Policy Liaison Group
Workplace Wellbeing

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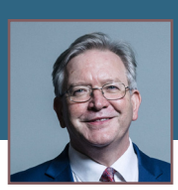
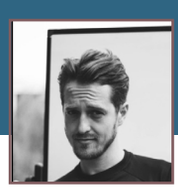
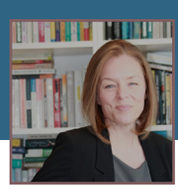
Flexible working

Peter Dowd MP; Dr Gemma Dale, Senior Lecturer at Liverpool Business School; James Reeves, Campaign Coordinator at the 4 Day Week Foundation; and Roopa Nagori, Senior Lecturer and Course Director at Coventry University.

Portcullis House


Peter Dowd MP


James Reeves


Dr Gemma Dale


Roopa Nagori

Introduction

Flexible working has already become the norm for millions of UK workers. 80% of respondents to a CIPD survey in Scotland said they would leave their job if flexible working options were removed, flexible working has surpassed pay as people's top priority when searching for a new job (Randstad, 2025). Government policy has been slow to catch up, and many businesses and managers remain reticent to embrace flexible working and address the UK's chronic productivity gap.

The Employment Rights Bill proposes that employers must justify any refusal of flexible working requests, e.g. changeable or compressed hours, including a four-day week. However, the debate among policymakers is underdeveloped. Peter Dowd MP, who opened the session, told participants his four-day week amendment was intended to "get the debate moving."

Participants agreed that evidence is no longer a barrier, the real challenges lie in culture, management practices, and embedding the right frameworks to make flexible working effective across sectors without causing unintended consequences such as overwork or isolation.

Key takeaways

“More time equals less stress”

- A major four-day working week trial in the UK found that 39% of employees were less stressed and 71% reported lower levels of burnout.
- The implications for work-life balance are not only well-evidenced but tangible, “you often hear people say, ‘I can go to the dentist now without worrying, or pick my kids up from school.’”
- As employees gain more autonomy and structure their work around their strengths, both wellbeing and performance improve. “The closer people can align with how they work best, the better the outcome, and time becomes less of a preoccupation.”
- Giving people more control over their time builds trust and boosts performance, “if people feel they’re working more effectively, that builds trust.”

Evidence vs. instinct

- Peter Dowd MP on his amendment to establish a Working Time Council to support the transition to a four-day working week: “My aim was simple: to get the debate about the four-day week moving. We know better working conditions lead to lower absenteeism, greater resilience in the workforce and stronger productivity.”
- Many decisions are still shaped by “leaders’ personal experiences, biases and beliefs.” The problem isn’t a lack of data, it’s how decision-makers interpret and apply it.
- “Managers still don’t trust people to work in a way that suits them”. Resistance is often emotional or habitual, not evidence-based. “The evidence is vast and we’re still fighting it, some of these debates are impervious to evidence.”

Value vs. time

- “Let’s stop measuring productivity by hours worked and start measuring it by value.”
- “Too many employers call people in for the sake of presence.” Visibility is not the same as impact; flexible working should be about designing work better, not just rescheduling hours.
- The fundamental question underpinning the discussion: “Is this a time issue, or a work design issue?”

Not a perk but a priority, changing the management mindset

- Flexible working will only succeed if managers are trained to lead differently. “We’ve got to think about line manager capability.”
- Too often, flexibility is seen as a change in scheduling, not a transformation in how teams operate. “If we want flexible working to succeed, we need to train managers to lead differently.”
- This includes “supporting autonomy, focusing on outcomes, and adapting team structures accordingly.”

- A cultural problem: There is still an undercurrent of presenteeism in many organisations. “Managers don’t trust people to work in a way that suits them.”

Issues raised

Rethinking work, rethinking wellbeing, “You can’t just bolt it on, you’ve got to redesign”

Flexible working cannot be layered onto outdated systems. Participants warned that without proper implementation, including redesigning workflows, trialling new systems, and training managers, flexible practices may do more harm than good. “There’s a difference between giving people a day off and redesigning how work gets done.” There are real risks of unintended consequences, e.g. work intensification, work extensification, loneliness. “We risk poorer mental health, not better.” Supporting managers to lead differently is critical to making flexibility work at scale. When done well, flexibility boosts performance: “Giving people more control over their time improves focus, engagement and, ultimately, business outcomes.”

Sectoral challenges

Structural and commercial pressures create significant barriers in some sectors. In industries like construction, clients expect constant delivery, leaving little room for experimentation with compressed weeks or altered shift patterns. Change is unlikely without buy-in across the supply chain. Smaller businesses also face practical hurdles, from resourcing constraints to lack of internal HR infrastructure, that make flexibility harder to implement, even when there is willingness. At the same time, flexibility must take into account the reality of different working lives, including caring responsibilities. For many, especially women, a shorter day rather than a shorter week may be the most effective route to work-life balance.

Recommendation

- The government should provide tailored guidance and resources to help SMEs develop workable flexible models.
- Line managers must be equipped to lead flexible teams and measure performance by outcomes, not hour worked.
- Sector-specific pilots should be funded to test flexible models in industries where implementation is more complex.
- Employers should be encouraged to redesign work processes, not just compress hours, to ensure long-term success.
- Flexibility should be embedded in national productivity and wellbeing strategies as a lever for growth and inclusion.

Links

- CIPD, ‘Working Lives Scotland Report’
- Benifex, ‘Expectation exponential Report’
- Benifex, page 28 of ‘The Big Benefits Report’
- UKRI, ‘A four-day working week improves mental and physical health’
- Peter Dowd MP’s amendment to the Employment Rights Bill, page 21 of the Bill’s Amendment Paper
- Roopa Nagori, ‘The design of hybrid work for improved employee engagement and well-being: perspectives for HRD practice’
- Randstad, ‘Workmonitor 2025’
- Sarah Forbes, Holly Birkett, Lowri Evans and Heejung Chung, ‘Flexible Working and the Future of Work:Managing Employees Since COVID-19’
- Dr Gemma Dale and Matthew Tucker, ‘Bosses are increasingly forcing workers back into the office – but evidence suggests it could backfire’

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.

To get involved, please contact
secretariat@plgworkplacewellbeing.org