scale to ensure existing intermediary organisations - from Jobcentre Plus, to welfare to work providers and regional and local devolved employment and skills teams as well as business support functions, business schools/universities/colleges - are equipped to advocate for and offer support for more flexible and supported employment opportunities. Timewise has extensive evidence of the impact of delivering change agent programmes within Councils in England, welfare to work programmes⁷ and the Scottish government⁸ (see also examples below).
- Developing the UK's business support offer to support job quality and performance improvements, including through job brokerage and design advice as above, including through funding for the development of job design expertise and pilot projects to provide further case studies, examples, frameworks for change and evidence to support employers to make changes.
- Exploring the role of employer incentives to encourage employers to consider candidates with long-term health conditions/disabilities – and to pilot and test the role of interventions at critical points from occupational health and work design experts.

Case study: Timewise and B&D Works, Barking and Dagenham job brokerage

Timewise supported Barking and Dagenham’s job brokerage service, B&D Works, to develop the Council’s approach to employer engagement in order to meet the rising demand for flexible and part-time work from candidates with caring responsibilities and long-term health conditions. The service now runs regular workshops for employers to inform and prepare them for upcoming changes to flexible working legislation, to promote Disability Confidence and to help them to understand the potential benefits. A sector specific programme, designed for B&D Works by Timewise, helps local social

⁷ <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/REPORT-Evaluation-of-Timewise-Change-Agent-Programme.pdf>

⁸ <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Scotland-Fair-Flexible-Work-Summary-Report.pdf>

care providers to improve scheduling practices to support employee input and control over shift patterns. Barking and Dagenham has set up a Supported Employment programme for people with learning disabilities and health conditions, which they are now expanding to people with long term health conditions. Staff report being able to more confidently advocate for individual clients seeking flexible work and other adaptations.

4. What are the key barriers that prevent employers from implementing the interventions you have mentioned in this section?

Timewise workplace pilots and the wide range of best practice we have generated challenge the assumption that better work design is not possible in site-based and shift-based roles, and that it necessarily involves trade-offs in profitability or performance for employers. However, it is also the case that employers, particularly in frontline sectors, face genuine barriers to adapting jobs and to improving job quality. These can range from procurement and commissioning models that don't allow for 'slack' in the workforce to make work more flexible, to upfront costs (even if recouped through savings over time), to supply chain practices, market competition, cultural barriers such as resistance to change and risk aversion and complex operational constraints and 'low road' business models reliant on casualised labour which lead to one-sided flexibility.

Timewise's *Ending the Two-Tier Workforce* report documented in detail the barriers facing employers in the **retail, health and social care, transport and construction** sectors following a year-long programme of engagement with employers, sector bodies, unions and workers in these sectors. We refer the Review to pages 27-28 of the report which set out in table form the sector-specific barriers facing these sectors and pages 17-20 which offer an overview of the types of barriers commonly encountered.

Our engagement with industry leaders, employers and workers points to the need for wider sectoral interventions and resources to address sector-specific barriers and scale examples of good practice. Crucially many of the barriers we identified were 'collective action' problems that cannot be rectified by individual employers acting alone. However, the UK legislative framework for workers' rights relies heavily on the individual response-request system between line manager and employee to agree flexible and predictable working arrangements. We have identified several key weaknesses in relation to this framework:

- Firstly, that in relying so heavily on the individual response-request system between line manager and employee to agree flexible and predictable working arrangements, there is a risk of exacerbating uneven power dynamics in the workplace. Our consultations with lower income workers suggest they can often

lack confidence in expressing their preferences through the individual request-response framework, fearing that it might harm their career. Many workers will be unaware of their new rights altogether.

- Secondly, managers agreed that relying on this framework can lead to lack of a shared responsibility for organising work, as it assumes solutions for more flexible and predictable work are individual in nature when they are often collective and team-based. Individual Flexible Working Arrangements can sometimes limit the flexibility available for other workers, if not combined with wider team- or organisation-based approaches that increase the range and volume of flexible working options available overall.
- Thirdly, a related weakness is that the Employment Rights Bill takes a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach when it comes to sectors. Our work has shown that it is vital to recognise that different sectors are at different stages in relation to flexible and predictable work, face unique operational contexts, and have different industrial and workforce compositions⁹.

In addition to hands-on, practical business support (see question 3), Timewise has therefore argued that stronger sectoral coordination and innovation supported by government is essential for driving down sickness absence, improving retention at work and tackling sickness-related ill health. We propose that government should build on existing employee and employer representative bodies to create industrial forums in sectors like construction and transport where existing institutions lack capacity, to create space for more coordination and consensus, rather than relying on individual employers.

Beyond setting regulation and standards, government can play the role of convener & deal maker to broker ‘something for something’ deals to achieve its objectives in these sectors. It is widely acknowledged that institutions to support effective dialogue between employers, sector bodies, unions and the government are lacking in the UK¹⁰. In particular, we lack the institutional know-how and expertise in industrial relations necessary outside of conflict resolution.

In some other countries consensus for driving through sectoral commitments and strategies is often negotiated through sectoral or workplace agreements, tied to incentives like preferential procurement and commissioning or grants and training. Norway’s *Inclusive Working Life Agreements* (IAs) are a good model for this and have been successful in reducing overall sick leave and helping people stay in

⁹ See page 29 for an overview <https://timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Timewise-Ending-the-Two-Tier-Workforce.pdf>

¹⁰ This is particularly the case since the Sector Skills Councils set up under the previous Labour government in 2002 have all but fallen away. Employer-led organisations in the UK are typically more focused on lobbying, standard-setting and providing services to member employers than focusing on labour market issues and collective bargaining, as is typically the case in more coordinated economies, such as Denmark and Sweden.

work¹¹. Working in an IA company increased the probability of returning to work after more than 16 days' sick leave and of maintaining paid employment.

Timewise is calling for a **Workplace Innovation Fund** to encourage collaboration and industry-led interventions. This would be focused on target sectors where high numbers of economically inactive people previously worked, and/or those with high staff turnover and sickness rates. Agreements would be negotiated with industry through the fund to drive down sickness absence, improve retention and open up pre-retirement paths for part-time and flexible work. The targets could be reductions in turnover and sickness rates, and improved rates of return to work from sickness. Government would work with sector representatives to identify what powers, interventions and support they need to achieve these, supporting them to develop strategies and pilot interventions to support change.

5. Do you have any other insights, case studies, or recommendations that you believe are relevant to this review?

Healthy work standards could encourage sectoral strategies to improve working conditions and job design, leading to the creation of more part-time and flexible jobs. Alternatively, this could be encouraged through public sector workforce strategies and the government's industrial strategy for growth sectors.

While Employment Rights Bill legislation is vital for setting the floor, healthy work standards at national, regional and local levels would help articulate expectations for healthy work and raise ambition. For example, IPPR has recommended establishing a 'good jobs standard' embedded at UK, national, regional and local levels, with a focus on raising the floor on working conditions and encouraging better job design. This would be a set of guidelines for employers – and for employees and trade unions – on the design of high-quality jobs. This set of standards could be seen as a prevention agenda for economic inactivity due to sickness as the think tank argues¹².

This could also be driven through public sector workforce strategies (such as the NHS 10-year plan and upcoming workforce plan) and the government's industrial strategy for growth sectors, including by supporting innovative technologies and models, such as e-rostering and employee-led participatory platforms.

As an example of how this could be implemented: through its 10-year plan and social partnership forums, the NHS can help set ambitions for improving working conditions

¹¹ <https://stami.no/en/2023/04/25/the-inclusive-workplace-agreement-ia-contributed-to-keeping-paid-employment/>

¹² <https://www.ippr.org/articles/our-greatest-asset>

and job quality. A strategy to improve ‘shift-life’ balance could be rolled out with the support of new technologies to support ‘e-rostering’ for the medical and clinical workforce. As well as improving staff wellbeing and work-life balance, based on pilot outcomes this will improve retention rates, reduce management time per roster period, and will result in more adaptable shift patterns which will create more opportunities to recruit those with work limiting conditions.

Voluntary measures adopted by employers to advertise jobs with specified options for flexible working could lead to the creation of more flexible and part-time jobs, particularly if backed up by industry support to design flexible roles.

Timewise has been tracking the development of the flexible jobs market for over a decade, and the availability of flexible and part-time jobs (3 in 10 jobs advertised as such) still lags far behind demand (9 in 10 want to work more flexibly)¹³. Evidence suggests employers can be nudged into advertising jobs as flexible and part-time: a Behavioural Insights Team study with Indeed, the recruitment company, where choice architecture was changed to give firms an option to add flexible options into job ads, achieved a 20 per cent increase in the number of jobs advertised as flexible, equivalent to at least 174,000 additional flexible jobs for the UK economy in a year¹⁴.

Similarly, a Government Equalities Office study with Zurich Insurance¹⁵ involved advertising all jobs as open to part-time patterns or job-shares by default, unless the hiring manager provided a business case for why that was not possible. Zurich UK has now nearly quadrupled the number of employees hired on a part-time basis after becoming the first company in Britain to offer all full-time roles on a part time, job share or flexible basis in 2019.

As part of a national effort to raise workforce participation and support the implementation of the Employment Rights Bill, government could work with major recruiters to adopt similar nudge approaches and encourage employers to sign up to a voluntary scheme to advertise more jobs with specified flexible working options. The public sector could play a leading role as part of the development of workforce strategies in education, childcare and social care and the NHS 10-year plan. Businesses using Jobcentre Plus could also be required as default to consider whether any job openings advertised can be made flexible.

¹³ <https://timewise.co.uk/article/flexible-jobs-index/>

¹⁴

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5dbac2d7ed915d1cff49f40b/Encouraging_employers_to_advertise_jobs_as_flexible.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-field-trial-with-zurich-insurance-to-advertise-all-jobs-as-part-time>

This needs to be backed up by industry support and coordination to share best practice on designing flexible roles. Managers and HR need support and training in how to design flexible roles, otherwise there's a risk of roles being advertised as flexible but with no redesign. This is true for all roles, but particularly acute when it comes to frontline low-margin sectors¹⁶.

Timewise also supports calls for reforms to Statutory Sick Pay to support greater attachment to the labour market. The current system is failing to identify health and mental health conditions early enough, and it is not doing enough to prevent those with such conditions either from falling out of work or moving onto sickness benefits.

For this to change, there needs to be a major shift in incentives with greater obligations on employers to support employees to stay in work. In the Netherlands, the government increased employers' responsibilities by lengthening the period of statutory sick pay for which they were liable. This helped incentivise employers to focus on prevention and rehabilitation, thereby reducing sickness absence rates.

Professor Paul Gregg¹⁷ has argued for a clearer 'right to return' to work beyond the Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) period of between another 28-76 weeks. So that there would be no extra burden on employers in terms of pay, he has argued that this longer period could involve government-paid benefits rather than employer-paid SSP. The employer, though, would still have responsibilities similar to those during a period of unpaid Maternity Leave.

Crucially these responsibilities should involve engaging with the employee about returning to work, offering workplace adaptation and the right to request part-time or other forms of flexible, home or hybrid working, similar to the right to request part-time working for new mothers. Building in better job design at this stage could make a huge difference, given that workers without flexibility are four times more likely to leave the workforce, while those with low levels of control over working hours, pace, tasks, order and work manner are 3.7 times more likely to exit¹⁸.

¹⁶ <https://www.timewise.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Timewise-Flexible-Hiring-Guide-for-Employers.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/reports/employment-economic-inactivity-and-incapacity-past-lessons-and>

¹⁸ <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/publications/stemming-the-tide>



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.

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