

# **MAKING HYBRID INCLUSIVE – KEY PRIORITIES FOR POLICYMAKERS**

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## Executive summary

Despite Government removing all guidance to work from home where possible earlier this summer, there are signs that the pandemic has prompted a lasting shift to more remote working in many organisations. Almost 9 in 10 workers told us that they don't want to return to pre-Covid working patterns.

However, there remains a risk that increased hybrid and remote working could exacerbate existing workplace inequalities, and lead to the emergence of new ones too. Hybrid working will present a further transition from the larger scale remote working introduced through the early stages of the pandemic. This research indicates that without the right planning and support, this new model could present distinct challenges for some worker groups who would stand to benefit from increased access to flexibility in their working arrangements.

That's why it is vital Government and employers engage proactively with this shift, addressing organisational policy-to-practice gaps and updating employment regulations and enforcement to align with this new way of working. This should look beyond a narrow focus on work location to consider wider opportunities to deliver genuine flexibility that meets both business and individual needs.

This new research into the impact of hybrid working for different worker groups has been conducted by the Work Foundation and Chartered Management Institute, drawing on polling of 964 managers and 1,000 remote workers, and additional engagement with frontline advice services.

## Key findings

**The majority of workers would prefer to spend their working week combining days on site and working from home, but employer plans do not always align with worker preferences.**

- 88% of workers would like to keep working remotely at least some of the time. On average, workers want to work remotely for up to three days per week.
- 46% of managers expect staff to work in an organisationally hybrid way – with some staff working remotely all the time and other members of staff working on site all the time.

An additional 38% of managers expect workers to work in an individually hybrid way – with workers coming in at least one day a week, but not the whole working week.

- Legacy attitudes towards remote working and career development may persist, with managers saying they expect remote or hybrid working to reduce access to stretch projects and workplace networks, and to exacerbate already existing inequalities in the workplace. These attitudes will present real risks for those who pursue hybrid working options as we emerge from the pandemic.

**Carers are missing valuable social connections with colleagues through the shift to remote working, and risk feeling 'out of sight and out of mind' of the rest of the organisation.**

- Workers with caring responsibilities were more likely to feel less connected to colleagues who are working remotely as they are less visible (63% compared with 55% of those without caring responsibilities).

**Manager behaviour and decision making can be pivotal in enabling or limiting access to hybrid and flexible work.**

- Managers have a high degree of discretion around working arrangements and this could increase scope for discrimination. More than half of managers report that they have decision making responsibilities for whether their direct reports can work remotely (55%) and when they should be present at the office (63%), but 1 in 5 (20%) of employees whose line managers make the decision for them are not happy with their organisation's working arrangements.
- Line manager support for remote working is considered particularly important by disabled workers, with 61% of disabled workers indicating they felt comfortable asking for remote working because their line manager was supportive of it (compared with 51% of non-disabled). This shows line manager's behaviour is key to lowering barriers of access to remote work.

**Working longer hours risks impacting wellbeing.**

- Detailed responses indicate parents and carers in particular may work longer hours to make up for interrupted time, causing blurred boundaries between their work and home lives, and negatively affecting their wellbeing.

## Recommendations for policymakers

Evidence from this research has informed the following recommendations for Government to support an inclusive transition to hybrid work:

- **Develop an employer campaign and accreditation programme to promote inclusive flexible working practices.**  
This should include consultation and engagement with staff around how time is spent when on-site, training for managers in managing a hybrid workforce, and the introduction of measures to support work-life balance such as an organisational 'right to disconnect' policy. Employer case studies should be used to promote innovative practices that ensure organisational changes are inclusive for different worker groups.
- **Require that large employers share information on their approach to flexible work and their progress in encouraging take-up across their organisation.**  
Employers with more than 250 staff should be required to publish their flexible and hybrid working policies externally, monitor take-up of flexible working practices within their organisation across different worker groups, and regularly publish this data along with action plans to drive improvement.
- **Support the development of management capability in providing inclusive hybrid work.**  
For example, modules on equality, diversity and inclusion could be added to the Help to Grow: Management programme, to ensure managers and leaders are trained on how to build and foster inclusive working environments.
- **Make flexible working the default position for all employees, with flexible options included in all job adverts,** unless employers have a sound business reason for an exemption. The range of reasons employers may give to refuse making a job more flexible should be narrowed; and workers already in post should be adequately supported to appeal decisions without fearing reprisal.

## Introduction

As we enter the final quarter of 2021, many organisations are planning returns to the office and rolling out newly-developed hybrid working models.<sup>1</sup> As they do so, it is vital that employers and policymakers identify opportunities to promote inclusive practices. Remote working is one form of flexible working which can support disabled workers, women, and workers with caring responsibilities to access employment and remain in the labour market, as well as help to increase staff wellbeing, productivity and motivation<sup>2</sup>.

The pandemic has driven a huge increase in take-up of remote working, and evidence suggests that it is here to stay:

- Before the pandemic, just 6% of working adults in the UK worked exclusively from home. This has since increased to 32% and has remained high<sup>3</sup>, according to figures derived from the ESRC Understanding Society survey.<sup>4</sup>
- Nearly a quarter of businesses (24%) intend to use increased remote working going forward, and 85% of employees currently working remotely expect to share their time between their usual place of work and remote working in the future, as the latest Office for National Statistics data indicates.<sup>5</sup>

We now have a valuable opportunity to rethink working practices, to improve access to flexible work and support the employment of under-represented groups. But this will require careful consideration and a proactive approach from leaders and managers to shift away from 'legacy attitudes' to remote work and avoid exacerbating and establishing workplace inequalities.

## This research

The first phase of this joint project consisted of a survey of 1,036 Chartered Management Institute (CMI) managers who were working remotely. This research highlighted that managers expect post-Covid take-up of remote working to be higher among disabled workers and those with caring responsibilities. Managers also expected remote working to decrease access to workplace opportunities, including developing professional networks (55%), representing the company at external events (38%) and access to stretch projects (23%).<sup>6</sup>

This policy brief generates additional evidence on these challenges by drawing on new surveys of 964 CMI managers between 26th August and 1st September 2021, and 1,000 UK workers who were working remotely between 31st August and 3 September 2021. The survey findings are further supported by qualitative interviews with organisations and bodies representing specific groups of workers, including women, disabled people and those with parental or caring responsibilities.

## Hybrid is the preferred approach, but employees and organisations may be interpreting this differently

For many organisations, remote working is new territory. The majority of managers in our survey indicate their organisations have implemented remote working policies, but as recent Work Foundation research found, most are continuing to learn what works,<sup>7</sup> and crucially how to develop an inclusive culture through this new model.

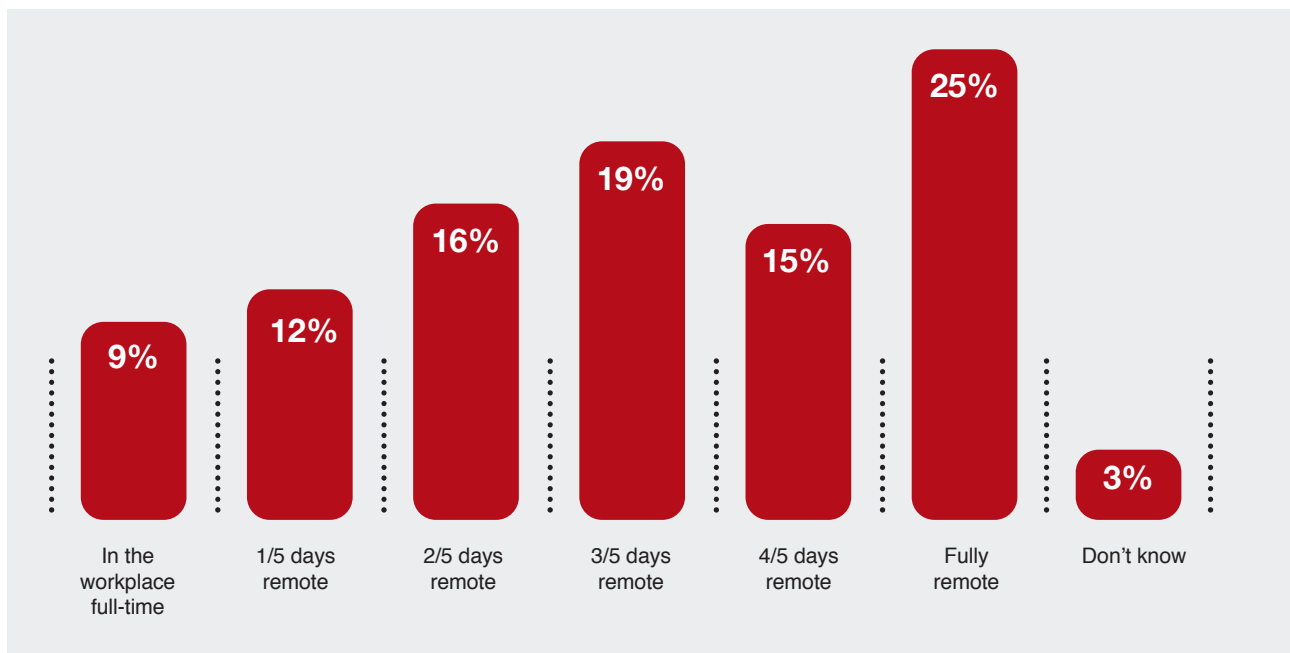
To avoid unintended consequences, it is vital that the implementation of hybrid working is managed sensitively and as part of wider organisational efforts to support staff development and improve diversity and inclusion.

65% of managers we surveyed reported that their organisation has a remote working policy in place, with an additional 6% expecting a policy to be introduced by December 2021. Large organisations are more likely to have a policy (68%) than SMEs (56%), although support for remote working is high among organisations of all sizes. The effects of the pandemic cannot be understated here; 73% of managers in organisations with a remote working policy say that this policy is in place as a direct result of Covid-19.

There appear to be two distinct approaches that organisations are taking in planning future working arrangements. Some are taking a hybrid approach at the individual level, with 38% of managers expecting staff to come in to work at least one day a week. Others are taking a hybrid approach at the organisational level, with 47% of managers expecting some staff to work remotely all the time and other members of staff to work in the office all the time. A full return to the office, or exclusive remote working across the organisation is much less common.

Employer plans, however, may not always match up with worker preferences. Our employee poll found that on average, remote workers want to work remotely for up to three days per week. 25% of workers say they want to work exclusively remotely, and only 9% of those currently working remotely do not want to work remotely at all.

**Figure 1: Proportion of the week that employees want to continue working remotely**



Source: CMI/Work Foundation survey of 1,000 employees

## While some workers are benefitting from a shift to hybrid, others are facing new challenges

Employees are generally keen to continue working remotely at least some of the time, with 88% of workers surveyed saying that they would like to work remotely between one and five days a week. A hybrid model like this will be fundamentally different to full remote working as experienced during the pandemic, and indeed to majority on-site working as was the norm pre-pandemic. Nevertheless, legacy attitudes towards remote working and what it means for career development may persist, which is a big risk factor for those who do pursue hybrid options.

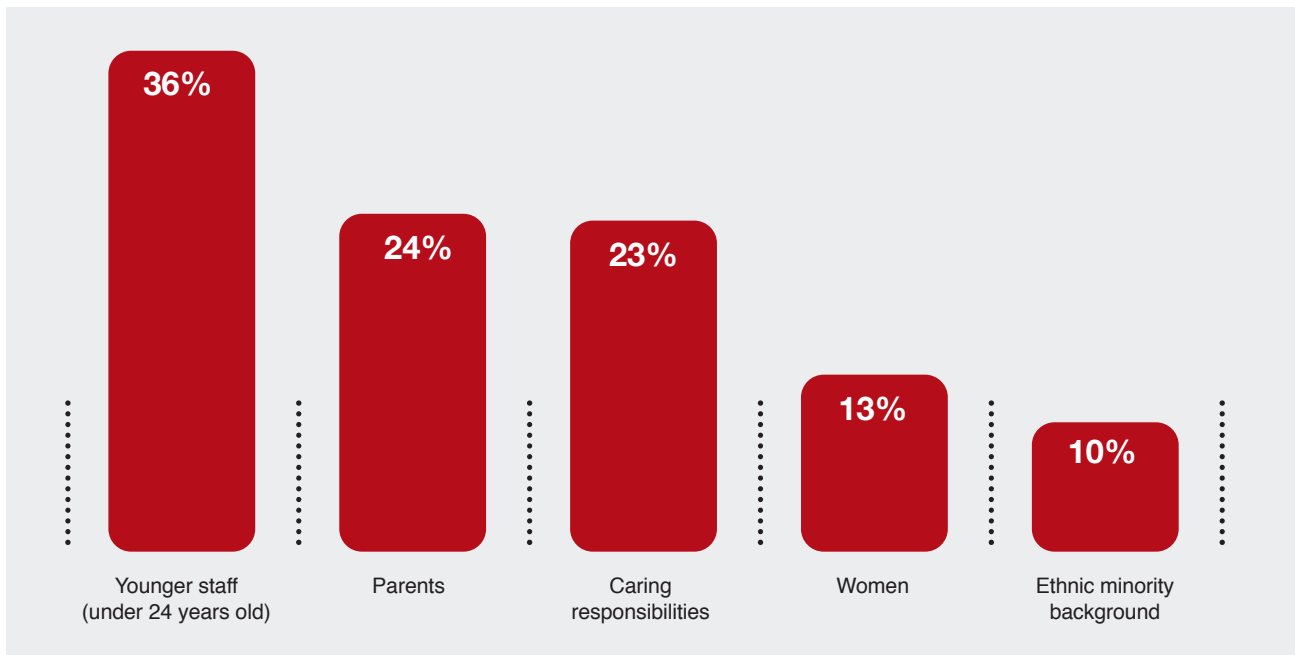


**Nearly 9 in 10 workers told us that they don't want to return to pre-Covid 19 working patterns.**

Working from home can mean reduced visibility in the workplace and there is evidence that reduced visibility to colleagues and senior staff may result in different rates of progression<sup>8</sup>. This could affect those who may already face disadvantage in the workplace and who may be more likely to work remotely, such as disabled workers.

This research found that managers have particular concerns that hybrid working could mean younger staff (under 24 years old) may be at risk of missing out on workplace opportunities, such as accessing networking opportunities, stretch projects, or representing the organisation at external events, with 36% of managers highlighting this as a concern. This was followed by concerns for workers with parental or caring responsibilities, women, and people from ethnic minority backgrounds. It is key that employers proactively address these challenges to avoid rolling back on progress to make their organisations more inclusive.

**Figure 2: Proportion of managers concerned that hybrid working could limit workplace opportunities for specific worker groups**



Source: CMI/Work Foundation survey of 964 managers

## Disabled people

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, roughly half of disabled people (52%) were in employment, a significantly lower employment rate than the rest of the population (81%), in large part due to organisational policies and practices that failed to account for disabled candidates and workers' needs.<sup>9</sup> Remote working, recognised as a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010, can support recruitment and retention of disabled workers,<sup>10</sup> but was often denied to disabled workers by employers prior to the pandemic, due to factors including technological barriers and other elements of workplace culture.<sup>11</sup>

Evidence from our employee survey finds that disabled workers are 1.3 times more likely than non-disabled workers to be working remotely (57% compared with 44%) and that working remotely was valuable to disabled workers as it allowed them to better manage their energy or their condition.

The recent shift to remote working is an opportunity to drive a longer-term shift in manager decision-making, ensuring that where disabled workers would like to work remotely some or all of the time, this is proactively enabled and encouraged by their organisation. Indeed, Government has already recognised the need to provide extra support in this area, extending the

**Disabled employees are 1.3 times more likely than non-disabled employees to be working remotely**

Access to Work scheme to support disabled people working remotely through the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

However, our research also highlights specific risks to disabled workers around visibility and access to opportunities, particularly with the transition to hybrid ways of working, as some of their colleagues return to the office. Managers highlighted the concern that remote work could mean that disabled workers 'miss opportunities due to being out of sight' and experience a lack of social contact and support in the workplace. But there is no reason that this should be the case; organisations that proactively align their approaches to staff development and hybrid work should be able to ensure that all workers are able to access training and progression opportunities.



## Women

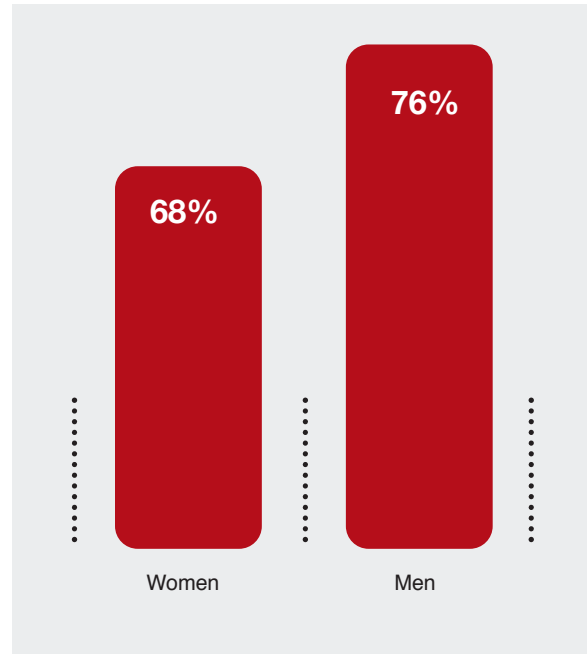
Prior to the pandemic women's representation in the labour market was increasing, but there remains a sizeable gender employment gap (the estimated employment rate for men is 78% and 72% for women<sup>13</sup>). An increasing body of evidence demonstrates that flexible working — including job-sharing, flexitime, compressed hours and remote working — can help lower many of the barriers that are preventing women from entering, remaining and progressing in work.

Despite the benefits, and the sharp increase in remote working over the past two years, barriers persist. Our employee survey suggests that women are less likely than men to agree that their organisation is inclusive of remote workers in its day to day operations (70% compared with 76% of men). Women also feel less comfortable than men in asking their line manager to work remotely (68% compared with 76%).

Furthermore, 20% of managers surveyed identified that increased remote working could create risks for women in terms of missing out on workplace opportunities and regressing towards more traditional role patterns. It is therefore imperative that the gains that were made during the pandemic are capitalised on, as men are now just as likely as women to want to work remotely at least one day a week. Importantly, increasing uptake of flexible working arrangements among men would help embed flexible work into the working culture, reduce misconceptions and associated career penalties.<sup>14</sup>

To ensure that all workers feel able to request alternative working arrangements, government guidance for employers should underline the importance of both men and women in senior positions role-modelling flexible working within organisations.

**Figure 3: Proportion of workers who agree they feel comfortable to ask their line manager to change their working arrangements to work at least one day of the week remotely, by gender**



**Source: CMI/Work Foundation survey of 1,000 workers**

## Parents and workers with caring responsibilities

Evidence shows that navigating work and caring responsibilities can affect the likelihood of both men and women progressing in their careers, and their satisfaction with their employer.<sup>15</sup> This particularly affects women, as women are eight times more likely to take the primary role in caring for children and are one and a half times more likely to take the lead in caring for adults in UK working households.<sup>16</sup> There also exists a significant employment gap between working mothers and fathers. Prior to the pandemic, 3 in 4 mothers with dependent children (75%) were in work, compared with 93% of fathers with dependent children.<sup>17</sup>

Over the past two years, women were under increased pressure to shoulder caring responsibilities at home. Although the burden of such responsibilities may have been exacerbated during the pandemic due to the restricted access to support networks and school and childcare closures, there is a wider concern that remote working could reverse some of the hard-won progress towards gender equality.

For many parents and carers, the experience of remote working has been positive. Many appreciated the lack of a commute and valued the additional time that could be spent with family.<sup>18</sup> Managers are conscious of this, with the largest proportion of managers identifying positive impacts for parents (49%) and carers (43%). Detailed responses from managers and employees further underlined the value of being able to flexibly fit work around caring responsibilities.

However, this balancing of work and caring responsibilities can lead to an interrupted working day and heightened pressure and stress, which can affect mental wellbeing over the longer term.<sup>19</sup> Managers reported they were concerned that parents and carers may end up working longer hours to make up for interrupted time, and that their training and professional development opportunities could be hampered by working from home. Parents and carers face a greater risk that the boundaries between their work and home lives become blurred. It is therefore key that employers carefully consider when and how they communicate with employees. This can be done through the introduction of an organisational “right to disconnect” policy, which would require employers to set out expectations and best practice for communication within the organisation.

Additionally, being overwhelmed while working at home makes it more difficult for managers and colleagues to provide support, which may also affect workplace relationships. This is reflected in remote working carers indicating it is harder to connect with colleagues who work remotely, as they are less visible (63% compared with 55% of non-carers). This highlights the need for inclusive communications strategies within organisations that set expectations around opportunities to share information such as hybrid meeting guidance to ensure those who cannot join a meeting in person to ensure those who cannot join a meeting in person do not miss out.

## Managers have a key role to play in supporting and role-modelling remote working

Regardless of whether a policy is in place, managers in an organisation often have a lot of discretion over who, when and how their team members work.

While managerial discretion can be key to an organisation being able to adapt to changing demands and circumstances, there are inherent risks to this approach.<sup>20</sup> One interviewee made the case that ‘when you have a system with a large amount of discretion built into it, there is increased risks of discrimination and disadvantage experienced by people from protected groups.’

More than half of managers say that they personally decide on the following working practices within their teams:

- which employees can work remotely (55%),
- when staff should be present at the office (63%),
- working time during the day (53%) and
- expectations for staff responsiveness (53%).

However, one in five (20%) employees whose line manager decides their working arrangements are not happy with these arrangements. It is particularly concerning that a higher degree of line management discretion appears to create barriers for those wanting to request access to remote working. Only 59% of workers whose line manager has formal decision-making powers over remote working requests are comfortable asking their manager to work remotely.

Where manager discretion frequently overrules employee autonomy and preferences, there are signs this creates discontent with potentially long-term consequences for worker motivation and retention.<sup>21</sup> However, where managers are supportive of remote working and role model this behaviour, this makes workers significantly more comfortable in asking to work from home. More than half of workers (54%) indicated that their line managers’ support was the main reason they were comfortable in asking for remote working.

## Making flexible working inclusive

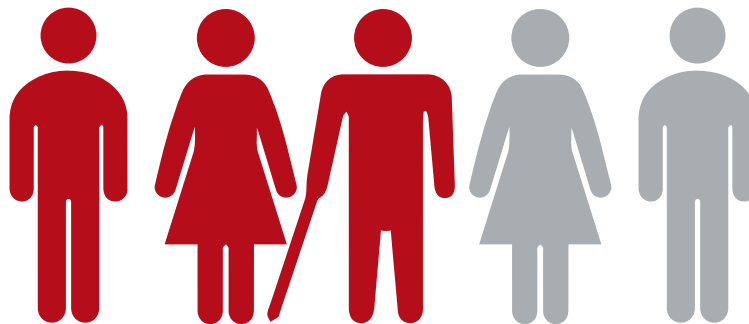
It is key that as we emerge from the worst of the pandemic, the policy focus rests on supporting the full spectrum of flexible work beyond hybrid or remote working, including job-sharing, flexitime and compressed hours.

The recent announcement from the Government, that every employee will be given the right to request flexible working from their first day in the job is a positive step in the right direction. Lowering barriers for people to request remote working is essential particularly for disabled workers, for whom access to this form of flexible work can be central to their ability to manage their condition and remain in work.

There are encouraging signs that organisations too are rethinking flexibility as a result of the shift to remote work through the pandemic, with nearly 3 in 5 managers (57%) saying their organisation is widening access to other forms of flexible work.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has meant that employers face a range of challenges including reductions in cash flow and increased employee absences.<sup>22</sup> One interviewee highlighted the risk that this could limit the ambition of employers to prioritise inclusive flexible work: 'employers are reeling at the moment [...] I have a real concern about them defaulting to what they knew before, because that's the certainty that they had.'

To retain progress made during the pandemic, it is important that employers refer to guidance and adopt good practice around flexible and hybrid work. A dedicated short employer guide has been developed alongside this briefing to highlight good practice and outline the simple steps employers can take to make hybrid and flexible work inclusive.



***Nearly 3 in 5 managers say that their organisation is widening access to other forms of flexible work***

## Recommendations for policymakers

Evidence from this research has informed the following recommendations for Government to support an inclusive transition to hybrid work:

- **Develop an employer campaign and accreditation programme to promote inclusive flexible working practices.**  
This should include strategies for consultation and engaging with staff around how time is spent when on-site, training for managers in managing a hybrid workforce, and the introduction of measures such as an organisational 'right to disconnect' policy. Employer case studies should be used to promote innovative practices in ensuring organisational changes are inclusive for different worker groups.
- **Require that large employers share information on their approach to flexible work and their progress in encouraging take-up across their organisation.**  
Employers with more than 250 staff should be required to publish their flexible and hybrid working policies externally, monitor take-up of flexible working practices within their organisation across different worker groups, and regularly publish this data along with action plans to drive improvement.
- **Support the development of management capability in providing inclusive hybrid work.** For example, modules on equality, diversity and inclusion could be added to the Help to Grow: Management programme, to ensure managers and leaders are trained on how to build and foster inclusive working environments.
- **Make flexible working the default position for all employees, with flexible options included in all job adverts,** unless employers have a sound business reason for an exemption. The range of reasons employers may give to refuse making a job more flexible should be narrowed; and workers already in post should be adequately supported to appeal decisions without fearing reprisal.
- **Prioritise inclusive employers within funding and procurement exercises,** by requiring that organisations with more than 50 employees and a turnover over £10m produce an up to date hybrid and flexible working strategy and action plan which prioritises inclusion as part of the application for any public procurement or Government grants.

## About Us

### About The Work Foundation

The Work Foundation is the leading think tank for improving work in the UK. We have been an authoritative, independent source of ideas and analysis on the labour market and the wider economy for over a hundred years.

As the pace of economic change continues to disrupt the ways we work and do business, our mission is to support everyone in the UK to access rewarding and high-quality work and enable businesses to realise the potential of their teams.

To do this, we engage directly with practitioners, businesses and workers, producing rigorous applied research that allows us to develop practical solutions and policy recommendations to tackle the challenges facing the world of work.

We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.

### About The Chartered Management Institute (CMI)

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) works with business and education to inspire people to unleash their potential and become skilled, confident and successful managers and leaders.

With a wealth of practical qualifications, events and networking opportunities on offer throughout the UK and Asia-Pacific, CMI helps people boost their career prospects and connect them with other ambitious professionals in any industry and sector. In fact, CMI has more than 100,000 people training to be better managers right now.

Backed by a unique Royal Charter, CMI is the only organisation allowed to award Chartered Manager status – the ultimate management accolade, and Chartered Management Consultant status which sets and maintains the highest standards for the management consulting profession.

CMI's thought leadership, research and online resources provide practical insight on critical issues for our **160,000+** membership community and anyone looking to improve their skills, nurture high performing teams and help pave the way for the next generation of managers and leaders.

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- <sup>3</sup> Responses were filtered by those who were currently employed, self-employed or both. Notably, estimates include workers who worked 0 hours in the week prior to the survey, in order to reflect the fact that many individuals were furloughed because they were in roles that could not be carried out remotely. As a result, this analysis provides lower estimates than Felstead and Reuschke (2020), but are closely aligned with estimates from the Office for National Statistics.
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