



## COVID-19 and flexible working: the perspective from working parents and carers

### Key findings

Working Families surveyed working parents and carers on their experiences of flexible working before and during the COVID-19 lockdown, and their aspirations for flexible working after lockdown:

- Whilst only 65% of parents and carers taking part in our survey had flexible working opportunities before the onset of the pandemic, 84% are now working flexibly.
- The most common flexible working arrangements reported by respondents during lockdown were working from home (63%) and flexing their hours (52%).
- However, 61% of the parents and carers we surveyed said family life had become more stressful or much more stressful during lockdown.
- 52% of women with male partners who responded have been working different hours from usual, compared to just over a third (34%) of their male partners.
- 65% of parents and carers we surveyed said they would like their future work arrangements to be extremely or very flexible. 32% said they would like them to be moderately or slightly flexible.
- Amongst parents and carers that took part, 48% said they planned to make changes to work more flexibly after lockdown.
- Just 1% of parents and carers we surveyed said they did not want any flexibility going forward. However, 13% said they did not think they would have the option to work flexibly, even though they would like to.

### Policy recommendations

Working Families is calling on the UK government to ensure the progress made around flexible working during lockdown is extended, not reversed, by:

- Acting on previous commitments to ensure employers are advertising jobs flexibly as the norm wherever possible.
- Helping ensure employers are taking a strategic, organisation-wide approach to better job design.
- Reforming the outdated Right to Request Flexible Working.
- Ensuring all parents and carers have access to secure jobs with guaranteed, predictable hours and access to all parental employment rights.



## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extraordinary effect on the way we work. Many key workers have kept going to work throughout the pandemic despite the childcare challenges they have faced, while others have turned to working from home in greater numbers than we have ever seen before, very often with their children at home.

Many parents who are unable to work from home or unable to work due to having no childcare have been furloughed. Other parents have had their hours reduced – at their request or their employer's. Some parents will have been made redundant. Many parents, particularly those in insecure work - which includes a disproportionate number of women and BAME workers<sup>1</sup> - will have seen their work and income disappear almost overnight.

## Working parents and the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 lockdown has posed particularly intense challenges for the UK's 13 million working parents. Since schools and childcare settings have closed, one in seven workers across the UK have had to make changes to their work pattern to balance work, childcare and very often home-schooling requirements.<sup>2</sup> Key workers who can access formal childcare still aren't able to access wrap-around or informal childcare, which is particularly crucial for those working long hours or working overnight.

Single parents and parents of disabled children have been particularly affected by the lack of access to childcare. Many single parents – already twice as likely as couple parents to be living in poverty – have had to make difficult decisions about requesting furlough leave or reducing their hours, with a subsequent loss of income.<sup>3</sup> Others have left the workplace completely.<sup>4</sup> Many parents of the estimated 1.1 million disabled children in the UK have had to manage their children's often complex care needs 24/7, without any of the outside support that would have supported them to work.<sup>5</sup>

There are wider gender equality issues to consider. Women still take on the majority of unpaid care work.<sup>6</sup> This means that they are more likely than men to work in insecure, low-

<sup>1</sup> TUC, 'BME workers far more likely to be trapped in insecure work, TUC analysis reveals', 12 April 2019: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/bme-workers-far-more-likely-be-trapped-insecure-work-tuc-analysis-reveals>

<sup>2</sup> ONS, 'Coronavirus and employment for parents in the UK: October to December 2019', 30 March 2020: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronavirusandemploymentforparentsintheuk/octobertodecember2019>

<sup>3</sup> Sumi Rabindrakumar, 'One in Four: A Profile of Single Parents in the UK' Gingerbread, February 2018: <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/one-four-profile-single-parents-uk/>

<sup>4</sup> Jamie Doward, 'BAME and single-parent families worst hit financially by Covid-19', *The Guardian*, 7 June 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/07/bame-and-single-parent-families-worst-hit-financially-by-covid-19>

<sup>5</sup> Amelia Hill, 'Brink of collapse: parents of disabled children buckling under 24-hour care' *The Guardian*, 13 May 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/13/parents-disabled-children-buckling-under-24-hour-care-coronavirus>; ONS, 'Family Resources Survey 2017/18', 28 March 2019: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/791271/family-resources-survey-2017-18.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/791271/family-resources-survey-2017-18.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> ONS, 'Women shoulder the responsibility of "unpaid work"', 10 November 2016: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/women-shoulder-the-responsibility-of-unpaid-work/2016-11-10>



paid jobs because their need for ‘flexibility’ is so great. Unable to work because they can’t access formal or informal childcare, and without access to key employment rights like the right not to be unfairly dismissed, many will have lost their jobs. Without guaranteed hours, others will have seen their work and income simply disappear. In the longer term, in challenging economic times, women who have been unable to work, or unable to work as much, may – like other groups more likely to work in insecure, low-paid roles, such as BAME workers and young people – find themselves first in line for redundancy.<sup>7</sup>

### The rise in flexible working during COVID-19

For those who have been able to carry on working during the crisis, there has been a huge shift in the way we work. The ONS estimates that between 41% and 49% of people have been working at home at some point during lockdown, while the Resolution Foundation found that 63% of all workers were working from home.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, in 2019, just 5% of the UK workforce said they worked mainly from home.<sup>9</sup>

But the opportunity to work from home has been very unevenly distributed, with higher paid workers being the most likely to work from home. Research conducted shortly after lockdown began found that only 33% of workers earning less than £20,000 had worked more from home that week, compared to 72% of those earning more than £40,000.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Resolution Foundation found that during the lockdown, 44% of the lowest paid workers were working from home, compared to 83% of the highest paid.<sup>11</sup> There is a similar split between higher and lower paid workers when it comes to expectations of working from home after the lockdown: 29% of the lowest paid workers expect to work from home more going forward, compared to 60% of the highest paid.<sup>12</sup>

Not all workers have access to working from home. In this report, we explore the experiences during lockdown of the working parents and carers who responded to our survey, and make policy recommendations that, if acted upon, will help ensure parents and

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<sup>7</sup> Living Wage Foundation, ‘Living Hours: Providing security of hours alongside a real living wage’, 2019: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/living-hours>

<sup>8</sup> ONS, ‘Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain’, 22 May 2020: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritaindata>; Laura Gardiner and Hannah Slaughter, ‘The effects of the coronavirus crisis on workers’, The Resolution Foundation, 16 May 2020: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-effects-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-on-workers/>. Data refers to the period 6-11 May 2020.

<sup>9</sup> ONS, ‘Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK labour market: 2019’, 24 March 2020: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuklabourmarket/2019>

<sup>10</sup> Abi Adams-Prassl, Teodora Boneva, Marta Golin, and Christopher Rauh, ‘Inequality in the impact of the coronavirus shock: New survey evidence for the UK’, Cambridge-INET Working Paper Series No: 2020/10, 1 April 2020: <https://www.inet.econ.cam.ac.uk/working-paper-pdfs/wp2010.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Laura Gardiner and Hannah Slaughter, ‘The effects of the coronavirus crisis on workers’, The Resolution Foundation, 16 May 2020: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-effects-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-on-workers/>. Data refers to the period 6-11 May 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Gardiner and Hannah Slaughter, ‘The effects of the coronavirus crisis on workers’, The Resolution Foundation, 16 May 2020: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-effects-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-on-workers/> Data refers to the period 6-11 May 2020.



carers are able to work more flexibly beyond the current crisis. We hope that the experience of the parents and carers who took part in our survey will be a galvanising force for change for *all* working parents.

### Working Families' survey

This briefing is based on Working Families' survey of 1,063 UK parents and carers of dependent children under 18. All respondents were in work during the COVID-19 lockdown, although some were on leave, including furlough leave. The survey asks about their experiences of flexible working before and during the lockdown, and their aspirations for flexible working after lockdown. Whilst flexible working is important for many workers, this survey focuses on the experiences of parents and carers, for whom flexible working is particularly important and who have faced particular challenges in working during lockdown, due to schools and childcare settings closing.

### Who took part in our survey?

The overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents were women. Most identified as white British (80%)<sup>13</sup> and the overwhelming majority were based in England (89%).

The survey largely reflects the views of employees as opposed to workers or the self-employed: the vast majority of respondents were employed, either full-time (50%) or part-time (42%). 5% were self-employed, and fewer than 1% were agency workers or zero hours workers. 87% of the men who answered the survey were employed full-time and 7% were employed part-time, compared to 46% of the women who were employed full-time and 46% who were employed part-time.

21% of survey respondents earned up to £18,999 a year, 23% earned £19,000-£31,999, 25% earned £32,000-£47,999, and 32% earned over £48,000, reflecting a skew towards higher-paid workers in comparison to the overall UK population.<sup>14</sup> Many of the lower-paid workers in our sample work part-time, reflecting the fact that most of those who answered our survey were women (who are more likely than men to work part-time after having children). Respondents' reported levels of seniority at work were high compared to the overall UK population: 23% of our survey respondents were administrative, support or junior level workers, 33% were middle managers, and 35% were senior managers or professionals.<sup>15</sup>

The results are therefore not representative of the UK population: overall, they reflect the experiences of mostly female parents and carers who are employees, many of them relatively high earners, with some degree of seniority at work. Rather than claiming generalisability, we present here the experiences of this sample and, combined with the

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<sup>13</sup> In 2011, 80.5% of the UK population identified as White British:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11>

<sup>14</sup> ONS, 'Percentile points from 1 to 99 for total income before and after tax', 5 March 2020:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/percentile-points-from-1-to-99-for-total-income-before-and-after-tax>

<sup>15</sup> National Readership Survey, 'Social Grade', <http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>



representative statistics from other research already presented, make policy recommendations to benefit all working parents beyond the current crisis.

**Parents, flexible working and lockdown**

**Before COVID-19**



**65% of respondents worked flexibly**

**During COVID-19**



**84% of respondents worked flexibly**



Unsurprisingly, there has been a huge jump in the numbers working flexibly during lockdown. Whilst only 65% of parents and carers taking part in our survey had flexible working opportunities before the onset of the pandemic, now 84% are working flexibly. 47% of those we surveyed said they had been working extremely flexibly or very flexibly during lockdown, compared to 23% prior to lockdown. Of the 35% of respondents that had not been working flexibly at all before the lockdown, 72% are now working flexibly.

The most common flexible working arrangements reported by parents and carers during lockdown were working from home (63%) and flexing their hours (52%).

36% of male and 40% of female respondents said they had been working different hours from usual. Some parents and carers reported that they had been working fewer hours than usual because of their childcare responsibilities. But others said that they had been working a similar number of hours to before, simply at different times. Some have found themselves doing more hours than before, working early in the mornings or late into the night.

*“I’m working harder than ever but... do so in the middle of the night”*  
 – survey respondent, female

As this comment suggests, it is important to highlight that the kind of flexible working parents and carers have experienced during lockdown is not ideal. While working from home and flexing their hours have made it possible for some to continue working, many of the parents and carers we surveyed have found that doing so without childcare has negated almost all the possible benefits, leaving them feeling stressed and exhausted.

61% of the parents and carers we surveyed said family life had become more stressful or much more stressful during lockdown. They described working late into the night or getting



up at 4am to work around caring for their children, and a blurring of boundaries between work and home that led to their feeling ‘always on’. They described concerns about the effects of this way of working on their mental health.

They also described worries that, having been furloughed or having worked around their childcare responsibilities, they are now more vulnerable to redundancy or being overlooked for promotion later down the line.

*“Another colleague without childcare responsibilities took on extra ‘critical’ work, meaning she wasn’t furloughed. It worries me if redundancies were eventually made, this critical work she was able to pick up could be the difference between keeping her and making me redundant.”*

– survey respondent (female)

Bearing in mind that the majority of parents we surveyed were in better paid, more secure roles with access to home-working, the majority did not feel there was a noticeable difference between the way male and female parents were treated by their employers, in terms of being supported to work from home or being furloughed.

However, some parents we surveyed did note some issues relating to gender inequality during the lockdown, including a tendency from employers to expect men to work as normal, while women managed childcare and work. This means that not only are mothers expected to take responsibility for the caring so men could continue to work, but that men are not being supported around childcare. While the prevalence of such experiences is not yet clear, it is important to consider these - and other aspects of gender equality – if, as has been predicted, gender inequalities have begun to widen since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

And although the parents and carers we surveyed mostly felt they had been treated equally by their employers, there are some differences in the ways that parents and carers in opposite-gender couples have balanced work and care. Of the women who said they had male partners, 52% of these women had been working different hours from usual, compared to 34% of their male partners.

Single parents have faced a particularly challenging time balancing work and care; while only 15% of female single parents that responded to our survey said they had been working different hours from usual, 29% reported being furloughed or applying to the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, compared to just 8% of women with male partners, and 18% of those women’s male partners.<sup>17</sup>

12% of female single parents and 13% of women with male partners reported taking annual leave or unpaid leave to help with childcare, compared to 8% of those women’s male partners. Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) has similarly found that during the COVID-19 lockdown, while fathers in opposite-gender couples are now doing more childcare

<sup>16</sup> Turn2Us, ‘Coronavirus pandemic widens the gender gap’, 4 May 2020: <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/About-Us/Media-Centre/Press-releases-and-comments/Coronavirus-pandemic-widens-the-gender-gap>

<sup>17</sup> Only four male single parents or carers answered our survey, so we do not include details of their answers here owing to the small sample size.





than before, mothers in opposite-gender couples are, on average, still doing more childcare and housework and less paid work than fathers.<sup>18</sup>

### Aspirations for the future



**More than 9 in 10 working parents and carers surveyed want their workplace to retain flexible working post-COVID-19**



Working flexibly has become a reality for many more working parents and carers – and they do not want to return to the way they worked before. Those we surveyed overwhelmingly wanted to keep working flexibly after the lockdown: 65% said they would like their future work arrangements to be extremely or very flexible, and 32% said they would like them to be moderately or slightly flexible. 13% said they would like to work flexibly but did not think they would have the option to. Just 1% said they did not want any flexibility going forward.

Amongst respondents who were not working flexibly before the lockdown (35%), there has been a major shift: 94% want to work more flexibly going forward. 20% of these parents and carers intend to put in a request to work more from home, 11% said they would request changes to their working hours and pattern, and 21% said they would have an informal discussion with their manager. 25% said they did not think they would have the option to work flexibly, even though they would like to.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew et al, 'How are mothers and fathers balancing work and family under lockdown?', IFS Briefing Note BN290, 2020: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14860>



**Almost half of parents and carers surveyed plan to make changes to their working patterns to work more flexibly after COVID-19.**



48% of all respondents said they planned to make changes to work more flexibly after lockdown. While most of the parents and carers we surveyed were women, amongst the men that took part, 45% planned to make changes to work more flexibly after lockdown.

*“I was previously working a nine day fortnight. During the outbreak I have reduced my hours to six per day but have been working every day. (I) have been able to see the benefits of eating with (the) children (and) being around more in (the) morning/early evening, without (a) corresponding drop in job performance.”*  
 – survey respondent (male)

Some of the parents and carers of disabled children who answered our survey described their hope that the flexible working they have experienced during the lockdown will become the ‘norm’ afterwards. They underlined the particular importance of flexible working to them in terms of staying in work while managing their children’s often complex care needs, especially given the difficulties they all too often face finding suitable childcare.

*“I can work when I like and when is convenient for me and my child. If my child has a seizure, I know I have an hour or more of undisturbed work time while he sleeps off the seizure. I think (flexible working) will be the new normal for a lot of parents of disabled children.”*  
 – survey respondent (female)

Parents’ and carers’ experiences of their employer during lockdown have been mixed. While 57% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with how their employer had helped them balance work and care during the lockdown, and 52% of parents and carers said they felt their employer had a much better or slightly better understanding of the needs of working parents compared to before the lockdown, a significant minority of parents and carers (21%) said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

Some of the parents and carers we surveyed said their employer is already thinking about making changes to the way they work in the immediate future. 28% of the parents and carers we surveyed said their employer has already said they would allow more working





from home after the lockdown, and 10% said their employer is planning to continue supporting staff to flex their hours across the working week.

It is important this approach is taken among employers more widely. The parents and carers we surveyed want three major shifts in flexible working: more autonomy to flex their hours, more flexibility around where they work from, and perhaps most importantly, a cultural shift in attitudes towards flexible working in their workplace.

### More autonomy to flex hours

That parents and carers are clearly flexing their hours during lockdown has demonstrated this can be done. While 27% of survey respondents said they were working variable hours before lockdown, 11% said they were planning to put in a request to flex their hours after lockdown, so they have more choice and autonomy around dropping their children off at school and picking them up, for example. The need to flex their hours was particularly acute for some of the parents of disabled children that we surveyed.

Parents and carers we surveyed had mixed views on employers taking a core hours approach; some felt they were useful in enabling work to fit around childcare, but others felt they could be unnecessary or unhelpful.

*“Good communication of when and where you are working is enough to enable teams to carry on. Core hours just add pressure if they are not completely necessary.”*  
– survey respondent (female)

Overall, parents and carers we surveyed expressed a preference for working in ways that deliver family time back and allow them more scope to work around childcare should it break down - part-time hours, term-time only work, compressed hours, and options to reduce hours without reducing pay by forfeiting annual leave, for example.

Parents and carers working shifts said they need predictability, shifts that fit with childcare and school hours, and some autonomy over the days and times they work.

*“Set days and shifts so that I know when I am working and can live my life. Not having to wait to see what I am working as it changes week on week.”*  
– survey respondent (female)

### More autonomy around remote working

Many of the parents and carers we surveyed want to continue working from home, with 22% of parents who were not working from home previously planning to request to work from home. They mentioned the use of video calls for meetings, in particular, and also tools such as Teams, Slack and cloud-based storage systems as helpful tools for communications and document sharing to support working from home.

At the same time, many parents do not want to see a shift to working entirely from home but would like more autonomy over when and how often they do. Some parents pointed out that working from home requires space and facilities, and that greater attention would need to be paid to health and safety issues.



Of course, not all jobs can be done from home, but very often some aspects can be. For example, one teacher that took part in our survey said:

*“Trainings and meetings (could) be available via video conferencing. Teachers’ planning, preparation and assessment time (could) be timetabled into a block so it could be completed at home.”*

– survey respondent (female)

### Cultural shift in attitudes

Parents and carers taking part in our survey highlighted the need for a shift in the way we think about colleagues’ working patterns and location. On a practical level, this included being mindful of start and finish times when planning meetings, or that a colleague may be part-time when scheduling in deadlines, and having regular contact with home workers so they can remain connected when working remotely.

They also identified the need for a cultural shift away from long working hours and presenteeism, and a need for working ‘differently’ to be ‘normalised’. Some parents and carers pointed out that because attending meetings remotely has become the norm rather than the exception during lockdown, this has levelled the playing field for remote workers.

*“(I would like) a focus on output and productivity rather than presenteeism (which) discriminates against... (working) parents.”*

– survey respondent (female)

*“All too often I think others see (flexible working) as an easy option. (But) it’s done for good reason (childcare), and I work very hard. Being present in an office isn’t a guarantee of good or hard work.”*

– survey respondent (female)

### Conclusion and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that flexibility can be unlocked in many, many more jobs than previously thought. However, our survey has shown that, whilst it has enabled some working parents and carers to weather this storm, having to work around childcare and home-schooling has negated many of the benefits.

The overwhelming majority of working parents and carers we surveyed do not want their employer to return to revert to business as usual after lockdown is lifted. It is time for the UK government and employers to #flextheUK – extending the flexible working opportunities afforded some parents and carers during lockdown to all parents and carers. Proactively creating more secure, good-quality flexible jobs will enable more parents and carers to benefit from flexible working when their formal and informal childcare and schooling arrangements are back in place.

We are calling on the government to act on previous commitments to ensuring employers are advertising jobs flexibly as the norm wherever possible, bedding in the positive changes that parents are already experiencing to the way they work during COVID-19. The government’s approach should ensure employers are taking a strategic, organisation-wide



approach to better job design to ensure the work life balance benefits of flexible working are felt.

Women – over-represented in insecure, low paid work – are more likely to have lost their jobs or suffered a fall in earnings since COVID-19 took hold.<sup>19</sup> Ensuring employers are taking a proactive approach to creating more secure, genuinely flexible job vacancies will support women into better work. Supporting fathers to continue to contribute higher levels of childcare post-lockdown<sup>20</sup> will also bolster women’s labour market participation.

Better job design could also unlock more secure, reduced hours jobs that can be worked flexibly – highly valued by many parents because they afford them more scope to spend time with their children and to manage work if their childcare arrangements break down. Given unemployment is rising, employers creating more jobs – and more job vacancies – will help avoid a situation where the majority of work is carried out by a shrinking pool of workers<sup>21</sup>.

It is clear that some parents and carers intend to use the Right to Request Flexible Working post-lockdown, to lock in their new way of working. However, the current pandemic has exposed the Right to Request as unfit for purpose.<sup>22</sup> Working parents’ and carers’ childcare arrangements can break down at any time - they need to be able to make a flexible working request from day one in a new job. That an employer has three months to consider the request, and their reasons for turning it down, should be urgently reviewed.

Not all parents and carers have had the job security and ability to adapt their way of working to keep their job through the current crisis. Too many will have been dismissed without notice, without pay and without the ability to claim unfair dismissal. Those without guaranteed hours will have seen their work simply disappear. All parents need access to secure jobs, with guaranteed, predictable hours, and access to all parental employment rights including to request flexible working. Otherwise its benefits will be felt unevenly.

There is no guarantee that the school and childcare settings working parents and carers rely upon will have returned to normal in September. It is crucial the government acts to move more UK employers beyond a crisis holding pattern to actually changing the way they organise work, and approaching flexible working as the norm, not the exception; and that the benefits of genuinely flexible working are felt amongst all working parents and carers.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/women-bear-brunt-of-coronavirus-economic-shutdown-in-uk-and-us>

<sup>20</sup> ONS, ‘Coronavirus and how people spent their time under lockdown: 28 March to 26 April 2020’, 27 May 2020:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/bulletins/coronavirusandhowpeoplespendtheirtimeunderrestrictions/28marchto26april2020>

<sup>21</sup> Analysis by the Guardian suggests there are now 8.5 unemployed people competing for every job opening, compared with just 1.5 before the current crisis began:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/16/record-unemployment-uk-government-ons-figures-labour-market>

<sup>22</sup> Prior to COVID-19, research by the TUC showed one in three flexible working requests were being turned down <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/one-three-flexible-working-requests-turned-down-tuc-poll-reveals>. The current pandemic has shown flexible working is available in many more jobs than previously thought.

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