

Family Friendly Working and Low Income Families

*Policy Briefing
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Introduction

There is increasing recognition of the value of family friendly and flexible ways of working to employers, families and communities in Scotland.¹ But much of the debate over recent years has been concentrated among middle and high income employers and employees, where flexibility has grown to be viewed as a point of competitive advantage.²

Less attention has been focused on the experiences of low income families, although there is growing concern about the economic situation of 'just managing families'.³ In order to better understand the experiences and needs of lower income families, Family Friendly Working Scotland commissioned original interviews and focus groups with low income parents, analysed alongside existing quantitative data from consecutive Growing Up in Scotland studies.⁴

The research looked at households in the lowest 40% of income in Scotland and found that parents on lower incomes:

- Have less access to flexible working than higher income groups;
- Are as likely to take up flexible working as higher income groups when it is available to them;
- Find childcare costs a major barrier to employment;
- Have missed out on family time together due to work commitments;
- Have little expectation that their employer will support them to balance work and care; and
- Value employers who offer flexibility.

References

1. For employer cases studies: <http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/case-studies/>
For employee case studies: <http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/employee-case-studies/>
2. Scottish Top Employers for Working Families Awards, <http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/employer-awards/>
3. Resolution Foundation (2016) Hanging on; the stresses and strains of Britain's 'just managing' families
4. The research was conducted by ScotCen Social Research who conducted 22 telephone interviews and three focus groups with parents on lower incomes, together with data analysis from the Growing Up in Scotland studies from 2006/07, 2007/08, 2010/11 and 2013.



Flexible Working Practice

This analysis found that there is a direct relationship between income and access to family friendly working:

- Parents in households with the highest quintile of income were 23% more likely to have access to some form of flexible working arrangements. When flexibility is available to working parents, take up does not vary by income;
- Parents on higher incomes were more than twice as likely (57% for the highest earning quintile compared to 22% in the lowest) to have access to paid time off when a child is sick than those on the lowest incomes;
- Parents on low incomes are more likely to call in sick themselves rather than say their child is ill.



In the qualitative research, there was limited recognition of the term ‘family friendly working’ or expectation that employers would arrange work in a way that enables people to balance employment with family life. Some parents felt that flexible working arrangements were only available to ‘managerial’ staff.

“ *I don't know that much about stuff like that. I think you could cut your hours. You can drop your hours if you want...I couldn't afford to do that. **Mother, couple, full-time***





Parents reported being more likely to rely on their colleagues than their employer to help them achieve the flexibility to meet their family commitments.

**“ There’s two of us with young kids – school age – and we’re both the same grades...I’m off this week. She took last week off as a holiday, so we do that at the school holidays. We split it.
Mother, couple, part-time**

On the whole, flexible working generally came down to informal and ad-hoc arrangements between employees and their line managers. While there were some positive examples, there were also instances where parents felt they had been penalised for working flexibly.

**“ Apart from the guilt that I have for having to take time off... because of what’s happened in the past with other employers, I do get quite anxious about taking time off.
Mother, single, full-time**

Those parents in the qualitative research who had negotiated a flexible arrangement with their employer were in professional or semi-professional occupations. Parents who worked in the public sector were more aware of flexible working options available to them and of employer related support such as childcare vouchers and workplace nurseries.





Childcare

The cost of childcare was identified as a major issue – many parents wanted to work more hours but said their additional income would in effect be cancelled out by childcare costs.

“ *With having four children, even for like the summer holidays clubs and stuff, its works out very expensive per day to have the children looked after...that’s why just one of us are working now, and the other’s at home with them all the time.*

Mother, couple, self-employed

The tax credits taper meant that this was also the case for parents receiving benefits support with childcare costs.

“ *I enjoy my job and everything but doing over 16 hours means... unless I get a really, really good paying job... it’ll just go all to bills.*

Mother, single, part-time

Many of the parents in the interviews and focus groups had chosen to give up work, or changed their job, to spend more time with their family. For some parents this was because the costs of childcare are prohibitive, but for others it was their personal preference about how to manage their time and money.

Echoing the differences in access to flexibility by income, six out of ten employees (57%) in the highest income quintile had an employer offering childcare vouchers, compared to only one out of ten parents in the lowest income quintile (13%).

Take up of vouchers amongst lower income parents is likely to be affected by the way that vouchers interact with in-work benefits, as well as less reliance on formal childcare among lower income parents.



Impact on Family Life

Many parents described themselves as ‘passing ships’ because they don’t get time together and this is the thing that families would most like to change about their work life balance. Being able to work term-time only was an attractive idea to many of the research participants.

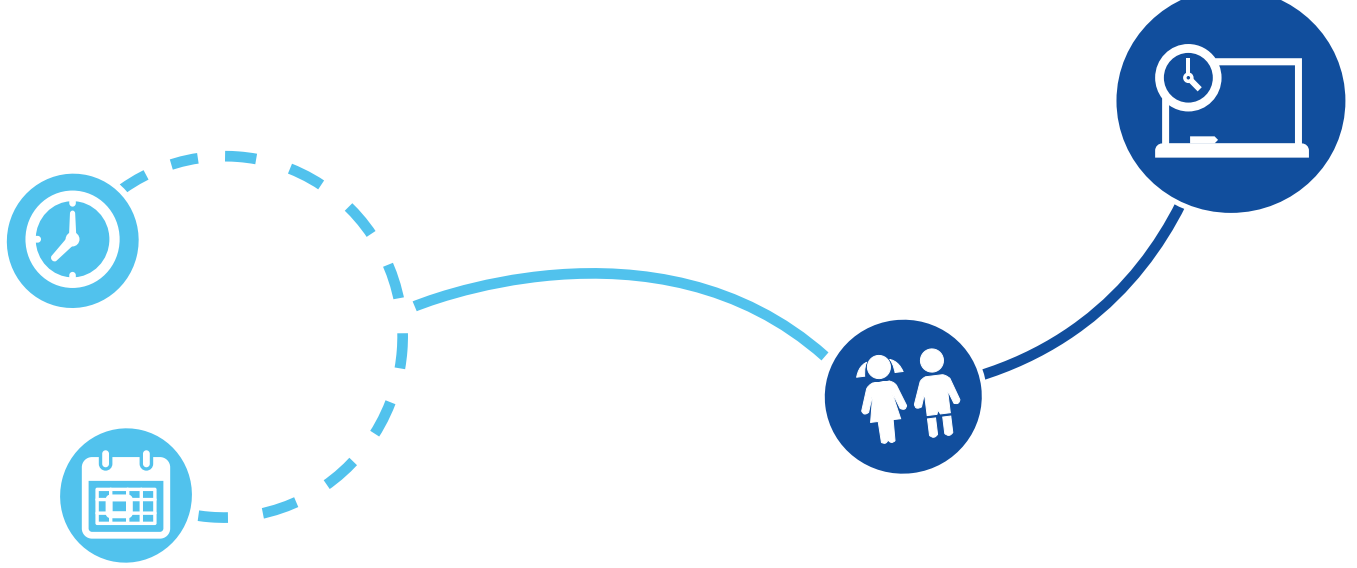
Survey data indicates that almost one in three (30%) low income parents feels that work commitments mean they have missed out on home or family activities they would have liked to have taken part in. This corresponds with ongoing concerns from working parents more widely about work impinging on play and quality time with children, and the ability to take part in school and nursery activities.⁵

A recurring theme through the qualitative research was that families often have to forego a holiday together in order to stretch their annual leave to cover school holidays and minimise the use of formal childcare.

“ We have to in effect split the...holidays between us to cover it all because childcare is so expensive...we’re rarely off at the same time. *Father, couple, full-time*

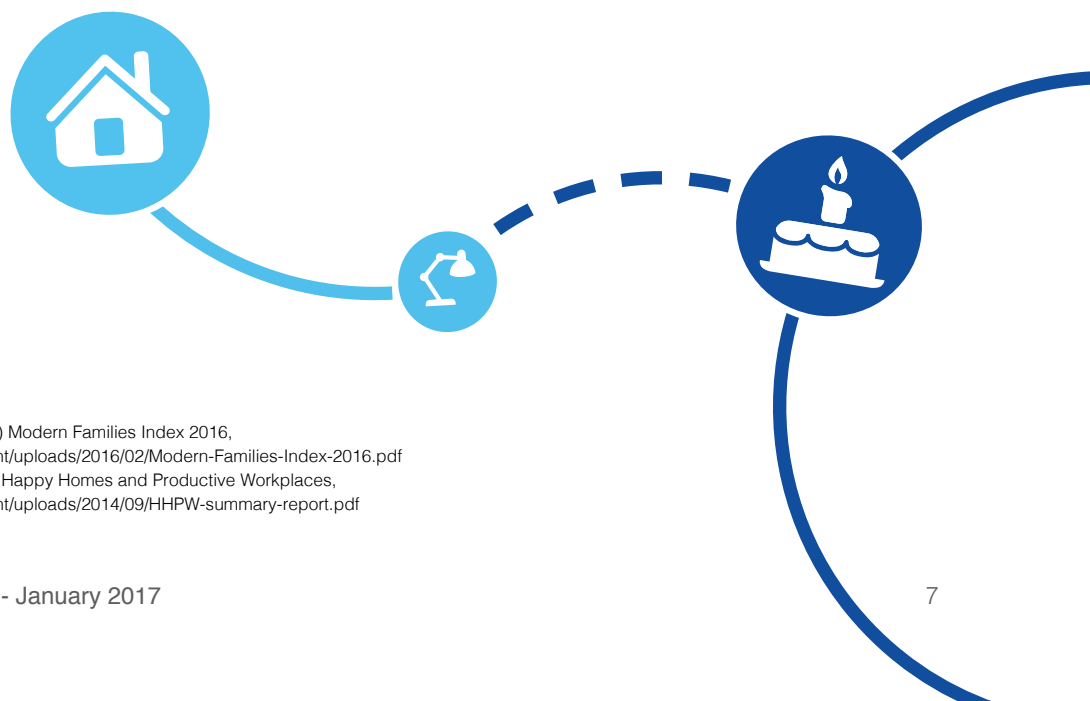
Although many fathers who took part in the research wanted to spend more time with their families, they felt it was far more acceptable for a woman to be working flexibly than a man. In some cases, where flexibility had been considered, reduced hours had been ruled out for the male partner because he was the higher earner in the household.





“ We’re probably working it to the best sort of situation that we can at the moment: that there’s always one of us available for the children, and the other one is working.
Mother, couple, self-employed ”

Many research participants felt there were positive effects from working for family life, including providing role models for their children, being more fulfilled and being able to afford holidays. But, respondents also raised concerns about stress and the impact on their relationships. There is evidence in other studies of the impact of stress at home impacting on work, and stress at work impacting on home life.⁶ **Low income parents with access to flexible working reported higher levels of mental wellbeing (66 per cent) compared to those without access (57 per cent) or not in employment (50 per cent).**



References:

- 5. Working Families and Bright Horizons (2016) Modern Families Index 2016, <http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Modern-Families-Index-2016.pdf>
- 6. Working Families and One Plus One (2014), Happy Homes and Productive Workplaces, <http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/HHPW-summary-report.pdf>

The Business Case for Flexibility



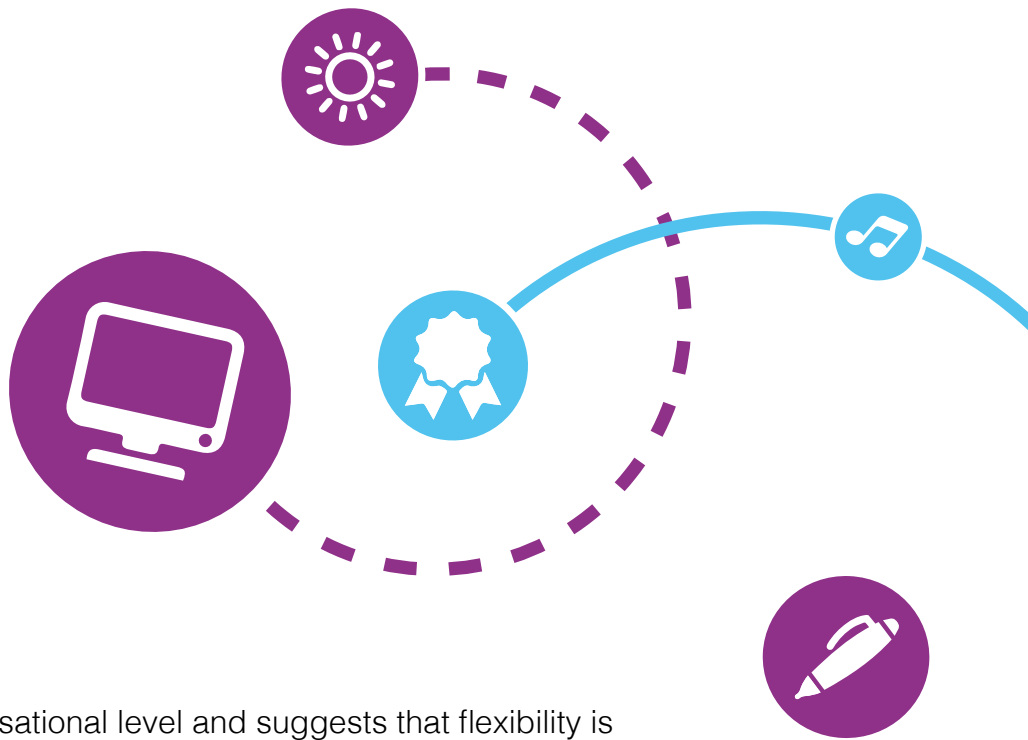
There is a strong link between access to flexible working and positivity towards employers. Eight out of ten (80%) parents rated employers who provide flexibility as 'very' or 'fairly' good, compared to fewer than five out of ten (46%) for employers not providing flexibility. Parents who had used flexibility were also more likely to rate their employer highly than those who did not.

These findings echo a wider survey of working parents in Scotland which found that more than six out of ten working parents (65%) are more likely to stay working for their current employer if flexibility is available and that more than half (56%) 'go the extra mile' at work, paying dividends for productivity.⁷

In focus groups, there was little awareness of the right to request flexible working, access to family friendly working and low expectations of employers offering this information freely. Among parents interviewed for this research, responses were tied to specific experiences rather than the rights available at work in general.

“ *I wouldn't say they're very supportive at all...I've been off once since this year, and that was because my son was really ill, and it kind of got frowned upon.* **Mother, single, part-time**

Respondents valued informal 'give and take' flexibility, for example, a slightly later start so they could attend a school event, but there are risks with keeping flexibility informal. When work life fit is something for the employee to resolve, this could indicate that the employer does not



support flexibility at an organisational level and suggests that flexibility is viewed as 'exceptional' rather than a normal way of working.⁸

“ *A wee bit of give and take with having to take days off, or starting early, or finishing early. Mother, couple, full-time*

Overall, research participants didn't expect to be able to achieve a better work life balance and mothers, in particular, accepted that they should downgrade their careers.

“ *I've been working as a nurse for just over eight years, and I can't really progress with more responsibility because I would be taking time away from the kids to give to my work. Mother, couple, temporary full-time*


“ *I did want to pursue my career a little bit more. Yeah, I think career had to take a back seat really. Mother, single, self-employed*

This clear trade-off between career and family time means that many employers are missing out on skills and productivity. Women working below their skill level are likely to continue to suffer career and pay penalties in the labour market as their children grow up.⁹

References:

7. Family Friendly Working Scotland (2016) Time to Rebalance, <http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/FFWS-Time-to-Rebalance-Results-Paper-.pdf>
8. Working Families (2016) Top Employers for Working Families: Benchmark Report, <http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/the-top-employers-for-working-families-benchmark-report/>
9. House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee (2016) Gender Pay Gap, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN07068#fullreport>





Conclusions and Recommendations

Lower income parents are less likely to have flexible working options available to them, yet where flexibility is available, take up does not vary by income. They have low awareness of their employment rights as parents, and low expectations of the support available from their employers. Yet they value employers who offer flexibility. The impact of work on family life, relationships and wellbeing, along with the cost of childcare, leads to many (especially women) reducing or giving up work entirely. At the heart of their expectations is a view that it is up to parents alone to find the work life fit – the balance of time and money – which best meets the needs of their family.

In fact, responsibility for this should be shared, by parents, employers and by government. A combination of flexible working and appropriate support with childcare can reduce stress within the family, enhancing mental and physical wellbeing and supporting family relationships; and can retain parents, especially mothers, in the workplace, to the long term benefit of their immediate employers and to the wider economy. Crucially, there should be genuine choice for families about their balance between work and home, time and money.

The business case for support for higher income workers is well established, lower income workers should not be left behind.

Employers

- This research confirms that employees' value flexible employers highly, a consistent finding in surveys of working parents across decades. And yet, many employers have yet to take advantage of the opportunities this offers for finding and retaining engaged and motivated staff. Employers need to ensure that their employees are aware of the flexible working options available to them and create a culture that enables low income employees as well as higher paid employees, and fathers as well as mothers to work flexibly. Training and support for line managers is crucial to embedding flexibility.¹⁰





- One simple measure that would help to change culture, and elevate flexibility beyond simply ‘doing a favour’ to a particular employee is for employers to shift the starting point so that jobs are advertised as flexible as the norm rather than the exception. This would mean hiring managers think about the best way to get the job done and what they really need for the organisation. The Happy to Talk Flexible Working strapline is one way for employers to signal their commitment to flexibility from the outset.¹¹

Government

- Affordability of childcare remains a key issue that impacts on the choices that families make about their working lives. This crunch is felt particularly acutely during school holidays, leaving many families with little prospect of spending much quality time together. The success of forthcoming reforms to early learning and childcare support in Scotland should be measured, in part, by the extent to which they increase parental choice in the way that families organise care.
- The Scottish Government has made firm commitments to supporting family friendly workplaces and these are notably included in the Scottish Business Pledge. Employers of those earning the lowest 40% of income should be the priority as new pledges are sought, to ensure that the benefits of fairer workplaces are felt equally.

For a full copy of the report visit:
familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk



References:

10. Working Families (2016) Top Employers for Working Families: Benchmark Report, <http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/the-top-employers-for-working-families-benchmark-report/>
11. Using the Happy to Talk Flexible Working strapline in job adverts indicates that employers are ready to have a discussion about flexible working. This will open up the application process to more people with the skills and talents employers are looking for, and encourage managers to think through the best way to get the job done. <http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/happy-to-talk-flexible-working/>

Family Friendly Working Scotland

Family Friendly Working Scotland (FFWS) supports and promotes the development of family friendly workplaces across Scotland. Our ambition is to make Scotland a beacon of excellence in family friendly working. We work with employers and support them to embed family friendly working practices, which bring huge benefits to both employees and business. FFWS is a collaborative partnership between Working Families, Fathers Network Scotland, Parenting Across Scotland and the Scottish Government. FFWS was established in 2014 with Scottish Government funding and support.

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