



Department
for Education

Exploring flexible working practice in schools

Final report – November 2020

CooperGibson Research



Social Science in Government

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has committed to promoting flexible working within schools. The [Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy](#) (January, 2019) reinforced DfE's commitment to support schools to implement flexible working to attract more people to the profession, retain them in teaching, and encourage more returners and career changers to teaching. To support that work, CooperGibson Research (CGR) was commissioned to conduct research to gather evidence on staff experiences (in particular, teachers and senior leaders) of flexible working in schools and ways in which these practices may be implemented and managed effectively.

Aims and objectives

There were four strands to this project, each of which supported the key aims and objectives of the overall research:

1. Literature review to identify existing evidence on flexible working practice in schools.
2. Online survey of senior leaders and teachers to establish existing approaches to flexible working in schools.
3. Telephone interviews with senior leaders and teachers to explore examples of flexible working taking place in schools and its perceived impact.
4. Pilot with schools to trial models of designing and implementing flexible working practice in schools.

This is the final report of the research project. It summarises findings from the final two strands: the telephone interviews and a pilot with schools in England, each of which took place from January 2019 onwards. For previous outputs from the research project, summarising findings from phases one and two of the project respectively, see: CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#) and CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#).

Methodology

Fifty qualitative telephone interviews were conducted, comprising of 25 teachers/middle leaders and 25 senior leaders in primary, secondary and special schools across England. In addition, six schools took part in a pilot phase. These schools were offered a package of support, including human resources (HR) and education consultants, who worked with the schools to identify how flexible working could most effectively be embedded in the schools. Visits to the six schools took place to interview key senior leaders and relevant staff at the beginning and end of the pilot, to gather evidence on their existing approach

to flexible working, changes that took place during the pilot phase, and impact on the school.

Key findings

The findings presented below are drawn from the qualitative evidence generated by the 50 telephone interviews and pilot activity with six schools. Caution is advised when drawing conclusions from this research due to the relatively small sample size and the profile of the sample, which was skewed towards schools where flexible working was already taking place in some form.

Defining flexible working

Flexible working was commonly defined by participants in the interviews and pilot in terms of individuals reducing their working time through part-time hours or job share arrangements, with much less reference to working flexibly whilst remaining full-time (for example, compressed hours). Flexible working was also commonly regarded as being relevant to those employees with family/care commitments.

Flexible working policies

Most senior leaders reported that a formal flexible working policy was in place in their school, but awareness among teaching staff about these policies was limited. It was also a common perception that flexible working was intended for individuals returning to work following family leave. Several teachers noted that the option for flexible working being included in the job advert had been a contributing factor in their decision to apply for their role.

Attitudes of senior leaders

Most senior leaders interviewed or involved in the pilot voiced a willingness, at least to some extent, to accommodate flexible working requests where they perceived it to be possible. However, they would often add caveats that they only agreed to flexible working for non-teaching staff or those without leadership responsibility. Teachers in special schools often found it difficult to request flexible working due to pupils' complex needs.

Overall, during the interviews and pilot, all participant types reported that a culture shift needed to occur within the sector to encourage senior leaders to be more open to flexible working. Where changes took place as part of the pilot, senior leaders acknowledged that it had been challenging to consider new ways of working but could see benefits emerging as a result.

Factors influencing decisions

Several inter-related factors were reported by senior leaders to inform their considerations about flexible working requests. These were: meeting school/pupil needs, staffing structures and timetabling considerations, school budgets, recruitment and retention requirements, the performance and productivity of staff, and the guidance and advice they accessed from local authority (LA), academy trust or HR personnel. Most decisions were said to be either ratified or reviewed by school governors. However, senior leaders were less certain that governors or executive leaders of academy trusts would be supportive of their own requests for flexible working, and – although examples were identified during the pilot of co-headship and senior leaders reducing working hours¹ – many did not feel that flexible working would be compatible with their own role. They suggested that governors and academy trust leaders needed access to more guidance and examples of how flexible working had been successful in a range of school contexts.

Challenges of flexible working

The interviews and pilot confirmed the findings of the previous stages of the research by identifying the same key challenges faced by schools in the implementation of flexible working. These were: 1) capacity (for example, timetabling constraints, reviewing directed hours, lack of continuity in teaching (particularly for pupils with complex needs), additional burden on full-time staff); 2) resources (for example, budget, salary reductions, and recruitment challenges); 3) leadership and accountability (for example, school culture, dividing responsibilities fairly in job shares, risk of part-time staff working longer hours); and 4) meetings and communication (for example, logistics for part-time staff attending training, communicating with staff off-site, and joint planning/handover requirements for job shares).

Benefits of flexible working

Despite the challenges reported, all senior leaders involved in the interviews and pilot identified benefits to schools in implementing flexible working arrangements. Common benefits were noted as being: 1) positive recruitment and retention (for example, retaining skilled and experienced teachers, and attracting a wider and higher quality range of recruits); 2) improved staff morale and wellbeing (for example, teachers feeling more supported, reduced workload and reduced sickness and absence rates); 3) additional capacity through skills development, team-working, increased sharing of practice; and 4) better management of succession planning at leadership level (for example, through job share/co-headship). A key unintended benefit of the flexible working pilot, in particular, had been the development of strategic capacity at leadership level.

¹ To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

Experiences of family leave

During the interviews, teachers were asked to describe any experience with requesting flexible working following a return from family leave. They commonly said that senior leaders had been open to discussing their requirements and working out arrangements that were suitable for both the individual and the school. However, a few teachers returning from maternity leave had felt that senior leaders were not open to the possibility of flexible working. They said that they had not received any information about the options for flexible working, or they had been told directly that flexible working requests would not be considered. To support these challenges during the pilot, senior leaders responded positively to guidance packs developed for schools. These included information on the rights and responsibilities of schools and individual staff members, and timelines and processes for making flexible working requests.²

Implementing flexible working in schools

Participants in the interviews and pilot were asked to describe how flexible working had been implemented in their schools, and the lessons that had been learned as a result. As with the benefits and challenges of flexible working in schools, responses tended to overlap across core themes: managing responsibilities and accountability, establishing effective communication mechanisms and planning logistical requirements.³ Similarly, the pilot with schools highlighted how flexible working arrangements could be used in combination, such as compressed hours being combined with home/remote working, phased retirement with job share and flexi or lieu time with personal/family days.

Technology was often implemented to support flexible working. This commonly included: secure cloud-based software for sharing documents and working remotely, mobile applications for communicating with parents, and management information systems to enable streamlined data collection. Senior leaders highlighted safeguarding or data protection concerns when allowing staff to work remotely, and the cost implications of specialist software packages.

Support required for flexible working

When asked about the changes that were required in order to make flexible working more successful in schools, teachers and senior leaders across the interviews and pilot spoke of the need for a culture shift across the sector so that it became more open to the idea of flexible working. To help this, they most commonly requested:

² See CGR (2020) [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: research appendix - example resources for pilot schools](#). DfE. This annex includes three template documents produced for schools during the pilot.

³ For detail on suggestions and practices implemented, [see section 4](#) in the main body of the report and separate 'pilot school summaries' document.

- Models of existing practice and case studies that could be presented to governors and executive leaders (in LA maintained schools and academies) to show how flexible working practices can be successful.
- Examples of how challenges to flexible working had been overcome, reflecting specific school contexts (for example, small primary, special school) the different types of staff (teaching and non-teaching), and what flexible working might look like/mean in a range of situations.
- Increased guidance and support for senior leaders in relation to HR matters such as implementing arrangements on a trial basis. This included simple checklists to use when reviewing flexible working requests.
- Information and guidance on managing flexible working in terms of ensuring accountability and fairly apportioning roles and responsibilities, and on navigating flexible working arrangements for those in leadership roles.
- Clearer information and guidance for teachers about the different types of flexible working available to them, other than part-time and job shares, and how to manage the challenges that may arise when working flexibly.

Points for consideration

Drawing together the main findings from this research project as a whole, the key messages and considerations are presented below:

- Senior education professionals will be key to any cultural shift across the sector towards flexible working. Evidence from this research project indicates that there is a need to reinforce messages that flexible working can be approached as an opportunity, rather than a risk. This includes support for senior leaders, governors and executive leaders in recognising the benefits of flexible working, and the ways in which it can be effectively implemented and managed.⁴ This may be achieved through updating guidance,⁵ and providing a range of evidence-based examples and case studies of flexible working in various school contexts and with different staff types.⁶
- Even where senior leaders wanted to make flexible working possible for their staff, they voiced concerns as to how to make it work on a practical level and over a sustained period of time. Those participating in the interviews and pilot suggested that case studies could show schools how changes are made, how to overcome challenges, and showcase the benefits and impacts. This was in addition to

⁴ Note that DfE has published an A4 poster for schools which outlines the key benefits for schools. DfE (2019), [The benefits of flexible working](#).

⁵ DfE (2017) [Flexible working in schools: Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools](#).

⁶ Whilst this research report was under development, the DfE published three [flexible working case studies](#). Further case studies may be helpful to schools across a range of contexts and with different staff types.

utilising case studies to illustrate the opportunities of flexible working to senior leaders who may be less open to flexible working.

- There were mixed levels of understanding across the school workforce about the possibilities and different types of flexible working, and the practical implications of how these may work in a school context. Raising awareness across the school workforce that flexible working can be appropriate for all members of staff, not just those with parental/care responsibilities, would be an important step towards developing a culture which is more amenable to flexible working arrangements.
- This research has established that it is important for senior leaders to review or introduce flexible working policies, to enable informal procedures to be formalised and to raise awareness across the workforce. Senior leaders participating in the pilot and telephone interviews requested support in accessing relevant policies and documents (such as a formal flexible working policy providing staff rights and responsibilities, request forms, and guidance packs to support schools in making the changes). They felt that these policies would help ensure that processes are clear for all staff (including timescales for requests), and encourage open and transparent dialogue regarding arrangements in place. The formalisation of policies and processes would help schools to move from reactive approaches to flexible working, to proactive approaches that can support strategic planning.
- Given the focus on HR issues during the pilot, it became apparent to the research team and specialist consultants providing support to the schools that up-to-date and accurate advice on HR matters relating to flexible working was important. Therefore, training for HR personnel, external HR providers and School Improvement Partners (SIPs) who work with schools could be beneficial. In addition, schools participating in the pilot benefited from accessing external, impartial advice and guidance, and felt that other schools would find this useful. This could potentially be facilitated through national online networks or access to telephone/virtual mentoring. Existing networks for support may also include local teacher/headteacher forums and collaborative groups.
- An extended flexible working pilot could further develop evidence in overcoming barriers to flexible working; carrying out additional and longer-term testing and tracking of flexible working practices (including innovative approaches) could inform new models of practice across the sector.

Further details of these considerations are provided in [section 5](#).

1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has committed to promoting flexible working with schools. An announcement in March 2017 by the then Secretary of State stated that flexible working practices should become the norm in schools across the country. A guidance document was published by DfE in October 2017⁷, outlining the definition and benefits of flexible working for schools, as well as potential barriers for school leaders introducing flexible working practices, and case studies of practice. This coincided with a DfE flexible working summit on 30 October 2017, attended by a range of stakeholders to discuss how schools have made flexible working a success, and various examples of good practice were shared. Following this event, DfE publicly committed to ‘carry out research looking at changing recruitment practices in schools, to inform our guidance about how schools can introduce flexible working’. The [Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy](#) (January, 2019) reinforced DfE’s commitment to support schools to implement flexible working to attract more people to the profession, retain them in teaching, and encourage more returners and career changes to teaching.

To help it to fulfil their pledge, the DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research (CGR) to gather evidence on the experiences of flexible working in schools and ways in which these practices may be supported.

1.1 Aims of the research

This project had two overarching aims:

1. Fill gaps in evidence on flexible working practices in schools, including understanding attitudes and perceptions towards flexible working among teachers and senior leaders and gather information on good practice.
2. Build on existing practice and knowledge emerging from the research to pilot approaches to flexible working with a small number of schools.

1.2 Research objectives

To meet these aims, the following objectives were set.

⁷ DfE (2017) [Flexible working in schools: Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools](#).

Objective one: Establish the existing evidence base of flexible working in schools (via literature review).

- Identify existing evidence on flexible working practices in schools, both in England and internationally where relevant.
- Highlight relevant evidence available from comparable sectors (such as further and higher education) nationally and internationally, including examples of good practice and their potential transferability to schools.

Objective two: Explore best practice, attitudes and perceptions relating to flexible working in schools (via an online survey of senior leaders and teachers, and telephone interviews).

- Establish existing approaches to flexible working taking place, forms of flexible working used, and how this relates to a school context.
- Explore schools' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of flexible working practices, including the perceived and experienced challenges and advantages of them.
- Identify what does and does not work for schools/teachers when offering flexible working, including any challenges experienced, effective ways to overcome them, and examples of good practice and innovation.

Objective three: Pilot and support the implementation of flexible working in schools (via a trial with schools).

- Identify effective models for designing and implementing flexible working in different types of schools.
- Establish examples of perceived impact of flexible working on schools and teachers.
- Identify any unintended consequences of the pilot for teachers and schools.
- Explore how support provided through the pilot and its impacts could be further developed.

1.3 Methodology

The research encompassed several stages of quantitative and qualitative data collection:

- A review of literature published from 2008 onwards, which focused on flexible working in schools in England. Six case studies were also developed. These explored flexible working in Higher Education (HE), health and social care, the

wider private sector, and three international case studies – Australia, Finland and Singapore.⁸

- An online survey of 2,896 senior leaders and teachers, to understand existing approaches to flexible working practice taking place, perceptions and experiences of flexible working.⁹
- In-depth telephone interviews with 25 senior leaders and 25 teachers/middle leaders in 50 schools to explore current flexible working practices in relation to school context.
- A pilot of flexible working practices with six schools to explore how flexible roles can be effectively designed and implemented within schools.¹⁰

This report provides the qualitative findings of the in-depth telephone interviews and pilot with six schools. Examples of practice are highlighted throughout, which may be of interest to school staff, and particularly in [sections 3](#) and [4](#). A separate publication includes summary reports on each participating school developed through the course of the pilot.

1.3.1 Telephone interviews

In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders. These were accessed via the online survey that had been conducted prior to the qualitative research.¹¹ Respondents to the online survey were asked to opt-in to further research. Those who responded positively (and where they met the sample criteria – see [section 1.3.2](#)), were invited to take part in the telephone interviews using email addresses provided during the survey.

1.3.2 Telephone interview sample

Fifty telephone interviews were completed; 25 with teachers/middle leaders and 25 with senior leaders, in primary, secondary and special schools across England (see Table 1).

⁸ For the published literature review, see CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#), DfE.

⁹ For the survey findings report, see: CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#), DfE.

¹⁰ To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#), DfE.

¹¹ For the survey findings report, see: CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#), DfE.

Table 1: Telephone interview sample by school and role type

	Teachers	Middle leaders	Senior leaders	Total
Primary schools	8	2	10	20
Secondary schools	6	4	10	20
Special schools	3	2	5	10
Total	17	8	25	50

In order to explore experiences of flexible working, the sample was skewed to those who had noted in the online survey that they were working flexibly in some form. All teachers and several senior leaders participating in the interviews were working flexibly to some extent. The majority of teachers were working in part-time or job share arrangements, whilst the most common form of flexible working among senior leaders was remote/homeworking. A small number were also included where they had experienced having requests to work flexibly declined in their previous and/or current school.¹²

The sample was also monitored to achieve a reasonable spread across different school-level characteristics, and types of teachers/middle leaders and senior leaders. Further details of the interview sample are provided in [Appendix 1](#).

1.3.3 Pilot of flexible working practice in schools

To address objective three ([section 1.2](#)), a pilot phase took place with six participating schools, between March and October 2019. The six participating schools were offered a package of support, including human resources (HR) and education consultants, who worked with the schools to explore flexible working options, how flexible working could most effectively be embedded in schools and to identify relevant challenges and solutions. Together, the schools and consultants formed action plans and support was provided to the schools throughout the duration of the pilot.

Over the duration of the pilot, each school was allocated up to six days of consultancy time. This varied according to each school and included face-to-face visits as well as regular telephone and email communications. Types of bespoke support provided by the specialist consultants included, for example:

¹² Five senior leaders said they had a flexible working request declined. Nine teachers said they had a request declined in a previous school and six had been refused in their current school.

- Reviewing existing school policies and procedures around flexible working and developing new policies and materials that schools could adopt and amend to suit their context.
- Reviewing directed hours calculations and capacity of different teams to explore options for how flexible working could be accommodated.
- Advising on operational issues such as timetabling, sharing staff responsibilities, communicating arrangements with trustees, governors, staff, parents/carers and pupils.
- Advising on HR issues such as contractual arrangements, legal obligations, understanding 'family friendly' entitlements, consulting with staff or unions.
- Developing documents and proposals for governors/trusts.

To provide evidence from the trials, school staff took part in depth interviews at the outset to explore existing approaches to flexible working in their school, aspirations for introducing flexible working practices, and key challenges and support required. End of pilot interviews also took place to gather evidence on the impact of any activity and changes that had taken place, including what worked well and less well, key successes and challenges, and lessons learned.

The evidence gathered during this process has been included in this report and integrated with the interview evidence. The pilot has also culminated in the development of six summary reports based on the experiences of each school taking part.¹³

1.3.4 Sample details of pilot schools

As with the telephone interviews, six schools were identified from the survey responses to take part in the pilot.¹⁴ These were schools which had stated in the online survey that they would be willing to take part in a pilot phase. The schools were selected overall on the basis of including a mixture of phase, type of school, different contexts and locations. Schools were also selected where they had identified challenges and issues that they would like help with and/or, they had identified some forms of flexible working that they would be willing to trial. Table 2 provides a summary of the range of school contexts of those involved.

¹³ To view the summary reports, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

¹⁴ For the survey findings report, see: CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#), DfE.

Table 2: Pilot school sample details (at the time of the survey)

School context	Number in pilot
Phase	3 primary 2 secondary 1 special
Type	1 single academy 2 multi-academy trusts 3 local authority maintained
Size	2 x less than 200 students 2 x 201-400 students 1 x 401 – 1000 students 1 x 1001+ students
Ofsted rating	4 Good 1 Outstanding 1 Requires Improvement
Deprivation levels (% children eligible for free school meals)	3 low 3 medium

At the beginning and end of the pilot, depth interviews took place at each school. These were held with a range of senior leaders and also included a small number of teachers and school business managers (see [Appendix 1](#) for further details).

1.4 Definitions of flexible working

The following definitions of flexible working practice were supplied to research participants and have been applied throughout this report. This expands on the core forms of flexible working outlined in [DfE guidance](#).

- **Part-time:** working less than full-time hours and/or working fewer days.
- **Job share:** two or more people doing one job and splitting the hours.
- **Split role:** tasks divided between two part-time job holders.
- **Split shifts:** a working shift comprising two or more separate periods of duty in a day.
- **Staggered hours:** the employee has different start, finish and break times from other staff.
- **Staggered weeks:** for example, a formal agreement to work outside term time to deliver booster classes/ sports programmes/enrichment activities.

- **Compressed hours:** working full-time hours but over fewer days.
- **Home/remote working:** regularly/formally agreed as part of directed time/timetabled hours.
- **Phased retirement:** gradually reduced working hours and/or responsibilities to transition from full-time work to full-time retirement.
- **Annualised hours:** working hours spread across the year, which may include some school closure days, or where hours vary across the year to suit the school and employee.
- **Sabbatical:** employee takes a period of time away from work, over and above annual leave; usually the job is kept open for them to return.
- **Career break:** employee takes unpaid time off work. Contract is suspended or ended, without a guaranteed return, depending on policy and individual agreement.
- **Flexi/lieu time:** the paid time off work an employee gets for having worked additional hours.
- **Family leave:** days of authorised leave during term time, for example to care for family members.

2. Approaches to flexible working

This section of the report summarises how participants in the interviews and pilot defined flexible working, awareness and use of flexible working policies in schools, and the factors informing senior leaders' decisions about flexible working requests.

2.1 Defining flexible working

At the start of each telephone interview, participants were asked to describe their understanding of flexible working. In response, most interviewees (teachers and senior leaders) tended to name specific types of flexible working such as part-time arrangements and job shares (these were particularly common among those in teaching roles). A few mentioned remote working, career breaks and flexi-time, although awareness of these being applied within a school context – during the interviews and the pilot – was generally low.

'I am not sure of the other types of flexible working other than job share. I have never heard of the other types¹⁵ in relation to education'. (Secondary school teacher, academy)

Flexible working was commonly defined by interviewees in terms of individuals reducing their working time (as this was the most common practice within schools), rather than the ability to work the same number of hours in staggered or compressed patterns. This supported the findings of the literature review and online survey.¹⁶ However, a few senior leaders did acknowledge that flexible working included a broader range of approaches.

'Flexible working doesn't mean people only work...part-time. There are other ways to manage people's working hours...[It means] to allow some degree of flexibility to people, which is very valuable to them. It is not just that [they] work fewer days'. (Secondary senior leader, academy)

During the telephone discussions and pilot, participants commonly suggested that flexible working specifically related to employees with family commitments, and parents returning from maternity leave in particular. Some mentioned that flexible working was a means by which school staff could achieve an improved work/life balance, or a way for schools to meet individual needs without compromising the quality of provision. Less commonly, teachers and senior leaders both suggested that flexible working was not based on working hours or patterns but the location of work, for example, being permitted to take planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time at home/remotely, or to be off-site during non-contact hours.

¹⁵ See section 1.5 for a list of all forms of flexible working considered during this project.

¹⁶ CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.4; CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.30.

2.2 Use of flexible working policies

Echoing the results of the online survey, the majority of senior leaders reported during the telephone interviews that a formal flexible working policy was in place in their school.¹⁷ Many of them also noted that they would review each request on a case-by-case basis, whilst following the formal process. Where schools did not have a formal policy in place, senior leaders said that it was not a statutory requirement,¹⁸ or that a policy would be too restrictive. Although those schools that took part in the pilot generally did not have policies in place, they requested support in formalising processes and tailoring policies and guidance so that they suited the needs of the school.¹⁹

During both the interviews and the pilot, awareness about flexible working policies was limited among teaching staff. Most did not know whether there was a flexible working policy in place in their school, suggesting a need for senior leaders to better communicate these to staff. This reflected the findings of the literature review, which highlighted a lack of awareness among teachers regarding the existence of flexible working policies in schools, alongside a need to retain some flexibility within formal processes in order to meet the requirements of each workplace.²⁰

2.3 Making requests

Many teachers participating in the interviews could describe their school's process for requesting flexible working, even if they were not aware of a formal policy. Where a few commented further, they felt that the processes for requesting flexible working were generally fair.²¹ During the pilot, however, there were some challenges identified. Teachers were often unclear of the processes to follow (reflecting the lack of formal policies being in place in these schools). This had led to misunderstandings regarding rights and responsibilities, and the expectation that a school could meet all requests.

As they were more aware of processes in place (in comparison to those taking part in the pilot), teachers participating in the interviews commonly described completing a template form or writing a letter of request to the headteacher and/or school governors. Several teachers mentioned that they had informal discussions with the headteacher in advance

¹⁷ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.19.

¹⁸ This was also reported by one-quarter of senior leaders responding to the online survey. Ibid., p.20.

¹⁹ During the pilot, most schools accepted templates to adapt in order to establish formal policies – see separate 'pilot school summaries' document for details, CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE. Also see CGR (2020) [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: research appendix - Example resources for pilot schools](#). DfE.

²⁰ CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE.

²¹ Two secondary school teachers did not believe that the process was fair. One reported that they had not received a detailed rationale for their request being declined, the second felt that teachers of shortage subjects were more likely to have their requests accepted, compared to those who taught subjects that were less challenging to recruit to.

of making their request. They had done this in order to ascertain the options available to them and the likelihood of a request being granted.²²

‘I spoke to the headteacher first. Then I had to send in a letter to the head and the governors with my suggested working pattern and explain how this would impact on my colleagues and the school, and how it would work in a positive way. This was all approved...and I got a 0.7 contract’. (Primary teacher, academy school).

During the pilot, a member of non-teaching staff working compressed hours/remotely emphasised the importance of arranging initial discussions and advanced planning before making a flexible working request.

‘[I] would advise people to think seriously about it, don’t just chuck the [application] form in and worry about the impact afterwards. [Complete] a comprehensive application so the person who receives it can imagine it happening rather than [just] the shock of how to deal with it. If [they receive] the form and it has got all the things on there [that need considering], and it is all sorted already, it is easier to imagine [the pattern being requested] succeeding’. (Non-teaching staff, primary LA maintained school)

The most common reason for flexible working requests given by interview and pilot participants was to manage childcare commitments. This reflected the common perception that flexible working was a practice intended for individuals returning to work following family leave ([section 2.1](#)). Some senior leaders also reported receiving requests in relation to ill health, the care of elderly parents, and in preparation for retirement. Likewise, a few teachers discussed making requests due to care responsibilities other than childcare, and phased retirement, but these requests were reported much less commonly.

2.3.1 Flexible hiring

‘Flexible hiring’ refers to flexible working options being made clear to potential employees as a standard part of all recruitment processes. During the online survey, the majority of senior leaders said that flexible hiring was not a standard part of their offer; where it occurred, flexible hiring was more likely to be considered for teaching posts rather than leadership vacancies.²³ Likewise, there was evidence during the telephone interviews that flexible hiring was occurring for teaching posts. Several teachers participating in the interviews had applied for jobs that referenced flexible working options in the advert, and this had been a contributing factor for some in their decision to apply. A small number noted that although their job had been advertised as full-time, a request for flexible working had been considered by the school.

²² For the experiences of those returning to work following family leave, see section 4.4.

²³ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.21.

Some senior leaders participating in the pilot had noted that when they included options for flexible working in their recruitment advertisements, they attracted a wider and higher quality range of candidates for the roles.

2.3.2 Attitudes of senior leaders towards flexible working

The literature review highlighted that the attitude of senior leaders was fundamental to the effectiveness of flexible working arrangements.²⁴ This was corroborated during the telephone interviews and pilot study. Although most senior leaders interviewed or involved in the pilot voiced a willingness, at least to some extent, to accommodate flexible working requests where they perceived it to be possible, there were several caveats around this.

Several senior leaders who said that they were open to flexible working during the telephone interviews, went on to state that this was only for non-teaching staff, or for teachers without a leadership responsibility.²⁵ These caveats created ambiguity in determining the overall attitudes of senior leaders towards flexible working. Thus, it was common for interview and pilot participants (across both senior leaders and teachers) to suggest that a culture shift needed to occur within the sector more widely, to encourage senior leaders to be more open to implementing flexible working arrangements. Where work towards this sort of change took place as part of the pilot studies, senior leaders acknowledged that it had been challenging to consider new ways of working, but the longer-term benefits were becoming apparent to them by the end of the trial ([section 3.3](#)).

‘I was always the one to stay late – the last to leave at night. I had unwritten [perceptions] that that was what the best teachers do – I lived by that. It was a philosophical shift for me and was emotional...it has broadened my mind...I am more flexible around the ones that [work flexible hours], I understand they work that way. I do enjoy the creativity [and] can see there is a threshold now. It has given me permission to go home earlier too, and I have done, I drop my son off to go to college. It feels reasonable to leave at 6pm’. (Senior leader, special school)

Indeed, it became apparent during discussions that some senior leaders did not regard existing practices as flexible working, simply because they were already part of everyday approaches to staffing.

‘I give [staff] the option that they can either work in the staff room, or in one of the offices if somebody is out for that day, or work at home... But I wouldn’t say that PPA at home was flexible working if I am honest. I just

²⁴ CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.25.

²⁵ See separate ‘pilot school summaries’ document for examples of senior leaders working flexibly, for example, as part of co-headship arrangements. CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

think that it is something we have to do because there isn't enough room in school'. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

For the most part, teachers also agreed that, in their current school, senior leaders were open to flexible working – however it should be noted that the interview sample specifically selected those that were already working flexibly, so as to gather detail on practices currently implemented in schools. Therefore, teachers were able to provide examples, both during the interviews and the pilot, of the practical ways in which they felt that flexible working had been openly supported in their school (i.e. beyond written policies and procedures). These included:

- Senior leaders setting an example by being part of job shares, working part-time or remotely.
- Schools/trusts employing a designated HR manager who oversaw the process of applying for and arranging flexible working. As part of their role, the HR manager would directly email staff on an annual basis to ask if anybody wanted to apply for flexible working for the following academic year. This was perceived to help openly acknowledge flexible working as a possible and acceptable approach across the workforce.
- Headteachers promoting the benefits and value of job share arrangements during staff meetings and other communications, for example, pairing teachers together whose strengths or teaching styles complemented one another in order to help promote high quality teaching and learning.

Despite these practices, some teachers participating in the interviews did not think that senior leaders were open to the idea of flexible working. They tended to be those who reported having previous requests for flexible working declined, or spoke of senior leaders' perceptions that flexible working was not practicable in schools.²⁶

Reflecting the online survey findings, some participants in the interviews and pilot felt unable to make a request for flexible working.²⁷ Like the online survey respondents, these teachers tended to work in special schools and felt that the arrangements could not work in their school environment due to the high needs of pupils and specific requirements for consistency in their support and care. For the same reasons, senior leaders in special schools often reported (during the interviews and pilot) that they would only consider part-time working for a limited number of roles, and were concerned that making changes to school policies could lead to a large – and potentially unmanageable – increase in requests for flexible working.

Emphasising the importance of senior leader attitudes towards flexible working, pilot school staff who had flexible working arrangements in place raised concerns that these

²⁶ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.58.

²⁷ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.56.

would not be honoured if existing senior leaders left the school and/or incoming leaders were not open to flexible working.

2.4 Decision-making

Senior leaders were asked during the telephone interviews to describe the factors that influenced their decisions to accept or decline flexible working requests. Most reported that they reviewed several issues in relation to one another, rather than highlighting one single determining factor.

‘We try to accommodate [part-time requests] ...as they are often about childcare... But then [it] doesn’t really work because we are trying to fit the timetable to accommodate those people who are part-time...Really [flexible working decisions are] about operational factors, but also about the experience that our young people have. If it [has] a detrimental impact on them, I am more inclined to say no to it ...Ultimately, we are responsible for delivering an outstanding education. You can’t always do that when you are saying [to pupils]: “this person will take you for this lesson but the next lesson it will be [somebody] else”’. (Secondary senior leader, LA maintained school).

As a result of these multi-layered considerations, senior leaders said that their decisions sometimes involved negotiating with members of staff who made requests for flexible working in order to find a compromise.

Meeting school/pupil need: Most senior leaders reported that they would consider whether a request met the needs of the school, specifically in relation to maintaining the quality of provision for pupils. This commonly included ensuring continuity of teaching and staff dynamics, for example, whether proposed job share arrangements would be successful between the individuals involved and the likely effect of their combined approaches in the classroom.

- **Staffing models and timetabling:** Senior leaders commonly stated that existing staffing structures were a consideration when making decisions about flexible working. This tended to include the capacity of the school to timetable classes appropriately or ensuring that any proposed changes to staffing models were manageable. Thus, several emphasised that they needed to be able to balance staff requests against broader strategic priorities, operational demands and levels of accountability. Indeed, during the pilot, several schools were supported with reviews of directed hours to explore where timetabling could be adapted to allow for flexible working.
- **School budgets:** For many senior leaders, budgetary considerations were a key factor in their decision-making. These were generally related to:

- The perceived higher costs of employing two-part time staff to fill the role of one full-time equivalent (for example, when including pension and training costs for two members of staff, or paying for joint PPA and handover time). One senior leader noted that as each staff member received a work laptop to enable remote working and clearer communications between job share partners, this meant additional costs for supplying equipment.
 - Additional staffing costs for cover or supply teaching to fill gaps in the timetable.
 - Budgetary savings as a result of flexible working requests, for example having the internal capacity to accommodate part-time hours without the need for additional supply costs.
- **Recruitment and retention:** Several senior leaders reported that teacher retention was a factor in their decision-making regarding flexible working. Several noted that agreeing to requests was not always an 'ideal' situation, but that they would do so in order to retain good quality and experienced staff that they may otherwise lose. Examples included retaining teachers returning from maternity leave who were requesting part-time or job share arrangements, agreeing to flexible working as part of phased retirement plans, or supporting staff who may have requested a reduction hours or career break/sabbatical to improve their work/life balance.

 'In terms of my heads of department, the reason why I am flexible with them is because it is hard to find experienced staff that are good GCSE and A level teachers. So, I would rather have them on four days a week than not have them. I believe them being here part-time brings a greater benefit than having less experienced staff here full-time'. (Secondary senior leader, academy)
- **Performance and productivity:** A few senior leaders felt that staff were more productive, and offered more commitment and high-quality contributions to school life, when their wellbeing was acknowledged directly by senior leaders; this included accommodating requests for flexible working.
 - **Guidance and advice:** Others mentioned accessing advice to ensure that their decisions followed formal guidelines and adhered to statutory regulations. They did so either through the LA, HR personnel based within a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), or their Chair of Governors.

Examples of practice: considering flexible working requests

Several senior leaders participating in the telephone interviews summarised their decision-making processes, and why they felt that it was important to review each individual request thoroughly before making a decision.

‘If someone requests flexible working you have to follow through and you have to look at it, you can’t say no [immediately]. I think that is good. It does give me, as a head, things to think about’. (Senior leader, special school)

By reviewing each request in detail, senior leaders felt assured that all decisions had been based on a considered review of all options. It also gave them an opportunity to plan for different scenarios, including potential challenges that may arise as a result of specific arrangements being agreed. Consequently, this meant that a ‘very measured decision’ was taken, enabling them to ‘set expectations very clearly once we have agreed the request’. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school).

A methodical approach to considering flexible working requests was perceived to support creativity in staffing models, and as a consequence enhance teachers’ working relationships. Therefore, senior leaders felt that undertaking reviews of individual requests meant that they personally remained open to different forms of flexible working practice, including those that they may not have used or agreed previously.

‘I would always continue to be open to extending my view of flexible working and not rush a decision. [I would want to] take a really long hard look at what is possible, not discount anything before we have explored [the options]...I could see that it is easier for me in that moment to say no, it is not possible....[But the right] amount of thinking around it needs to happen’. (Senior leader, special school)

2.4.1 Role of governors

Nearly all senior leaders reported that school governors either ratified their decisions regarding flexible working requests, or scrutinised senior leaders’ decisions when reviewing staffing models and recruitment requirements. Reflecting the online survey findings, many teachers were also aware that the process for submitting a flexible working request involved a review of the request by governors.²⁸

Overall, senior leaders were positive about the role of governors in managing flexible working requests. They commonly stated that governing bodies were supportive and

²⁸ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.22..

engaged with the review process for decisions. Some noted that the school had a sub-committee, consisting of a small number of governors, that focused on staffing and resource issues. This was felt to be helpful in ensuring that sensitive personnel issues were treated confidentially.

Nonetheless, senior leaders were less certain that governors and/or executive leaders of academy trusts would be as supportive towards their own requests for flexible working (again, this was similar to the survey and literature review findings).²⁹ As a result, some suggested – during the interviews and the pilot – that governors and/or executive leaders of academy trusts needed to have access to more guidance, including specific examples of how flexible working arrangements could be effective at senior leadership level and in different school contexts ([section 5](#)).

A small number of senior leaders reported that governors only became involved in decisions related to flexible working where requests had been declined and then progressed to an appeals stage.

‘It is good the governors aren’t involved in all the decisions, because if it came to appeal there would be nobody to appeal to. So, when somebody does appeal, they are appealing against my decision...The governors can listen to all of the evidence and make a decision. There is no [conflict of interest] there’. (Senior leader, special school).

Where governors were reported to have no role in the decision-making process, senior leaders said that decisions regarding working arrangements were operational and therefore overseen by senior leadership teams (SLTs). In these instances, governors would be updated on any staffing changes more generally, and informed of any significant changes to working patterns as part of those updates.

²⁹ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.58; CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.20.

Example of practice: working with governors

A senior leader in an LA maintained primary school described how they notified the personnel committee of the governing board once a formal request for flexible working had been received by the school. This committee then created a 'working party' to review the specific request, which generally consisted of the headteacher and a maximum of two designated governors in order to ensure confidentiality.

'The reason that we do that is that I don't think that everybody needs to know the circumstances of the request. Sometimes it could be really tricky because it could be about the sickness of a family member, that kind of thing. I think it is on a need-to-know basis. Also, we are discussing things like income, that the whole world doesn't need to know'. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

The working party used the request as an opportunity to review the staffing model each time, with every member of staff noted on a separate piece of paper.

'We [use the pieces of papers to] put people into different positions, and look at if there is a really clear fit anywhere that we haven't thought about... We basically rehash all of the staff every time we get a flexible working request. It takes about three hours to do'. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

A photograph was taken of this paperwork process taking place, so that the person who made the request could be shown how the working party worked on the decision, 'and that we really have actually tried [to consider each possible arrangement]'. Once the working party had come to a decision, it forwarded a recommendation to the personnel committee. The headteacher highlighted that this approach ensured that the process was transparent, and the decision could be held up to scrutiny.

'One of the requests that I had, I didn't think that two of the people who requested a job share would be very good or effective working together. [However] the governors were able to challenge me, because I had to be fair and I have to [make each decision] on merit'. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

Following the recommendation from the working party, the personnel committee would meet to ratify the decision. The headteacher would then communicate that decision to the staff member, with a 'potted history' of the process behind it.

3. Implementing flexible working in schools

This section details the forms of flexible working that participants in the telephone interviews and pilot reported were currently implemented in their schools, and the perceived challenges and benefits related to them.

3.1 Practices currently implemented

All research participants were asked about the different types of flexible working implemented in their schools. The literature review and online survey had indicated that part-time and job share arrangements were the most common practices in schools, and the interviews and pilot confirmed these patterns.³⁰ All reported that part-time working arrangements were in place in their schools, and many mentioned job shares.

However, as with the online survey and literature review findings, it was clear that other forms of flexible working were implemented in schools. Those most commonly mentioned were:³¹

- Personal/family days
- Phased retirement
- Flexi or lieu time
- Home/remote working
- Sabbaticals

A small number of interview participants explained that these arrangements were not always used in isolation from one another and related to both teaching and non-teaching roles. For example, the pilot identified examples of compressed hours being combined with home/remote working, phased retirement with job share and flexi or lieu time with personal/family days.³² Thus, senior leaders involved in the interviews and pilot suggested (as per the literature review) that creating an element of flexibility within flexible working itself was a means to ensuring successful implementation of these practices in school settings ([section 4.1](#)).

‘My business manager has hours that are completely flexible. Some weeks [they] will be in the office doing very conventional hours...other weeks [they] might do compressed hours, [or] extended days and then be off for a

³⁰ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.51; CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.15.

³¹ Additional forms of flexible working less frequently mentioned were: annualised hours, staggered hours, split shifts, compressed hours and career breaks.

³² See ‘pilot school summaries’ document for some detailed examples. CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

couple of days. And then because of the nature of [their] role, [they] can work from home as well'. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

'I went to the head one day and said: "I really love working here but I am really struggling because the [daily sixty-mile round journey to work] is exhausting". So, we talked about ways we could make it better. I said it would be good if I could come in a bit later a couple of days a week so that I could miss the traffic. So my head talked about it during my performance management and planned it [so] that I would come in 45-minutes later two days a week...I then got an email about a week later to say that it had been confirmed...I make up my hours [by completing some work at home] in the evenings'. (Secondary teacher, special school)

3.1.1 Implementing flexible working by role

Despite their stated openness to flexible working, senior leaders tended to say in the telephone and pilot discussions that they found some types easier to accommodate than others. For example, most perceived that it was easier to accommodate flexible working arrangements for members of staff in non-teaching or support roles. Senior leaders in primary schools specifically emphasised that arranging flexible working for teaching staff was very challenging. When these challenges were explored further during the pilot, it was clear that poor past experiences with staff working flexibly had increased reluctance among senior leaders to agree to future requests.

Generally, senior leaders commonly perceived home/remote working and staggered weeks as not being possible for those in teaching posts. This was due to the class-based nature of teaching and the need for staff to be on site during specific hours.³³

'Having now been head for just over twelve years, and been in schools for double that time, having seen and observed job shares, part-time working and so on, I strongly think that in a primary school...a class teacher is not a role that can be job shared...I have seen that lead to inconsistency in classrooms and negative effects on children. But the [less permanent] class-based roles, [for example] PPA cover teachers and intervention teachers: that is where I will look to create a degree of flexibility'. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

In addition, several did not see how flexible working could be compatible with their own role, although they did indicate that they may consider it in the future. This reflected their perceptions that members of staff with leadership responsibilities could not be granted flexible working ([section 3.2.3](#)).

³³ Small numbers of interviewees said that they had not implemented compressed hours, annualised hours, part-time/job share for teaching staff, flexi-time or career breaks.

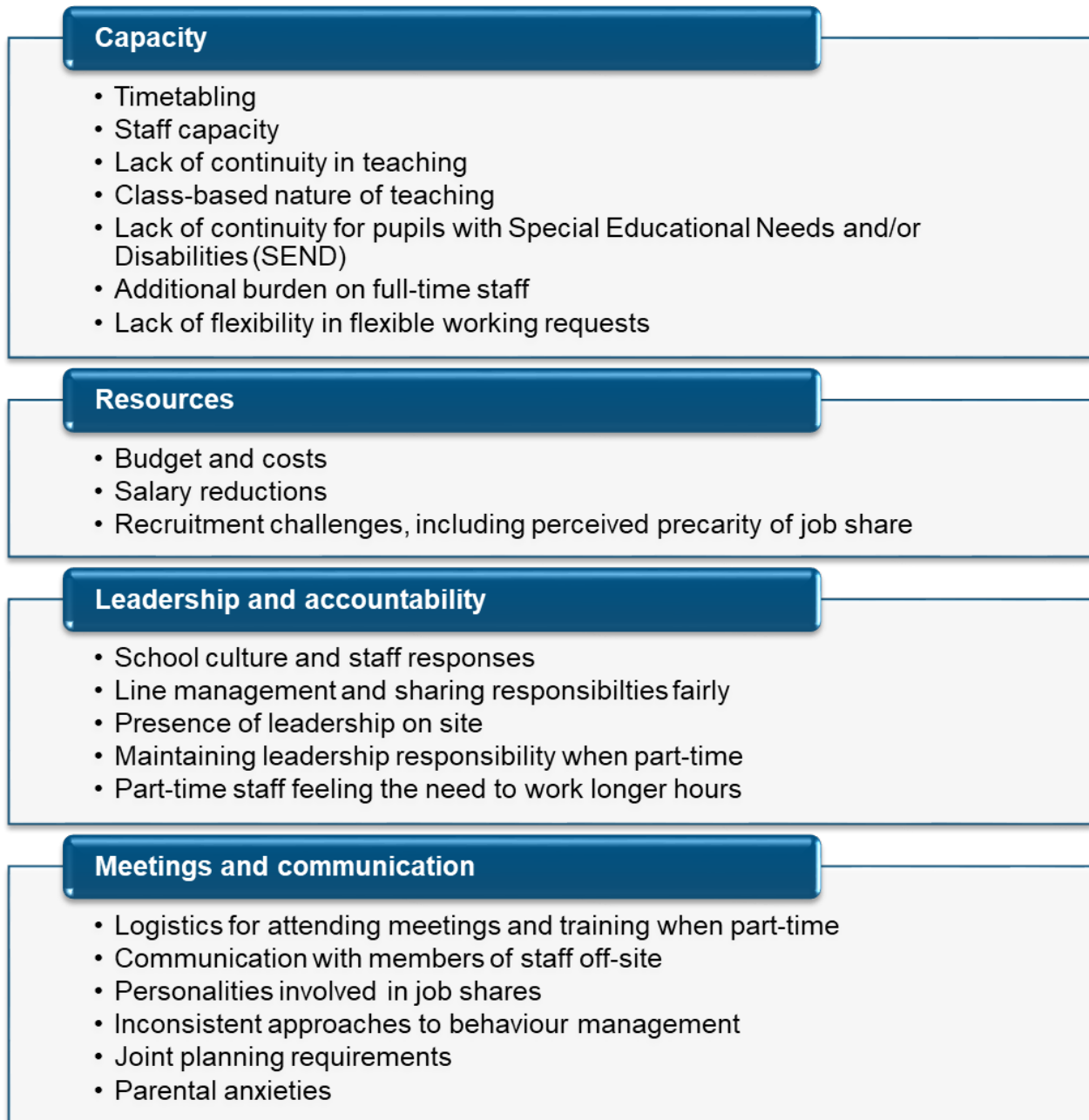
3.2 Challenges of implementing flexible working

A wide variety of challenges were raised by interview and pilot participants in relation to implementing flexible working. Reflecting the literature review findings,³⁴ such challenges were often strategic considerations, or operational issues of capacity and resource, rather than the quality or effectiveness of teaching practice among flexible workers. As such, the challenges raised by participants during the interviews and pilot could be categorised under four broad headings: 1) capacity, 2) resources, 3) leadership and accountability, and 4) meetings and communication (Figure 1).

As with the factors that informed decision-making, the various challenges were generally not regarded as discrete issues by research participants. Instead they were commonly reported – especially by senior leaders – to be impacted by, or to contribute to, one another.

³⁴ CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.20.

Figure 1: Challenges of flexible working



3.2.1 Capacity

Most senior leaders and teachers said that the perceived lack of continuity in teaching, and its subsequent impact on pupils, was a challenge when considering flexible working arrangements.

‘[A member of staff] wanted...[a] 0.6 [contract] over three days.... [and] we could not accommodate that... [because the subject they taught had only one hour per week timetabled]. It would have meant...split classes [with another member of staff] and we felt that [they] would not be able to establish a relationship with [a] group if [they were] only seeing them one hour per fortnight... We have...found that if there is a discontinuity then we

really need to do our best to prevent that, because teaching is about relationships...If you can't establish relationships it really is quite difficult to do the best for your youngsters'. (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

This lack of continuity was a very common reason why participants went on to highlight logistical challenges of timetabling or staff capacity. It was also the most common reason why senior leaders had declined flexible working requests, and why teachers reported that their requests had been declined. This reinforced the responses provided during the online survey.³⁵ This issue was addressed during the pilot: reviews of directed hours took place in several of the participating schools, to highlight where additional capacity could be created in accommodating flexible working requests.

In both primary and secondary schools, creating a timetable to include several job share and part-time arrangements was reported to be a complex task. This work tended to flag restrictions in terms of capacity; teachers were required to be in class at very specific times of the day, thus it was difficult to ensure adequate staff were in school to cover periods where part-time workers were not present. Timetabling issues were often specifically mentioned where schools were managing split classes, with several members of staff working part-time or in job share arrangements. This was perceived in some cases to have a negative impact on pupils in terms of inconsistent approaches to teaching, and an increased burden on full-time colleagues to cover additional lessons. However, there were examples in the pilot of job shares being reported by senior leaders to have a positive impact on pupils, due to the range of skills and specialisms available to each class. For interview participants based in primary schools, the ability to cover part-time timetables when managing a small workforce was felt to be challenging due to staff: pupil ratios.

This was further complicated when senior leaders needed to confirm that specialist skillsets were available at necessary times throughout the day or week. This included ensuring the on-site presence of designated safeguarding leads (DSL), trained First Aiders, and teachers with curriculum specialisms working on the days that those subjects were timetabled. It created a particular challenge for small primary schools where a senior leader, that was also the DSL, requested flexible working. Furthermore, several senior leaders noted during the interviews and pilot that specialist skills, knowledge and training were required for working with young people with complex needs. This was a particular consideration for those based in special schools, where skills needed to be regularly practised to remain safe, and consistency in personnel ensured dignity in care

³⁵ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.26.

for the young people involved.³⁶ This created challenges both for flexible working, but also a potential barrier for flexible workers in accessing specialist training.³⁷

‘With more complex youngsters the training is bespoke to the child. So...medical training is not generic. It is for that young person... [If you work flexibly] are you doing it frequently enough to be getting it right? So that is where you then go back to the scenario of you have to think about, it is not okay to have this person [trained]... You don’t train [several] people to change one person’s catheter, that is an intimate process. If they can’t do it regularly then it isn’t going to be safe anyway’. (Senior leader, special school).

In addition, senior leaders needed to ensure that additional burdens were not being placed on full-time colleagues to cover the timetable. As a result, a small number suggested that timetabling was made more difficult where requests for flexible working were in themselves inflexible, for example, individuals only asking for specific non-working days and not being open to compromise.

There also remained concerns among both teachers and senior leaders, as per the literature review findings, that part-time teachers worked more hours than required in order to demonstrate their commitment to the school.³⁸ Some part-time teachers admitted that they intentionally worked more hours than required to mitigate the risk of senior leaders developing a negative perception of their level of commitment.

Furthermore, a few senior leaders reported that their personal workload had increased as a result of implementing flexible working in their schools. This tended to be due to spending additional time ensuring part-time staff received information they may have missed when they were not on site, and line-managing those in job share arrangements.

‘The challenge that my governors give me is that we want to keep the best staff that we can for the school which I totally [understand], but what they don’t think about is...it is just so difficult. Because I’ve got almost double the amount of work to do [for example, in terms of the performance management of staff]. And I have got quite enough to do already to be honest. I have just put the performance management timetable up on the wall. I’ve got twenty-three appointments on there [for] fourteen classes. It is ridiculous’. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

³⁶ See separate ‘pilot school summaries’ document for an example of how flexible working was managed to improve staff wellbeing in a special school. CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

³⁷ For more on attending training see section 3.2.3.

³⁸ CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.68

3.2.2 Resources

The financial implications of flexible working were reported as a challenge by many participants in the interviews and pilot (and particularly those in special schools). The costs commonly associated with flexible working arrangements were:

- Staff in job share partnerships having joint PPA and handover time (therefore two people being paid for one timetabled period).
- Paying for additional members of staff to attend training or to go into school for extra hours to attend staff meetings or other school events (compared to the cost of one full-time member of staff).
- The cost of personnel time for the administration and line management required for greater numbers of staff.

In addition, several teachers mentioned the reduction in salary and subsequent impact on their pension as a barrier to requesting flexible working. Some also noted that job share contracts felt less secure than part-time, as they were dependent on the ongoing availability of an appropriate job share partner.

‘I am looking on the regional LA website to see if any two-day per week jobs come up. Unfortunately, there aren’t many, which reinforces that there are not many job shares going on or people are recruiting within the school’. (Primary teacher, LA maintained school).

During the pilot, the ability to cover hours became an issue where a group of primary schools implemented flexible working at senior leadership level (where the headteacher reduced their hours and deputy headteacher ‘acted up’ for one day per week). Solutions included drawing on supply for a small number of days per year, and offering the opportunity for existing part-time staff to take on additional hours where this suited their circumstances.³⁹ Nonetheless, in both the interviews and pilot, recruitment challenges were reported to be a problem in agreeing job share and part-time arrangements specifically (for example, lack of applicants for job share/part-time positions to cover gaps in the timetable).

3.2.3 Leadership and accountability

The pilot identified examples of job shares at senior leadership level, and the cultural changes made in schools to allow these arrangements to be effective.⁴⁰ However, most senior leaders taking part in the interviews and the pilot, split fairly evenly across primary, secondary and special schools, did not believe that flexible working arrangements were compatible with leadership roles (including their own). They were particularly sceptical

³⁹ To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

⁴⁰ To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

that part-time, job share or split role arrangements could be effective for leadership positions. Some reported that they did sometimes work remotely/from home, however they mentioned that this had led to them to being unaware of decisions or situations that had arisen in their absence. This had subsequently made them feel uncomfortable about flexible working in the future ([section 3.2.4](#)).

Other senior leaders spoke of the additional pressure that they felt personally where their deputy or assistant headteachers worked flexibly.

‘I am advertising for a deputy head at the moment...I wouldn’t want that to be a flexible work position, simply because of the pressure that that would put on me. I want a deputy so that I can go out of school and leave it with somebody legally who can do everything I can do...You have to just protect yourself at some point as well, because it is an intense job. I love it, but if I was thinking [I can’t be ill or go to a meeting] on Wednesdays and Thursdays, because [those were the days] when the deputy doesn’t work, that would be untenable’. (Senior leader, special school).

Reflecting the reticence that senior leaders felt towards flexible working in leadership roles, several middle leaders (for example, Head of Department, those with a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR)), reported that challenges had arisen when they requested flexible working. The main issues were:

- **The perception from senior leaders that teachers could not retain a TLR or leadership responsibility (such as subject or curriculum lead) if they worked flexibly:** some middle leaders reported that they had been required to rescind their leadership responsibility/TLR to have flexible working granted; their flexible working request would be declined if they did not do so.
- **Working more hours for less pay:** maintaining a leadership responsibility/TLR and changing to part-time hours meant that some middle leaders reported undertaking the same amount of work in less time and for less pay. For example, one middle leader in a secondary school reported that they had a proportion of their TLR payment removed to reflect their reduction in hours, but the full-time workload for the TLR remained their responsibility.
- **A negative impact on career progression:** a few teachers were concerned that by working part-time, this would negatively affect their chances to be considered for middle leadership /TLR in the future.

In terms of managing accountability, this was commonly reported as challenging for job share partners and their line managers specifically. Nearly all of the interview and pilot participants reporting this were based in primary schools. For example, teachers would describe being in a current job share arrangement and feeling that they contributed higher quality work or more commitment than their job share partner.

A small number of teachers in job shares said that they had found it more difficult than expected to adjust to the arrangement as they were no longer solely responsible for, or did not have as much control over, the work of their class compared to full-time teaching. Senior leaders echoed these comments, suggesting it could be difficult to ensure that part-time teachers, or those in job share arrangements were clearly held to account for their performance. Some queried the commitment of teachers working for two or three days per week, and (reflecting the capacity issues mentioned earlier) others felt that it added burden on full-time colleagues to monitor the performance of several members of staff in job share arrangements. During the pilot, managing accountability within job share arrangements was a key area of work with schools ([section 4.1.1.1](#)). This involved reviewing job descriptions, the roles and responsibilities of staff members to ensure all areas were covered and shared appropriately, and handover arrangements – a job share toolkit was developed for schools which helped to support this work.⁴¹

3.2.4 Meetings and communications

Balancing meetings and communications with staff who were not present on site was commonly acknowledged as a challenge by senior leaders and teachers during the interviews and pilot.

- **Managing communications:** Senior leaders and teachers across all phases found communicating effectively with flexible workers challenging. They reported that it could be difficult to ensure that all staff received the information delivered during meetings (even when minutes were available), or during informal conversations, that had taken place when some staff were not present. Thus, some senior leaders perceived a risk that teachers who worked part time could feel less engaged with the school community as a result.
- **Attending meetings and training:** Teachers mentioned that attendance at meetings and training events could be difficult to balance with flexible working patterns. This was a common challenge for teachers who worked part-time or in job shares across all phases. They reported difficulties in negotiating with senior leaders which staff meetings and training sessions they should attend, their obligations for attending parents evening and extra-curricular events if these took place on their non-working days, and whether or not they would receive additional pay or time off in lieu for doing so.

Confirming the findings of the online survey, a few teachers and senior leaders felt that communication problems were sometimes created by the personalities involved in job share arrangements.⁴² Where two members of staff had very different teaching styles or ways of working, for example, this created difficulties in working as a partnership.

⁴¹ To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE. Also see CGR (2020) [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: research appendix - Example resources for pilot schools](#). DfE.

⁴² CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.40.

‘For a job share to work well, the relationship with the other person...is really important, [as is] your ability to communicate. I have learnt this from working at [at my current school] where initially...there were meetings between us and we would touch base with email and texting and that worked quite well. Then when [my job share partner was on leave] and there were different supply teachers taking the class, I was leaving notes for them and I don’t know if they were even being read. A job share has to work both ways and that is something the headteacher in making their decision to allow a job share has to consider. They need to be...sure that the people they are trusting to share a class are going to take it upon themselves to do it properly’. (Primary teacher, LA maintained school).

Several senior leaders said that this lack of consistency in communication between teachers in job share arrangements had led to difficulties in behaviour management, for example where pupils had reacted negatively to the different styles implemented in the classroom. A small number of senior leaders and teachers also noted that inconsistencies in communication or attendance at events could lead to anxieties among parents/carers.

‘It can be a bit difficult for parents if they want to get in contact with you and you are not in school on that day. Some parents might see that as an issue’. (Secondary teacher, LA maintained school).

This was felt to lead to frustrations among some parents/carers, if they could not speak to both teachers together at parents evening, or if one teacher was not aware of a problem and a parent/carer wanted to discuss it with them.

Examples of practice: maintaining effective communication within job share arrangements

Senior leaders spoke about the challenges of managing job shares. This typically included poor communications between job share partners, leading to a lack of clarity, efficiency and continuity in teaching and learning.

Several teachers in job shares, and senior leaders managing job shares, commonly used shared PPA time so that job share partners had regularly scheduled meetings for joint planning. Handover time between job share partners was considered by many interviewees to be an essential element of effective job shares. Using this time to ensure clarity and consistency in approaches was felt to support planning, communication and behaviour management in the classroom.

‘The school [timetables] us to have joint PPA time...so that we can sit down and have a face-to-face meeting... Otherwise we would be spending all our time emailing or phoning to hand over, it is much easier to do it [in person]’. (Primary teacher, LA maintained school)

Some senior leaders suggested holding regular (ranging from weekly to half-termly) informal reviews of a job share arrangement. They felt that this helped to develop clear accountability, and for any issues in communication between partners to be identified and addressed at an early opportunity. These reviews ranged from joint meetings, to short conversations with each teacher to keep track of progress.

‘Sit them down and talk to them about who is doing what, [ask] what is going on? What are they not happy with? We tend to be quite honest with staff and say look, this is not working, what can we do to make it better? And then try to support them to improve it. It is often quite good when you point it out to them.... When the governors or the headteacher agree to a job share, they put in reviews every half term with the teachers, about how that job share is working.

It is not disciplinary, it is not formal, it is just a [chance to ask] ‘let’s see how things are going, are there any gripes that we need to get out of the way. Are there any things that we can improve on?’ That gives everybody the chance then to say, ‘I don’t like the way this is going, or this is working really well’... That is written into the job share... It’s just about making sure that we are all on the same page. Opening the communication a little bit’. (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

3.3 Benefits for implementing flexible working

Despite the challenges reported, all senior leaders involved in the interviews and pilot identified benefits to schools in implementing flexible working arrangements. Overall, these reflected the survey feedback, with key benefits noted in recruitment and retention, staff morale and wellbeing, improving capacity and skills development (Figure 2).⁴³

Figure 2: Benefits of flexible working



3.3.1 Recruitment and retention

Nearly all senior leaders and several teachers reported during the interviews and pilot that offering, and accommodating, flexible working arrangements was an important way of retaining teachers in the profession.

‘Lots of people can see that flexible working provides opportunities that make staff stay. People knew that I was looking elsewhere to develop my

⁴³ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.34-36.

skills so can see that this opportunity [to job share at senior leadership team level] has helped me to stay'. (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

Some senior leaders also felt that flexible working had improved their recruitment opportunities (see [section 2.3.1](#) for findings on 'flexible hiring', particularly during the pilot). Commonly, senior leaders acknowledged that if they did not find ways to meet flexible working requests, they would potentially lose skilled and experienced members of staff. Many were prepared to deal with the challenges of timetabling and managing effective communication if that meant being able to retain quality teachers.

'Essentially, if we want to keep people...we get so much more benefit if we can keep staff and allow them to work flexibly. It gives us headaches, but it is worth [if] it keeps good members of staff'. (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

Many teachers interviewed corroborated this view, by indicating that they were either considering leaving the profession prior to working flexibly, or they would do so if they were unable to work flexibly in the future.

'I did think about leaving teaching a few times before I got the four days. I had quite a lot of bad luck with schools for a couple of years and I looked into what roles ex-teachers could do, but when I saw this job for part-time I thought I would give it one last try. I like this school, I am happy here at the moment and if all goes well I will stick at it'. (Secondary teacher, LA maintained school)

Several senior leaders noted that the improvement in teacher retention meant that they were also able to make financial savings, due to the reduced need to draw on teacher supply agencies for recruitment purposes.

3.3.2 Staff morale and wellbeing

Supporting the findings of the online survey and literature review,⁴⁴ many senior leaders and teachers involved in the research felt that implementing flexible working improved staff commitment, morale and wellbeing. This was a particularly common perception among senior leaders in secondary schools. They noted that agreements in flexible working arrangements had helped their teachers to feel supported and valued, and they were perceived to work harder and more efficiently as a result.

⁴⁴ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#). DfE, p.36. CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.52-65.

In addition, staff were perceived to be less tired or stressed, which in turn led to reduced sickness or absence rates and increased resilience, with a happier working environment benefiting the school ethos and wider community.

‘I think teachers who have done it...are much happier in the role...They feel that [flexible working] keeps them fresh and energised in what is a very tough and demanding job. It is a brilliant job and vocation, but [working flexibly] keeps them energised... [It increases] enthusiasm and a passion for the role’. (Secondary senior leader, LA maintained school).

Most teachers said that flexible working arrangements had improved their wellbeing and/or work-life balance, particularly those in primary and secondary schools.⁴⁵ They commonly reported that reducing their working hours had enabled them to spend more time with their own families and fulfil care commitments. In turn, this was perceived to have reduced their stress levels and tiredness and enabled them to enjoy their work more as a result. Many of the comments relating to wellbeing also referenced a reduction in teacher workload.

‘[Working part-time] has definitely had a positive effect on my mental health. I have seen lots of other [teachers] go under from the stress of the job. For me...it makes me feel like I can do the job properly, and I have time for my children, which is most important’. (Secondary teacher, LA maintained school)

Where they provided feedback senior leaders taking part in the interviews and pilot, who had reduced to working three or four days per week, most commonly said that the arrangement had improved their personal wellbeing once they had clear boundaries for their non-working days in place.

‘At the very start [of working three days per week] I found it quite difficult to manage, because I was trying to be everything. I was trying to be a headteacher part-time and in the days when I wasn’t working I was trying to be a good parent...I can remember a couple of days where I was neither...I was trying to answer emails, answer phone calls at the same time as look after [my child]. No one was happy. So...the days when I could shut the laptop...and turn my phone off and actually be a parent, were fantastic. I think I [had] a better bond with my [child] as a result of that’. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

3.3.3 Capacity and skills development

Several senior leaders, particularly in primary schools, felt that arrangements such as job shares meant that they had additional staffing capacity compared to situations where

⁴⁵ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#), DfE, p.36.

they only had full-time staff in role. Some had taken advantage of additional skillsets held by part-time teachers, for example music tuition or extra-curricular activities, or had enabled joint planning sessions. The latter were thought to improve team-working, with job share partners sharing ideas and examples of practice with one another.

Example of practice: creative approaches to managing handover days

A headteacher of a primary academy was managing a relatively large workforce of approximately 70 individuals, including 30 teaching staff. There had been several applications for flexible working, including job shares, sabbaticals and staggered hours.

‘The decisions regarding flexible working are always focused on what is the best thing for children. So, we have a look at what it would look like... [and how] that would compare with the previous provision. If it is not going to be as good, then we wouldn’t do it...What this has allowed us to do, is develop a very strong staff team’. (Primary senior leader, academy school)

As there were several job share arrangements in the school, handover and shared PPA time tended to fall on a Wednesday for all pairs. This meant that the school tended to have all staff present on a Wednesday at certain times of the day. As a result, the leadership team reviewed the staffing structure to identify ways that this could be managed to the benefit of teaching and learning. Consequently, they have implemented additional intervention work with pupils.

‘What we’ve started doing now is on Wednesdays, we have got two or three hours where we have got floating members of staff. We are putting them in to do six-week sessions with [cohorts of pupils who need additional support]. So, we have a booking system. I take a maths group in year six, so [with a pupil] who hasn’t [understood] a concept, I can sign them up for an extra session. It works really well...it is a real winner in terms of improving performance...It happened totally by accident, it was just because we were so overstaffed on Wednesdays’. (Primary senior leader, academy school)

Implementing flexible working arrangements was also thought to have encouraged a focus on career development across the wider workforce, particularly in the schools involved in the pilot.⁴⁶ For example, a headteacher reducing hours to four days per week felt that this supported succession planning by upskilling and instilling the confidence in their deputy headteacher to take responsibility for decision-making one day per week.

⁴⁶ To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

Likewise, phased retirement was perceived to secure staff retention whilst encouraging the dissemination of skills and expertise to the benefit of new staff during transition periods.

3.3.4 Development of strategic capacity

Several senior leaders reported that participation in the pilot study had led to increased strategic oversight (for example, staff members with clearer lines of accountability), or new working practices, such as joint planning meetings, that increased capacity for strategic development across the school. The initial focus for most schools involved in the pilot had been on formalising operational processes, creating guidance for staff and obtaining support in considering and devising suitable working arrangements for individual members of staff. Thus, the positive impact on strategic processes had generally been an unexpected consequence of being part of the flexible working pilot.

For example, one headteacher reduced their contracted hours to four days per week, with another member of the SLT stepping up as deputy headteacher for one day per week. This had led to the need for planning meetings and increased communication between the two members of staff involved.

‘We have started having to meet more regularly, the [new flexible working arrangement] has forced us to be more strategic and be more reactive – so that is a long-term benefit. [We have] planned [meetings] in the diary for every week/other week. We are meeting and talking and not working in isolation’. (Primary senior leader, LA maintained school)

Furthermore, several senior leaders involved in the pilot noted how useful the guidance materials, template policies and information packs produced as a part of the pilot would be for future use with staff. They felt that the work undertaken during the pilot meant that, by clarifying policies and processes, planning and timetabling for flexible working in the future could become more strategic. This was because staff requests were anticipated to be better informed and made with more advanced notice, as a result of improved communications with staff. Likewise, senior leaders felt that succession planning would be improved by providing team members the opportunity to upskill from experienced staff, whilst managing phased retirements.

3.5 Experiences of family leave

When returning to work following maternity, paternity or adoption leave, employees have the right to request flexible working.⁴⁷ During the interviews, teachers were asked to

⁴⁷ For guidance, see ACAS ‘Code of practice on handling, in a reasonable manner, requests to work flexibly’ and ‘The right to request flexible working – an ACAS guide’, accessible via: <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4859>.

describe any experience with requesting flexible working following a return from family leave. Although the question had encompassed all forms of family leave, participants who responded to the question spoke predominantly about maternity leave, with a small number mentioning paternity leave. These individuals commonly said that senior leaders had been open to discussing their requirements and working out arrangements that were suitable for both the individual and the school. These discussions were often conducted as part of Keep In Touch (KIT) days, or through informal conversations with senior leaders; generally, these teachers felt supported by their schools. Some noted that a form to request flexible working had been included in a school information pack created for them as part of their preparation for leave and subsequent return to work.

However, a few teachers returning from family leave had felt that senior leaders were not open to the possibility of flexible working. They said that they had not received any information about the options for flexible working, or they had been told directly that flexible working requests would not be considered. These differences in experience tended to be dependent on the attitudes of individual senior leaders towards flexible working, rather than specific challenges associated with family leave specifically.

‘After I returned from my first maternity leave, I had a meeting with the head and [they were] very clear that...they didn’t have anyone working part-time, and there were no part-time opportunities available. It was a case of [the headteacher] didn’t like it so [the school was] not doing it... [but by the time my second period of maternity leave] was up, the school had a new headteacher. I met with [the headteacher] and [they were] much more family orientated...I explained my situation to the new head and that I would quite like to return part-time, three days per week if possible. [The headteacher] just said, ‘yes that is fine’, straightaway’. (Primary teacher, academy school)

To support these challenges, a guidance pack was developed for schools participating in the pilot, which could be circulated to staff on maternity leave. Senior leaders had found this useful, particularly as the pack clearly outlined the rights and responsibilities of schools and individual staff members, and timelines for when flexible working requests should be made prior to a return to work.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ For details on the use of the guidance documents developed during the pilot, see separate pilot school summaries. CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

4. Supporting flexible working in schools

This section of the report highlights the range of examples that interview and pilot participants gave in describing how flexible working had been supported in their schools, the practical steps that schools had taken to support implementation, and the areas where additional support may be required.

4.1 Implementing flexible working: what works?

In addition to the examples and case studies of practice that were identified during the literature review,⁴⁹ participants in the interviews and pilot were asked to describe how flexible working had been implemented in their schools, and the lessons that had been learned as a result. Their responses, as can be seen in Figure 3, generally focused on:

- Managing responsibilities and accountability
- Establishing effective communication mechanisms
- Planning logistical requirements

As with the benefits and challenges of flexible working in schools, responses tended to overlap across these core themes. For example, carefully planning the logistical requirements for flexible working was perceived by senior leaders to support clear communication.

⁴⁹ CGR (2018), [Flexible working practice in schools: literature review](#). DfE, p.21-24.

Figure 3: Practices implemented to overcome challenges and support flexible working in schools



4.1.1 Managing responsibilities and accountability

Many senior leaders said during the telephone interviews that setting clear expectations with staff was fundamental to making flexible working arrangements effective.

‘I think for flexible working to work well...you have got to be very clear from the start about what the expectation is for the person who is having a flexible role. And any other commitment that they need to make to somebody else who is doing other aspects of their job when they are not here... Most [teaching] staff are also form tutors, so... you’ve also got to

make sure that you are making [sure that] the correct information about all of the pastoral concerns... on a day-to-day basis is passed over... When you're talking about flexible working for those members of staff who are TLR holders... if it is something like 'who is going to look after behaviour'...it has got to be very clear who is going to be doing that'.
(Secondary senior leader, LA maintained school)

The use of formal policies and processes was felt (by both senior leaders and teachers taking part in the interviews) to be a useful tool in agreeing practices and tasks to be completed. This was also echoed during the pilot. Such policies were perceived to support transparency during any staffing review or change in leadership, and helped all to be clear on roles and responsibilities. As such, formal policies provided a written document that all members of staff and senior leaders could access, thereby helping everybody to understand and follow the same process.

Where this formal documentation was not in place, some senior leaders reported during the interviews and pilot that they would be implementing formal policies in the future, and teachers hoped that they would be implemented. This was particularly common among those who had experienced the challenges of appeals processes or tribunal hearings following disagreements over flexible working arrangements, or where staff were anxious about the implications for their role if there was a change in leadership. During the pilot, most participating schools requested help in developing flexible working policies and guidance documents; templates were therefore produced for each school to help set out expectations for different members of staff, and which could be tailored according to circumstances and need.⁵⁰ Furthermore, to support schools in overcoming previous challenges, job share and homeworking guidance documents were also developed, which clearly set out expectations and working processes for each arrangement.⁵¹

'I think it is very important that [senior leaders] write down what the working pattern is for somebody who was working flexibly for the entire year...Now [the senior leader is] leaving the school it puts me in a very difficult position. It needs to be written down formally regarding who is going to be in class with me during the week and who will cover my part-time hours on a Friday. It is not reassuring at the moment'. (Primary teacher, academy school)

Further to establishing formal processes, senior leaders commonly said that they reviewed flexible working arrangements in school on a regular basis; for most, this

⁵⁰ See CGR (2020) [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: research appendix - Example resources for pilot schools](#). DfE.

⁵¹ See CGR (2020) [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: research appendix - Example resources for pilot schools](#). DfE.

involved an annual review to ensure that the following year's arrangements would continue to be appropriate for the school and individual staff needs.

Examples of practice: regular reviews of arrangements

Senior leaders suggested during the telephone interviews that it was useful to start planning flexible working as far in advance as possible. This included:

- An annual review of all existing flexible working arrangements, and asking staff in the winter term to start notifying the SLT of requests for the following academic year. This was reported to support both timetable management and to encourage a culture of openness towards flexible working.
- Liaising with staff members on flexible working arrangements to maintain updated records as to the level of flexibility that they are willing to have, for example, in terms of which days of the week are non-working days.
- Agreeing homeworking on set days at the beginning of each half-term for administrative or business management staff, so that this is made clear on shared calendars and could be planned accordingly.
- Making new arrangements temporary so that they could be trialled and before deciding whether they were sustainable on a permanent basis.

Others implemented arrangements for a trial period to ensure that they were successful before agreeing to them on a long-term or permanent basis. This did not necessarily mean that arrangements would be agreed long-term, as the trial period or temporary arrangements offered an opportunity for schools to identify challenges that may not have been foreseen. This was also observed during the pilot, where senior leaders did not want to make permanent arrangements until they had tested whether they would be workable in the school context. This led to discussions regarding the contractual implications of implementing flexible working on a trial basis.⁵²

4.1.1.1 Managing job share arrangements

Managing responsibilities and accountability was felt to be particularly important for ensuring job share arrangements worked effectively. This included agreeing working patterns, outlining levels of responsibility and establishing areas of accountability for each partner at the start of each arrangement. In turn, this helped to mitigate challenges in relation to poor communications or inconsistent approaches between job share partners or full-time and part-time colleagues.

⁵² To view the pilot school summaries, see CGR (2020), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: pilot school summaries](#). DfE.

‘I think it is important that consultation takes place. It is important that you involve the line manager, [and] that you get a full appraisal really of the...[school’s] requirements. The pupils’ needs come first as well. [When] trying to maintain that balance between pupil needs and staff needs...it is really important to have that dialogue with everybody involved, and to be open and transparent with the member of staff, tell them where your concerns are as well. We do try to have those conversations. That then hopefully alleviates...[any] animosity that might just build up’. (Secondary senior leader, LA maintained school)

Reflecting this, several teachers described how they had met with their job share partner to agree how they would share class-based responsibilities, and how they would hand over information. They felt that this had kept arrangements clear in terms of managing day-to-day working practices.

4.1.2 Establishing effective communication mechanisms

As reported in [section 3.2](#), one of the key challenges perceived by interview participants was ensuring effective communications were in place between job share partners, and for staff who were not present on site full-time.

Where they provided examples of how their flexible working practices had been supported in schools, most teachers mentioned that appropriate communication mechanisms had been put into place (for use of technology to support flexible working, see [section 4.2](#)). These included:

- **Overlapping days for job share arrangements:** Several teachers mentioned that they and their job share partners were both in school together on one day each week, which provided a valuable opportunity to meet and share information and handover the class to each other. A common day for this to take place was Wednesday, with examples given of the teacher taking the class for the second half of the week then telephoning or emailing their partner with updates so that they could be prepared to take over the class again on a Monday morning. Some mentioned the use of a shared notebook to communicate events during the week to each other and maintain a record of progress, although a small number highlighted that this in itself could be a time-consuming task. Many senior leaders also noted that they timetabled job share partners to be in together simultaneously for these reasons. This was often arranged so that both teachers were timetabled for PPA time, and this time would then be used for managing job share communications.
- **Joint planning arrangements:** As mentioned, joint PPA time was felt by job share partners to be valuable in supporting their working arrangements. Alongside this, some also suggested other means for keeping in touch, including group messaging services used by all teachers for a subject/year group to ensure that all

colleagues were kept up-to-date, or meeting periodically for more in-depth joint planning sessions.

‘What we have found works well for [our job share partnership] is: in the summer holidays we meet for one day and we do a medium-term plan for English, maths and science, so we know exactly what each other is doing. Then we just send each other a quick email on a Tuesday or a Friday and say ‘I have got this far, you need to do this bit next’. Because we have done a lot of the planning together, we know what each other is thinking about it. We did try with one of us doing one subject each but that didn’t work as well’. (Primary teacher, academy school)

- **Regular email and phone communication:** Nearly all teachers and senior leaders with part-time hours, or those in job share arrangements, noted that they were available to their school should they need to be contacted on the days they were not on site. Some senior leaders emphasised that they made conscious efforts to ensure that part-time or job share staff were not disturbed on their non-working days, but also understood that if it was an emergency, staff were contactable.

‘New staff come to the school and they know that ...[their] non-working day is a day off. Staff know not to message flexibly working teachers out of hours. We work with new staff who come in on a flexible contract to show them how to say no to something, because [they] are not at work. We don’t want them sucked into full-time working on a part-time contract. We show them how to set boundaries. It is informally done, but people are respectful of it’. (Primary senior leader, academy school)

- **Managing email traffic:** A small number of senior leaders noted that although email communication was useful, they would speak with staff directly if they were responding to emails late at night and recommend that staff removed email from mobile devices in order to have a break from work-related information. Senior leaders indicated during the pilot that they were also trying not to send emails over weekends, so as to model behaviours to staff and show that they were not expected to respond outside of the working day/week.

Senior leaders commented that regular updates, planning and communication between staff members who worked flexibly helped their schools to overcome the potential challenge of having inconsistent approaches to teaching and behaviour management in the classroom. Likewise, in terms of communicating with parents/carers, most interview participants felt that it was important to make it clear from the start of the year or term what the teaching arrangements would be, and on what days each member of staff could be contacted. Most also stated that both partners in a job share attended parents’ evenings, even if these were scheduled for their usual day off. The importance of communicating with parents/carers was also reflected in the pilot study, where one school had carried out a lot of work with parents/carers to communicate their approach to flexible working in school.

‘There were three or four teachers who were part-time last year...Parents did question this, but we justified that we needed part-time staff to get a good quality of staff. We asked parents how many of them would want to be able to work part-time? I would take one amazing part-time teacher over one mediocre full-time teacher’. (Primary senior leader, academy school)

For supporting flexible working more generally, three senior leaders in secondary schools and one senior leader in a primary school reported that it was very helpful to connect with, and draw on the expertise and advice of, other senior leaders.

‘I do get round robin emails though from other heads asking what would we do in a particular situation. They will say they have had a request for a job share, what would you do? Stuff like that. So, there is a network of heads who can provide support’. (Primary senior leader, academy school)

This informal sense of networking and peer support was felt to enable senior leaders the opportunity to gather advice from practitioners who had experienced a similar situation. Some senior leaders involved in the pilot also suggested that online forums to access informal and impartial advice would also be useful.

During the interviews and the pilot, research participants stated that peer networking (both through email groups and face-to-face network meetings) enabled them to learn about the impacts and challenges of different working arrangements, and how to manage them, from a practical perspective. It was notable that staff in schools participating in the pilot study were particularly positive about their involvement. They said that they appreciated the opportunity to talk through options, concerns and queries that they had as they worked on various stages of implementing changes in their approaches to flexible working. They reported that having access to knowledgeable, impartial expertise had been helpful to them in ensuring that any changes that were made were well thought-through and carefully planned, with actions in place to mitigate risks. Senior leaders from some pilot schools also felt that access to external advice from specialist consultants had helped to challenge their own thinking and consider options for flexible working that they may not have done otherwise.

‘I needed those quite challenging questions for me to change my mindset. I know initially when the trust suggested we [take part in the] pilot, I remember [the headteacher] saying...how difficult it would be and how inflexible we [have to be in a] special school. I think we were thinking, probably, there was not much you can do here...I needed to hear [what was possible]. If I had just had a document to read, it would be put to bottom of pile. I needed to be faced with it and challenged, because it wasn’t my belief [that flexible working was possible]’. (Senior leader, special school)

4.1.3 Planning logistical requirements

Several senior leaders described the advance planning that they undertook towards timetabling and implementing flexible working arrangements. This was not only related to contact time in the classroom, but additional factors such as attending staff meetings, extra-curricular events, parents' evenings and staff training.

'I chose my day off very carefully because I wanted to maintain my full role on SLT so for example, I wanted to be able to go to all meetings. Where other members of staff are part time, they miss meetings and I didn't want to do that. I feel in terms of communication, and passing on information and informing my decisions, that is really important'. (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

Approaches detailed in the pilot and interviews commonly included an annual message to staff in the early new year, asking them to submit any flexible working requests for the following September in order to inform timetabling.

'We usually write the timetables [in February] and they come out around June time; so [the new year] is a good time for people to start asking for part-time because I am looking at staffing and it gives me time to recruit staff. If they start putting [in requests] in June and July it becomes much more difficult because the timetable is written and we wouldn't be able to [recruit cover or job share] staff. We use [timetabling software] ... and within that you can block certain days teachers can't work. But what we try and do is write the timetable first [without blocking the days out], or we will put a few people in but not others, and then see where the gaps are'. (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

This annual review cycle was also used by senior leaders as a means to ensure that staffing arrangements were sustainable and remained in line with fluctuations in pupil numbers or curriculum changes each year. It was noted by one pilot school that 'timing was crucial' in terms of implementing flexible working arrangements as 'it is difficult to make big in-year changes'. As a consequence, they suggested that 'the September refresh was an obvious time' for implementing any whole school changes in approach to flexible working. In response, teachers in the same school noted that it was important to ensure that any changes that affected the wider staff should be communicated clearly and as far in advance as possible, to help staff get used to the new ways of working and have the chance to ask any questions. Senior leaders in another pilot school also noted that, retrospectively, they would have informed key members of staff earlier about the headteacher's decision to reduce their working hours with the deputy headteacher 'acting up' one day per week – particularly for those in administrative roles who needed to be aware of who was available in school (for example, for day-to-day communications and decision-making), and when. It was felt that early communication to staff about changes to working patterns, and open dialogue about the implications of those changes for both

teaching and non-teaching roles, would help to manage change more positively across the workforce.

Advance planning was also perceived to offer the opportunity for some senior leaders to discuss a range of options with members of staff who had requested flexible working, but whose requests did not initially fit with the needs of the school. For example, this included where requests for particular non-working days had been received but could not be accommodated.

‘The challenge would be the timetabling, that’s the main thing. Just getting the jigsaw to fit. [But] because we do it so far in advance anyway, we try and get it mapped out over the year. Sometimes we do have to go to individual staff and ask if they can change days, ask if it would suit them. We have got staff who do work four days for example, and they don’t mind which day they have off. So, I have two members of staff who would change week by week if we wanted them to... That is how we cover if somebody is off sick, or something like that. It works because the staff are equally flexible’. (Primary senior leader, academy school)

This sense of individuals being flexible with flexible working was also found throughout the pilot. Examples included members of non-teaching staff who worked flexibly and would agree to work remotely for one day per week at times where their paperwork workload was high, or would be in school on days they would not usually be if their help was requested.

4.2 Use of technology to support flexible working

Interview participants were asked whether and how the use of technology supported flexible working in their schools. Nearly half said that this generally enabled remote working, should staff wish to work on planning or marking at home, for example.

‘What the school has done in the last six months, which has had a positive impact, is that we can now access all our emails and [data] from home. So, in terms of report writing you would normally have had to stay at school to access [the data required] to write your report, [but now this could be done at home]’. (Secondary teacher, LA maintained school).

Several types of software were mentioned as being particularly helpful, and these included:

- **Cloud-based document storage systems**, which not only enabled staff to access documents remotely, but also to share and edit the same documents or resources, so that they were not duplicating efforts and could each access the most up-to-date version as required.

- **Mobile applications for communicating with parents/carers**, which enabled photographs of classwork and school activities to be shared from school, news or information to be sent directly to parents/carers, as well as private messaging systems that could help job share or part-time staff to stay informed through a tracked record of all communications received in relation to their class.
- **Management information systems**, which allowed staff to record and access all data securely and in one place, therefore supporting remote working.

Senior leaders highlighted safeguarding or data protection concerns when allowing staff to work remotely. For some, this risk was overcome by issuing staff with school devices such as laptop computers, although for others the cost of providing this equipment was a barrier to remote working. The software itself also had cost implications, and therefore to take this and data security issues into account a small number of senior leaders had permitted senior leaders only to access school data remotely.

For others, using cloud-based or other online management information systems meant that members of staff were no longer leaving handwritten notes for one another or were not relying on the use of portable drives or memory sticks, which were felt to pose a risk to data security. Thus, in these instances, the use of technology was perceived to support data protection requirements as well as flexible working.

4.3 Support required for flexible working

Teachers and senior leaders were asked about the changes in support that were required in order to make flexible working more successful in schools. The most common response among both senior leaders and teachers was that there needed to be a culture shift so that the sector as a whole became more open to the idea of flexible working.

‘People look at me as though I am absolutely mad when I say I work from home on a Friday. And they say, ‘but you are a head!’... So, I don’t think it is promoted enough. I don’t think it is accepted enough’. (Secondary senior leader, LA maintained school)

‘I think in general [flexible working] needs to be more accessible. This school is brilliant and I wish all schools were like this [but] flexible working is swept under the carpet a bit in some schools. My friends in primary teaching can choose their days off and can have that flexibility, whereas in a lot of secondary [schools] we are told we can’t, we very much fit around the timetable’. (Secondary teacher, academy school)

To support this culture shift across the sector, interview and pilot participants suggested that there needed to be more information and guidance available to schools about flexible working, and that case studies and examples of existing practice would be particularly helpful.

- Senior leaders specifically requested models of existing practice, information and case studies that could be presented to governors to show how practices could be successful, and also examples of how challenges to flexible working had been overcome. It was suggested that such guidance needed to reflect specific school contexts (for example, small primary, special school) the different types of staff (teaching and non-teaching), and what flexible working might look like/mean in those situations.
- Senior leaders requested increased guidance and support in relation to HR matters such as contracted hours (for example, what was/was not reasonable in terms of going 'above and beyond' those hours), and introducing contractual arrangements on a trial/permanent basis. This included simple checklists that they could use when reviewing flexible working requests to ensure that all potential impacts had been considered in advance. They requested more information and guidance in relation to managing flexible working roles and accountability, and for navigating flexible working arrangements for those with leadership/TLR responsibilities.
- Teachers felt that they needed clearer information and guidance about the different types of flexible working that were available to them, especially those other than part-time and job share arrangements. It was suggested that this information should be clearly aimed at teachers and include practical ideas of how to demonstrate to senior leaders that different arrangements could work in school settings, or a 'troubleshooting' guide for dealing with any challenges that may arise for teachers working flexibly.

Senior leaders and other members of school staff involved in the pilot study noted that they had appreciated being able to access the support and guidance of external advisors. They had found it helpful to discuss a range of practical considerations, such as HR implications, operational and strategic planning, reviews of roles and responsibilities and ensuring these were delegated appropriately across staff. They particularly noted that it was important to be able to listen to external advice, and in turn this had challenged them to reconsider their own attitudes and perception of what types of flexible working were possible and sustainable in a school setting.

'Some kind of toolkit with a webinar to start off [would be useful for schools wanting to implement flexible working policies and processes]. It is not sustainable to have this face-to-face or on video link from DfE, but it is [important] that someone is explaining the benefits.' (Senior leader, special school)

Smaller numbers of interview and pilot participants suggested a range of other ideas for supporting flexible working in schools:

- A central point for information and guidance in relation to flexible working that provided standard templates for policies and processes (such as those produced during the pilot for this research),⁵³ to help create more consistency in approaches across the sector towards flexible working.
- Additional funding available to schools to access cover staff or to fund training or appraisal time for additional members of staff recruited as part of job share /part-time arrangements.
- Increased collaboration and peer-to-peer support between schools to showcase flexible working arrangements and how to support day-to-day implementation.

⁵³ See CGR (2020) [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: research appendix - Example resources for pilot schools](#). DfE.

5. Conclusions and points for consideration

This final section draws together the main findings from this research project as a whole and offers points for future consideration for schools and policy makers.

5.1 Perceptions, attitudes and cultures

Throughout all stages of this research, one of the clearest determining factors for the success of flexible working in a school was the attitude and approach taken by senior leaders towards flexible working, and their level of commitment to making it work. Thus, senior leaders being open and willing to consider different flexible working options was consistently identified as being fundamental to their successful implementation across a school's workforce. This included acceptance among governors and executive leaders of academy trusts (as well as senior leaders) that flexible working was possible, in some form, for all staff types, including those in leadership positions.

'I have worked in other schools and [flexible working] is non-existent. A flexible working culture comes from the head and their willingness to support their staff. We have formalised what was there before. The school has a family ethos and the school can see [the headteacher] leading by example with how the SLT work. Staff value that.' (Secondary senior leader, academy school)

Although many senior leaders participating in this project regarded themselves as being open to flexible working,⁵⁴ in the interviews they often added caveats that they would only consider these practices for non-teaching roles, staff members without leadership responsibilities, or for a limited number of staff only. Reflecting this, 'flexible hiring' was generally not a standard offer that senior leaders used in recruitment drives. This indicated some ambivalence towards flexible working among senior leaders, and limited awareness as to the potential recruitment benefits. Indeed, where 'flexible hiring' was used by schools in the pilot studies, senior leaders noted an improvement in the range and quality of candidates applying for roles.

As the sample of interview participants focused on schools where flexible working was already in place, many examples were provided of how these arrangements were being implemented and managed practically in schools, across a wide range of staff and at all levels of leadership (see [section 4](#)). Overall, teachers felt that their schools had supported their requests for flexible working wherever possible. Some were mindful of the potential negative impact on colleagues or pupils of flexible working arrangements, but it was senior leaders rather than teachers who most commonly reported these challenges (see [section 3](#)).

⁵⁴ CGR (2019), [Exploring flexible working practice in schools: interim report](#), DfE, p.12.

It is clear that senior education professionals will be key to any cultural shift across the education sector towards flexible working. There is a need to reinforce messages that flexible working can be approached as an opportunity, rather than a risk. For example, the pilot study demonstrated that strategic development at leadership level could potentially occur as a result of the operational changes made in schools to address flexible working challenges. Thus, there is a need to consider ways in which senior leaders, governors and executive leaders can be supported so that they are better able to recognise the benefits of flexible working, and the ways in which it can be effectively implemented and managed.

Based on the evidence from this research project, it could also be helpful to schools to have access to specific guidance (or updated existing guidance) aimed at LA maintained schools, academy trusts, governors and senior leadership teams, which provides a range of evidence-based examples of flexible working practices taking place in a range of school contexts and implemented for different staff types.⁵⁵ More case studies reflecting a wide range of examples and ways of overcoming challenges would be beneficial, so as to support a shift towards a sustainable culture of flexible working across the sector over the longer-term, and to encourage senior leaders to adopt 'flexible hiring' within recruitment advertisements.⁵⁶

5.2 Awareness, policies and processes

All stages of this research project have identified mixed levels of understanding across the school workforce about the possibilities and different types of flexible working available to members of staff at all levels, and the practical implications of how these may work in a school context. Although formal policies and processes were often reported to be in place by the senior leaders participating in the interviews, awareness about these was limited across the wider workforce, and particularly among teachers. There was also limited application of formal policies among the pilot schools. Overall, it was evident that flexible working was generally regarded (by senior leaders and teachers) as being relevant only for certain types of staff, for example, those returning from maternity leave, or in non-teaching roles, or those who had specific personal circumstances that required consideration for flexible working (such as care commitments).

Raising awareness across the school workforce that flexible working can be appropriate for all members of staff, not just those with parental/care responsibilities, would be an important step towards developing a culture which is more amenable to flexible arrangements. To support this step, it would be helpful for schools to have access to

⁵⁵ Note that there is a guidance document currently available. However, many of the exemplars relate to maternity returners and individual rather than senior leader/school perspectives. See DfE (2017) [Flexible working in schools](#): Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools.

⁵⁶ Whilst this research report was under development, the DfE produced three [flexible working case studies](#). Further case studies may be helpful to schools across a range of contexts and staff types.

materials which highlight the options available, benefits, and where people can access further information.⁵⁷

This research has established that it is important for senior leaders of schools and academy trusts to review or introduce flexible working policies. These help to ensure that processes are clear for all staff (including timescales for requests), and encourage open and transparent dialogue regarding arrangements in place. It can also be beneficial for formal policies to be reviewed regularly with governors, annual reminders to be distributed to staff to submit requests for the following academic year, and clear guidelines on making a request for flexible working signposted at the same time. The formalisation of policies and processes can help schools move from reactive approaches to flexible working, to proactive approaches that can support strategic planning.

5.3 Challenges, barriers and benefits

Even where senior leaders wanted to make flexible working possible for their staff, they voiced concerns as to how to make it work on a practical level and over a sustained period of time. These concerns related to a range of strategic and operational factors, including capacity, resources, budgeting, managing accountability and communications, and ensuring consistent quality of teaching and learning for pupils. Despite this, many senior leaders and teachers were able to identify the benefits of flexible working, which often resonated with key challenges facing the sector: improving recruitment and retention rates (and associated budgetary savings due to a reduced use of supply staff), addressing teacher workload, and supporting staff wellbeing.

Much of the pilot work was focused on supporting senior leaders to review job descriptions, roles and responsibilities and directed hours, to consider the practicalities of implementing new flexible working arrangements and how to manage them effectively and sustainably. This also included the development of template policies, information packs and proformas for schools to adapt to their circumstances and needs. The provision of external, impartial advice and encouragement was a key aspect of the pilot, with senior leaders acknowledging that this had given them a constructive space in which to explore challenges, consider new ideas and identify possible solutions.

Schools also need support in putting evidence-based theory and policy into practice. Case studies would help to provide examples of how a range of flexible working practices can be enabled and practically implemented, with practical examples of changes made within schools to accommodate flexible arrangements and overcome key challenges. Schools mentioned that it would be helpful if case studies related to different school contexts and a range of staff types. More accessible forms of presenting practical

⁵⁷ Note that DfE has published an A4 poster for schools which outlines the key benefits for schools. DfE (2019), [The benefits of flexible working](#).

examples may also be beneficial, including use of short clips/videos, and webinars.⁵⁸ These could emphasise how to overcome the challenges of flexible working, and clearly link to the benefits and impacts for a range of staff types. In addition, these resources could signpost school staff to template policies (including staff rights and responsibilities), request forms and guidance packs to support schools in making these changes.

Access to external, impartial advice and guidance has been beneficial to all pilot schools (for example, to discuss HR, operational considerations, strategic planning, problem solving, advice and guidance for senior leaders, reviews of directed hours, reviews of job descriptions and the appropriate delegation of roles and responsibilities). Schools involved in the pilot acknowledged that this support would be helpful for other schools. Although unsustainable to deliver in a one-to-one/face-to-face arrangement over a long period of time, this could potentially be facilitated through national online networks or access to telephone/virtual mentoring. Avenues for this support may be identified through existing networks, including local teacher/headteacher forums and collaborative groups.

HR support can be available to schools and academies through internal staff teams, local authority HR teams and private HR providers. It became apparent to the research team and specialist consultants supporting schools, that high quality training about flexible working is vital for HR personnel, providers and School Improvement Partners (SIPs) who work in or with schools. Such training ensures that these stakeholders have a thorough understanding of flexible working, implications for schools, and the benefits and challenges.

Whilst this research has explored the challenges, solutions and ways to enable flexible working in schools, the timing was such that longer-term evaluation was not possible. An extended pilot could be used to further develop evidence in overcoming barriers to flexible working, carry out additional and longer-term testing and tracking of flexible working practices, and inform new and innovative models of practice in the sector (for example, introducing different types of flexible working less often used in schools). This extended pilot could be used to identify the specific support required at a granular level to make sure that flexible working arrangements have a good chance of being successful, evaluate what that 'success' looks like, and measure the long-term impact of flexible working.

⁵⁸ Whilst this report was under development, DfE published a short video case study showing how a school had adopted a headteacher job share. View the video [here](#).

Appendix 1: Interview and pilot sample details

Table 3: Interview sample breakdown by role and school type/context

	Teachers/Middle Leaders			Senior Leaders			
	Primary	Secondary	Special	Primary	Secondary	Special	Total
School type							
LA maintained	6	4	1	6	6	3	26
Single academy		3	1	1	2		7
Multi-academy trust	4	3	3	3	2	2	17
Total	10	10	5	10	10	5	50
School size							
<200	4		4	3		2	13
210-400	5		1	1		3	10
401-1000	1	4		6	3		14
1001+		6			7		13
Total	10	10	5	10	10	5	50
Region							
East Midlands	1			1			2
East of England	1			1			2
London	1	2		1	1		5
North East	2		1		1		4
North West	1	1		2	4		8
South East		1	1	3	3	2	10
South West	1	3	1	1	1	2	9
West Midlands	1	2	1				4
Yorkshire & Humberside	2	1	1	1		1	6
Total	10	10	5	10	10	5	50

Table 4: Interview sample breakdown by gender and level of experience

	Teachers/Middle Leaders			Senior Leaders			
	Primary	Secondary	Special	Primary	Secondary	Special	Total
Gender							
Male	1	2	1	3	2	2	11
Female	9	8	4	7	8	3	39
Total	10	10	5	10	10	5	50
Years in teaching							
Up to 2	1						1
3-5	3		1				4
6-9	2	2					4
10-15	1		2	3		1	7
Over 15	3	8	2	7	10	4	34
Total	10	10	5	10	10	5	50

Table 5: Interview sample breakdown by subject of secondary school teachers/middle leaders

	Teachers/Middle Leaders
Biology	1
Chemistry	1
English	2
Health & social care	1
Mathematics	1
Modern foreign languages	1
Physical education	1
Religious education	1
Social science	1
Total	10

Table 6: Interview sample breakdown by flexible working arrangements – personal experience and school level arrangements

	Teachers/Middle leaders⁵⁹			Senior Leaders⁶⁰			Schools⁶¹		
Types of Flexible Working	Primary	Secondary	Special	Primary	Secondary	Special	Primary	Secondary	Special
Part-time	9	9	3	2	1		10	8	5
Job share	6		1	3			6	3	2
Split role				1			1	4	
Split shift							1		
Staggered hours		1	1				4	2	1
Staggered weeks							1	1	
Compressed hours				1			1	3	
Homeworking			1	5	3		6	2	1
Phased retirement		2			1		1	5	2
Annualised hours								4	
Sabbatical							4	4	2
Career break	2							1	
Flexitime	1	2			1		4	5	
Personal days	1	3	2	3	2		8	5	1

Table 7: Pilot school interviewee details (role type)

Initial visit (start of pilot)	Final visit (end of pilot)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 headteachers (6 schools). • 7 vice principals/deputy headteachers/assistant headteachers or assistant principals (5 schools). • 2 school business managers (2 schools). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 headteachers (5 schools). • 5 vice principals/deputy headteachers/assistant headteachers or assistant principals (4 schools). • 4 teachers (3 schools). • 2 school business managers (2 schools).

⁵⁹ Several mentioned more than one type of flexible working.

⁶⁰ Two senior leaders did not currently work flexibly. However, they had experiences in their schools where they had tried to implement flexible working and wished to provide feedback, or they were interested in working flexibly but were not sure how these arrangements could be effective for a member of SLT.

⁶¹ Senior leaders were asked to outline the range of flexible working arrangements taking place in their school, which included any flexible working arrangements in place for their own role.



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