

# Flexible working for over 50s

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A toolkit for  
employers

Developed by Timewise

Based on an 18 month  
programme with large  
employers

[ageing-better.org.uk](https://ageing-better.org.uk)



in partnership with:

**timewise**  
TALENT THROUGH FLEXIBILITY

# About us

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## Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

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## Timewise

Timewise is the UK's leading flexible working consultancy specialising in flexibility as a positive talent strategy. Timewise delivers consultancy services to help employers attract, retain and develop the best talent through flexible working solutions.

Timewise was founded by Karen Mattison and Emma Stewart, to tackle the lack of quality part-time jobs and drive the flexible conversation forwards.

Today, the Timewise team are well-known as thought leaders and innovators, called upon by policymakers and businesses to shape flexible working policy and practice.







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# Recommendations for employers



## Flexible working works best when it meets both employer and employee needs.

Flexible working is a strategic workforce tool that can motivate and improve staff work-life balance, while maintaining or improving performance. For each employer, it should tie into strategic workforce priorities and planning, as well as employee wellbeing.

Improving flexible working for over 50s will be most effective if it is done as part of a wider drive to enable more flexible working. This is important for a number of reasons. Flexible working should be offered to all employees where it's possible, and 'positive discrimination' towards older workers can send the wrong signal. In addition, over 50s may feel concerned that they are being sidelined or targeted for redundancy. Good communication is, as always, essential.

A recommended approach is outlined below.



**1** Develop your business case



**2** Assess your flexibility



**3** Design and roll out programme

# 1. Develop your business case

**Different employers will have different reasons for wanting to enable more flexible working and it is important to consider it from different angles:**

- The workforce priorities tied to your strategic aims – which could include workforce planning, recruitment and retention, reflection of client base and customer strategy, staff wellbeing and addressing the gender pay gap.
- Your corporate social responsibility and social purpose.
- The link to your organisational values and other people-related initiatives.

The case you develop is likely to involve all of the above and it will be important to reflect this in any communication.

**Your workforce strategy will highlight current and forecast staff and skills shortages and surplus. In addition, you can look at:**

- What proportion is made up by employees who fall into the 50-55, 56-60 and 60+ age groups?
- When, historically, do people leave and is there any recruitment at this age?
- How labour and skill gaps could be addressed and pre-empted by greater recruitment and retention of older workers.
- The extent to which you offer career development or management to this age group.

It's important not to do this in isolation – as with any programme, engaging people is best started by asking others their views.



**“Working a compressed week with a variable day off requires focus, good planning and remaining responsive to business needs. But it freed up a day for family and out of work interests.”**

Pilot participant

## 2. Assess your current level of flexibility as an organisation

Review what flexible working is currently like in your organisation (across all age groups). Is your policy well communicated? Is flexible working actively promoted and supported? What sort of flex options are possible? How many people are working flexibly? How many senior people are working flexibly?

### You may want to:

- Review your flexible working policy and application process – is it clear, well communicated and understood?
- Identify how many people work flexibly. Part-time working and annualised hours will be recorded by HR, but it is likely that a number of people have informal arrangements around working from home and late starts
- Do you have clarity around health and carer policies? Is there a good uptake of these in practice?
- Seek out the pockets of good practice. Identify teams where flex arrangements are in place and ask how they make it work



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**“Working a compressed week with a fixed day off meant cross-team planning, clarity on required outcomes and a willingness to support each other. It also resulted in a real improvement in work-life balance.”**

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Pilot participant

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### Get some feedback on flexible working

You may want to run a short survey and hold a number of focus groups to get manager and staff views on flexible working, as well as an indication of the number of informal arrangements. You should use this as an opportunity to learn more about the older workers in your organisation, to better understand their specific concerns and needs around accessing flexible working. This can be done in data survey analysis (using age brackets as a category) and with targeted focus groups.

## Indicators of a good flexible working environment



Clear and well understood policy and procedures around flexible working.



Support from senior management.



Open conversations between managers and staff at individual and team level.



A sense of shared responsibility to make it work.



A range of formal and informal arrangements.

## Indicators of a poor flexible working environment



Inconsistency across the organisation.



A feeling that people are often treated unfairly.



A tendency to keep flexible arrangements quiet.



Staff feeling they will be turned down and managers asserting that it cannot be done in their teams.



A limited number of arrangements, many of which are long-held legacy arrangements.



### 3. Design and roll out your programme

Based on what you have learnt so far and what you want to achieve, you will now be able to start shaping what you want to do. This might be a small, targeted intervention, or a more widely promoted large scale one. In any case, start by articulating and validating the following:

#### Scope:

- Overall aim (relating to business, social purpose or organisational values)
- Specific objectives
- How you adjust the detail to make flexible working accessible to different groups

#### Communication:

- Confirm your key messages and how these should be communicated
- Create the opportunity for clarification and feedback

Make sure you are sensitive to how your planned intervention might be perceived – both by older workers and more widely – and build this into any communication. People interpret messages based on their previous experience and personal attitudes. Some may welcome an initiative that they feel reflects the organisation's practices of looking after staff. It's important to pre-empt how different groups of people may respond and to factor this into your communications.

#### Consider how people interpret messages differently

A communication about flexible working is likely to get a range of responses:

“

“Does that mean that they want people to work part-time? I cannot take a pay cut.”

“

“Is this a way to put us on zero-hours contracts?”

“

“I’ve already got three part-timers on my team – cannot have anymore.”

“

“I’m interested – I know exactly what would suit me.”

So, ensure you get your messaging right by pre-empting these.



**“A review of the team workload and individual responsibilities, allowed two team members to move to a compressed week, giving them more time for personal commitments and better work-life balance.”**

Pilot participant

### 3.2 Training and support

Based on your assessment of existing flexible working policy and practice, consider how you can best support staff and managers. This might be in the shape of training and support materials. There should be a focus on:

- Working with job holders and their line managers to identify what scope for flexibility there might be in different roles
- Discussing the implications of changing to a more flexible working pattern
- How they can trial a different working pattern
- Using this as an opportunity to update your support materials. Templates and structured questioning are a much more helpful way to get people to think about flexibility, compared to an outline of your flexible working policy. Remember to focus on how it can be made to work, with an emphasis on outcomes rather than presenteeism.

### Options to target support for over 50s

You may want to consider:

- ✓ Offering information about how flexibility affects pensions and retirement options
- ✓ Reinforcing the validity of all reasons for wanting to work flexibly (it's not just for parents)
- ✓ Offering a range of informal and formal flexible working options, which can be combined and varied according to personal and business needs.



# Guidelines for line managers

Creating more scope for flexible working across your team and for older workers



**As a line manager, you have a critical role to play in making flexible working a success, for your direct reports, across your team and for yourself. You need to consider performance targets, financial constraints, deadlines and ensure these can be maintained when individual working patterns change to allow for more flexibility in how people do their work.**

More flexible working patterns across a team usually necessitate some changes in planning, communication, and performance management. They also require a change in mind set, which is what drives a positive change in working patterns.

Below you'll find a series of steps to take that will help you create more flexibility in your team's working patterns and feel confident about how to do it.



## 1. What flexibility is possible within the team and in a role?

As a manager, it's tempting to think about flexibility in terms of people's preferred working patterns. A better starting point is to look at the work your team needs to deliver and what flexibility is possible across different roles.

Do this by using the principles of job design – when and where can a job be done, and by whom. This will help you and your team understand the different tasks involved in different roles, and what the interdependencies look like.

- a. **What** are the key role/team requirements?
- b. **Where** can different tasks be done?
- c. **When** does the work need to be done?
- d. **How much** work is allocated to different roles?

## 2. How do you talk to your team about flexibility? How do you talk to individual staff?

Moving from a flexible working policy to good flexible working practices requires an open and proactive approach to promoting and supporting flexible working. At the organisational level, this can be seen through the messaging, role modelling and facilitation of flexible working. At the team level, it starts with you as a line manager, talking to your team about what it means, the benefits and real constraints, and what you need to do – collectively and individually – to make it work.

Here are some ideas on how to talk about flexibility:

- What is flexible working and what are the benefits?
- Discuss the team deliverables and performance measures and where there may be scope for different working patterns. Do the same for one-to-one discussions
- Agree clear and measurable outcome-based objectives
- Agree how you will communicate, both as a team and as a line manager with a direct report
- Utilise the technology available to support new ways of working
- Be upfront about how difficult it might feel



**“I’m at the point where I realise there are a number of things I still want to do in my life. I want to keep working but carve out more time for myself.”**

Pilot participant

### 3. Trying flexible working patterns

The important part is to set you and your team up for success. Easy to measure performance indicators can be helpful to show that changes in working patterns aren’t having an adverse impact on performance.

Individuals should feel able to openly discuss the flexibility they need; but they also need to understand that flexibility must work for the business too. Good communication is key – working through the implications together, to reach an agreement that works for all.

Spend some time considering the ground rules to make it work. You can discuss the following questions to work out what your ground rules are:

- How will you ensure that performance is visible?
- How will you change communications as a team?
- How will you maintain team cohesion?
- How to iron out hiccups?
- What sort of check-in can you put in place?

### 4. Embedding flexible working

It’s great when people start to enjoy the benefits of flexible working. When you are confident that the team’s performance has been maintained, you may want to spend some time thinking about the following:

- Can you quantify the improvements flexible working has brought? This might be an increase in productivity or positive feedback about motivation or wellbeing in a staff survey
- Discussing flexibility should be a rolling process, being discussed as part of the budget cycle and annual performance reviews
- Consider options for flexible hiring – can you advertise roles as open to flexibility, and how will this affect the onboarding process?

There’s plenty to do at all levels, but your role as a line manager is pivotal.







# Guidelines for staff



**Having a more flexible working pattern can bring about a lot of benefits for you, as well as for your employer.**

Good flexible working doesn't have to mean zero-hours contracts, irregular or anti-social shift patterns, or seasonal work that is all consuming for a short space of time.

Good flexible working is a way of working that matches your preferences with what's needed in a job role and by an employer.

**Flexibility works best when both sets of needs can be met**

**Organisation's needs**

**Individual's needs**



These guidelines have been put together to help you think about what sort of flexibility would work for you and discuss this with your manager. Your employer will have a flexible working policy and a specific process to make a formal application.

Here are the steps you should take when thinking about flexible working:

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### **1. Consider what sort of flexibility could work in your role**

This means looking at the different aspects of your job and when and where tasks could be done. Think about how much you interact with others, whether some of the work can be done at home, whether the technology is available to do this, and so on.

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### **2. Think about what your preferred working pattern would be**

Based on the above, what sort of pattern would help you achieve a better work-life balance? Think about what is essential and what would be a nice-to-have.

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### **3. Think through some of the detail about how you would make it work**

Your manager will be looking to see if you can still do your job to the same level, with no adverse impact on your performance or the rest of the team. Think about how you might need to adapt some aspects of how you work, e.g. keeping your diary up to date, ensuring cover for when you are not in.

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### **4. Arrange an informal discussion with your manager**

It's really helpful if you and your manager can talk about flexible working before you make a formal request. In many instances, your manager will be happy to support you and work out something without a formal process. That's good, but you may want to have a centrally held record of your arrangement, even if it's not a change in your contract.

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### **5. Ask for a trial period**

Prepare yourself for some changes in your working style. Make sure you check in with your manager that it's working for them and give feedback as to whether it's working for you.

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### **6. Finally, accept there are limits on flexibility and play the long game**

Certain roles may be much better suited to certain types of flexibility than others. Be reasonable about what is possible and think about what options might work for you now and in the future.

## How to design flexibility into a role

Complete this form to help think about the sort of flexibility possible in a role.

## 1. The purpose of the role

Aim of the role:

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Key responsibilities:

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How to show these have been done:

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## 2. What's involved in the role: key tasks

To understand how more flexibility can be introduced, it's helpful to consider the work in terms of

- **Where** tasks can be done
- **When** these can be done
- **What** the interactions are with others (e.g. clients, team, other colleagues)

### Key tasks:

Tasks that can be done from home:

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Tasks that can be done at different times:

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Who do you communicate with, and how:

### 3. Reasons for wanting greater flexibility

(e.g. to regularly care for someone, reduce or change commuting time, have more time to myself, work at times that suit me better, keep regular appointments, etc.)

Remember a reason is not required. But it can help in terms of thinking through what sort of flexibility would work best.

Write these here:

[illegible]



#### 4. Consider what sort of flexibility might work

Based on the above, what sort of flexibility might be possible in the role? And what would match your individual needs best? Remember a combination might work, too.

Some examples

- Flexi hours
- Compressed week or fortnight
- Working from home (fixed or variable day)
- Annualised hours
- Part-time
- Job share

#### 5. Implications

Changing a working pattern will have implications both for you and others you work with. It's worth thinking through what these are and what will need to be done differently.

Here are a few areas to get you started:

- Is any cover needed? Who else can make decisions?

- Will communication be done differently?

- How can you show your performance is still the same?

- Is the technology available?

- How is the team affected?

- What needs to be done differently in terms of planning?

#### 6. Talking

Line managers will have different attitudes, based on their experience and work pressures and priorities. It's important to:

- Lead with what sort of flexibility might be possible
- Explain how it would help with work-life balance
- Explain how it would work in practice

#### 7. Making a request

Your employer should have all the information about policy and procedure readily available.

Let's take action today for all our tomorrows.  
**Let's make ageing better.**



This report is part of our work on Fulfilling work  
and is freely available at [ageing-better.org.uk](https://ageing-better.org.uk)

The Centre for Ageing Better creates change in policy and practice informed by evidence and works with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities. Ageing Better is a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund.

