

# Exploring flexible working practice in schools

## Introduction and background

The Department for Education (DfE) has committed to promoting flexible working among the teaching workforce within schools. This literature review forms part of a broader research project that aims to explore existing use of flexible practices in schools, and how flexible roles can be effectively designed and implemented in the sector. It summarises existing evidence on flexible working practices and how they have been implemented in schools, highlights relevant examples of practice within broader sectors and internationally, and identifies gaps in evidence for future consideration. The focus of this summary is on flexible working in schools.

## Key points

### Flexible working in schools: the context

- In March 2017, the then Secretary of State for Education announced a commitment 'to see flexible working become the norm' in schools. Following a Flexible Working Summit in October 2017 a range of pledges were made and were outlined in a policy paper. The paper set out a definition of flexible working for schools, the perceived benefits of flexible working, and the potential barriers for schools in introducing and implementing them. The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts recommended that the DfE 'work with the schools sector to share good practice in implementing flexible working', to help retain and develop the teaching workforce, and attract qualified teachers to return to the profession.

### Experiences and perceptions of flexible working in schools

- The Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey (NFER, 2018) gathered survey responses from 1,962 teachers, split fairly equally by phase of education and role. Sixty per cent of respondents felt that it was 'easy for teachers in their school or returning to teaching to arrange part-time or flexible working'.
- However, a study conducted with 1,000 teachers between August 2015 and February 2016 found a lack of awareness about flexible working and a number of difficulties in accessing it.
- Over half of the respondents in the NAS/UWT study were unaware of Flexible Working Regulations and did not know whether their school had a flexible working policy in place; some believed that flexible working was not an option for a teacher.
- Nearly one-third of teachers said that they had a flexible working request denied – this was particularly common among those with leadership or with a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR). This has been supported by research undertaken by Flexible Teacher Talent, which found that nearly all requests at leadership level had been denied.
- Common reasons for schools denying requests cited in the NASUWT report were cost to the school, potential negative

effect on pupil attainment/wellbeing and school performance. Other reasons included that: parents prefer one point of contact and do not like split teaching (particularly in primary schools); it is not possible or convenient for the school; timetabling complexities; job share positions being allocated already; or not being able to recruit suitable job share partners.

- Approximately one-third of teachers felt that they would be granted flexible working on an informal basis, rather than having it agreed and written into contracts; some reported 'complications' due to these informal agreements, such as senior leaders changing their minds.
- School leaders, including those with middle leadership responsibility, had reported giving leadership/management roles 'as a precondition for flexible working'.

### Part-time working

- The number of teachers working part-time has increased. According to the latest workforce figures, 23 per cent of teachers working in England were doing so on a part-time basis in 2017.
- DfE research (2017-2018) has identified that teachers can find part-time working helpful for their work/life balance. However, qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with 101 former teachers found that they were still working well beyond their contracted hours when working part-time. This reflected the findings of the Teacher Workload Survey 2016, with nearly one-third of part-time teachers reporting that '40 per cent of their total hours were worked outside of school hours' which was a higher proportion than for those working full-time.
- A large body of research undertaken into teacher retention has included recommendations for implementing or increasing part-time opportunities in schools.
- NFER's longitudinal teacher retention study found that teachers in secondary schools often leave the profession in order to take-up part-time working opportunities, suggesting that they may have left to seek more flexibility. This supports findings of a Rapid Evidence Assessment to inform the Working Longer Review (2017), which identified



evidence that some teachers nearing retirement age were taking up, or intending to take-up, supply teacher roles in order to access part-time opportunities.

- In 2007, changes in the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) included the option to take phased retirement, thereby enabling schools to retain older members of the workforce for longer.
- Early research into the impact of this change on teacher behaviour involved 4,837 teachers and headteachers. Half of all headteachers interviewed felt that meeting teachers' needs in terms of supporting flexible working and phased retirement was a key aspect of ensuring quality provision. When examined by school phase however, the majority of headteachers in secondary schools were not happy at the prospect of employing more part-time teachers as a result of the TPS changes.
- In terms of the impact of TPS changes on the decisions of older teachers, nearly one quarter of teachers participating in a recent study were considering remaining longer in teaching and reducing their hours. The study also found that although older teachers would appreciate being able to reduce their hours (for example to four days per week), they encountered a range of barriers to doing so. They reported reluctance on the part of headteachers due to timetabling difficulties and concern about lack of continuity for pupils. A few talked of the difficulties of reducing responsibilities and staying in the same school.

### Other forms of flexible working

- There is little evidence of other forms of flexible working such as staggered or compressed hours, working from home, or ad-hoc arrangements.
- Guidance from the NUT includes possible suggestions to enable working at home including the introduction of 'home admin days' for planning time, or for staff working 'on significant curriculum projects...provided that such days are agreed in advance, recorded in the office calendar, and that staff are contactable at home during working hours. The guidance argues that home working can be very efficient as it helps staff to focus on a task.
- DfE and NUT guidance have reported a number of benefits to job sharing, including: having a larger teaching staff which can cover different aspects of the curriculum; providing opportunities for phased retirement, thereby retaining experienced staff; enabling succession planning and smooth transitions; and classes benefitting from the energy and motivation of 2 teachers.

### Engagement initiatives for career returners

- In March 2016, there were 251,300 qualified teachers under the age of 60 not working in the sector. Flexible working may be a way of encouraging some of these teachers to return.
- There have been 2 recent pilots aimed at returners. One of the main barriers that potential returners in the pilots reported was a lack of opportunities for flexible working, including part-time teaching roles. For example, 46 per cent of career breakers from the Return to Teaching pilot reported that a lack of flexible or part-time opportunities was a barrier to returning to the profession.

### Perceived challenges to flexible working

- Within research studies, the most common challenge to implementing flexible working practices in schools cited, is a perceived lack of support for flexible working among school leadership teams.
- The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

2018 Teacher Omnibus survey reported that thirty-one per cent of respondents felt that a lack of support among senior leaders and governors was the 'most significant barrier to part-time and flexible working'. This barrier was more commonly cited by classroom teachers.

- In the same survey, nearly 47 per cent of 1,962 practising teachers cited timetabling issues as a particular barrier; and this was cited more commonly by senior leaders.
- The House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2018) received evidence that school leaders perceive the knowledge/skills of career returners to be out of date (for example where this cohort of individuals are looking for part-time opportunities).
- The Work Foundation (2014) noted a perception among school leaders and parents that pupils (particularly primary age) struggle if they are taught by different teachers, or that this will have a detrimental impact on school performance/learner outcomes.

### Examples of existing practice

- In addition to the DfE guidance, other organisations have highlighted a number of ways in which flexible working can be developed in schools.
- Some schools wishing to retain teachers have implemented phased retirement including a two-year part-time consultancy contract to support succession planning and transition to new leadership. Others have agreed for the headteacher to work from home for one day per week to enable them to attend to childcare needs.
- Further examples of current practice were found on a #WomenEd and Maternity Teacher/Paternity Teacher (MTPT) Project discussion thread. It cited schools which had implemented practices such as: adapting school timetables mid-year to reflect changing circumstances of teachers; maintaining responsibility and leadership roles (and pay) for leaders taking part-time hours; and offering later starts or early finishes to support teachers with care commitments.
- Some schools are enabling senior leaders to work flexibly. For example, Ambition School Leadership (a school leadership training organisation) reported in a blog in 2018 that a Deputy Headteacher works four days per week (0.75) but is 'flexible if needed' to attend meetings. Because of this arrangement, one of the Assistant Heads was appointed as an Associate Deputy Head to cover the other 0.25, thereby gaining career progression.
- The London Leadership Strategy has published a case study of co-headship in place at Barham Primary School. Both headteachers work three days a week, with an overlap for handover meetings. The case study suggests that they feel their leadership skills and expertise complement each other. The arrangement is seen as successful due to continuous communication between the heads and flexibility in sharing workload.

The full document can be downloaded from:

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