Flexible working for all?

The impact of the right to request regulations in Scotland

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Executive summary

Enabling flexible working is a critical component in closing Scotland's gender pay gap. Whilst the employer and employee benefits of flexible working are well-established, past research has identified a number of barriers to its use. In the light of the extension of the right to request flexible working to all employees on 30 June 2014, which aimed to increase the quality and availability of flexible jobs in the UK, this study focuses on the use of formal flexible working in Scotland during the period 2010 to 2015, considering what type of employee works flexibly and how this has changed over time. The findings reveal that:

- On the whole, the use of formal flexible working in Scotland has changed very little over the period of the study and there is **no early evidence of an increase in its use since the extension of the right to request** on 30 June 2014. This highlights the limitations of the current legislation that employees must be employed for six months before they qualify for the right to request flexible working but also suggests the existence of ongoing cultural resistance from employers.

- There was some change in the use of the individual forms of flexible working over the period of the study. There were **increases in the use of home working and flexi-time** which are more equally used by men and women. However there were also **decreases in the use of term-time working and job sharing** which is a cause for concern given that these are much more likely to be used by women (e.g. 93% of the Scottish employees who indicated that they work term-time are women).

- **Part-time work continues to be much more likely to be used by female parents than male parents,** with little sign of change. This suggests the persistence of gender norms and stereotypes about men's and women's roles in mixed sex households, and at work, which creates barriers to mothers increasing their hours and to fathers reducing their hours. **Women are also more likely to work part-time than men regardless of parenting responsibilities** which may be because women continue to work part-time after their children reach adulthood despite no longer "needing" it. This may

create a barrier to other women with caring responsibilities who need to work part-time, particularly in female-dominated occupations where there is already a high level of part-time working.

- There is a **more equal gender split in employees using flexi-time which is more likely to be used by managers and those in large organisations. However, it is not more likely to be used by women or those with caring responsibilities and is not widely used across occupational groups.** Previous research has found that the nature of work may not always be suited to flexible working (for example where high levels of supervision are required) however it is argued that organisation-wide cultural resistance and negative line manager attitudes towards flexible working in general continue to prevent its more widespread use.

Close the Gap recommends that organisations review the types of flexible working available to, and used by, their employees and analyse this information by gender to identify barriers to update. Line managers should be enabled to challenge the status quo in their team, and capacity should be built in line managers to generated creative solutions to operational challenges. Organisations should also consider the promotion of flexible working by default in both internal and external job advertisements, and share profiles of employees who work flexibly in order to encourage uptake among other employees.

1. Introduction

One cause of Scotland's gender pay gap is a lack of quality part-time and flexible working which results in women's under-representation at management level and in senior grades, and their concentration in lower grades (Close the Gap, 2018). The statutory right to request to work flexibly was extended to cover all employees on 30 June 2014, rather than only those with children under the age of 17 (or 18 for disabled children). It was hoped that this extension will help lead to a shift away from a traditional working hours culture to one where working flexibly is the norm, improving the availability of better quality, better paid flexible jobs for all and helping close the gender pay gap (Pyper, 2015).

Flexible working benefits both the employer and employee; organisations have access to a wider pool of talent and employees are better able to balance work and home commitments. It has also been linked to improved employee engagement levels and job satisfaction (CIPD, 2012) which in turn can improve retention and reduce recruitment and training costs.

Yet a right to request flexible working does not equate to a right to work flexibly. Employees with less than six months of full-time employment do not have the statutory right to request to work flexibly and those that request it have no guarantee of it being approved. The regulations say that employers must consider applications but are not obliged to grant all requests if one of eight business reasons can be proven. The business reasons set out in the regulations are wide-ranging and include the burden of additional costs, a detrimental impact on quality, an inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff or a detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand (ACAS, 2014). In practice, it is therefore relatively easy for an employer to refuse a request should they not be persuaded of the business benefits of flexible working. This leaves limited options available to an employee who has their request refused. It has been found that approximately 20% of applications are refused and that men may be more likely than women to have requests declined (Tipping and Perry, 2012). Barriers such as negative line manager attitudes and a cultural presumption against flexible working may also exist to dissuade employees from submitting an application in the first place. Furthermore, those employees who have applications approved often experience

a stigma associated with working flexibly which has been found to lead to limited career progression (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008; Crompton and Lyonette, 2011).

In light of the extension of the statutory right to request to work flexibly, this report presents the current picture of flexible working in Scotland and examines what type of employee works flexibly, how this has changed over time and whether there is any early indication of a move towards flexible working for all.

What is flexible working?

Flexible working may involve a reduction in contractual hours such as job sharing, a change in the way full-time working hours are organised such as flexible start and finish times or compressed hours, or spatial flexibility in terms of where the work is carried out such as home or remote working. Some of these are established practices such as working part-time but others have become more prevalent due to technological advances such as regular homeworking.

Flexible working may be offered to all or certain groups of employees without the need for a formal written request. This is often the case with flexible start and finish times (commonly known as flexi-time) where, providing employees work during certain core business hours (often 10am to 4pm) and work the correct number of contracted hours, they are able to choose their own start and finish times. It can also take on a more informal form where an employee needs to alter their working time or place on an ad hoc basis to accommodate medical appointments or on a short-term basis to accommodate family obligations. In this case no formal alteration to the employment contract may be necessary however access to such informal flexibility will often depend on having a supportive line manager or a degree of job autonomy; this is not the case in many lower paid roles which also tend to be female-dominated.

2. The data

The research presented in this paper applies quantitative techniques using data from the Understanding Society survey (University of Essex, 2016) which is a nationally-representative study of the UK population containing information on various aspects of the respondents' lives, including working conditions. The survey is a rolling panel study meaning that the same households participate in the survey each year.

There are currently seven waves of the survey and data on flexible working has so far been collected at three different time points (waves 2, 4 and 6) which fall within the period from January 2010 to December 2015. Both permanent and non-permanent employees are asked about the flexible working options at their main workplace and the survey questions distinguish between formal and informal flexible working. Formal flexible working involves an employee having successfully applied under the right to request legislation or an organisation offering all-employee flexi-time. Informal flexible working is separate from any formal arrangements and involves an employee's ability to vary their working hours on an ad hoc basis. Employees are asked about the availability of formal and informal flexible working at their workplace and about their use of formal flexible working including part-time, term-time, job share, flexi-time, home working, compressed hours, annualised hours and other forms. The full wording of the survey questions is included in the appendix.

A sample size of 2,403 was available for the wave 2 analysis which included all employees in the Scottish sample other than proxy respondents who were not asked the flexible working questions. Due to panel attrition there were 1,965 respondents included in the analysis for wave 4 and 1,769 for wave 6. Weights were used to correct for unequal selection probabilities, differential nonresponse, and potential sampling error.

3. Method

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the overall picture of the availability and use of flexible working in Scotland together with the gender differences. Logistic regression models were then used to predict the likelihood of an employee working flexibly or not flexibly given certain information such as their gender, caring responsibilities and the type of organisation in which they work. Further information about the models can be found in the appendix on page 22.

Due to the relatively small numbers of Scottish employees using certain types of flexible working this research was limited to analysing the most widely used types of flexible working only. In addition, the survey did not collect information on any flexible working applications made but refused therefore it was not possible to include any analysis in this respect. The period covered by the study since the extension of the right to request is relatively short; future waves of the survey will provide opportunities for further analysis.

4. Findings

The availability of flexible working

In terms of formal flexible working, in wave 6 (which covered the two years ending in December 2015 and therefore spanned the 30 June 2014 changes) 70% of employees answered that one or more type of formal flexible working was available at their workplace and a higher percentage of women compared to men indicated this. This figure is low given that most organisations have part-time workers however it is likely to reflect the wording of the survey question ("If you personally needed any, which of the following arrangements would be available to you?") which emphasised whether flexible working was personally available to the respondent rather than whether it was offered by the organisation.

Regarding the availability of informal flexible working, in wave 6 55% of Scottish employees felt they had some flexibility to vary their working hours on an informal basis for example by re-arranging start or finish times if needed; there was a relatively equal gender split in this regard.

The use of flexible working

In Scotland part-time work was the most commonly used form of formal flexible working followed by flexi-time. This is consistent with the findings of other UK studies (Tipping and Perry, 2012; Wanrooy et al., 2013; ONS, 2017).

The use of term-time only working and job shares appears to have declined while the use of flexi-time, home working and compressed hours has slightly increased. However, overall there appears to be very little change in uptake of formal flexible working in Scotland in the period January 2010 and December 2015; in wave 2 around 43% of all employees worked flexibly, there was an increase during wave 4 and then a decrease back to just below 43% in wave 6 (Table 1).

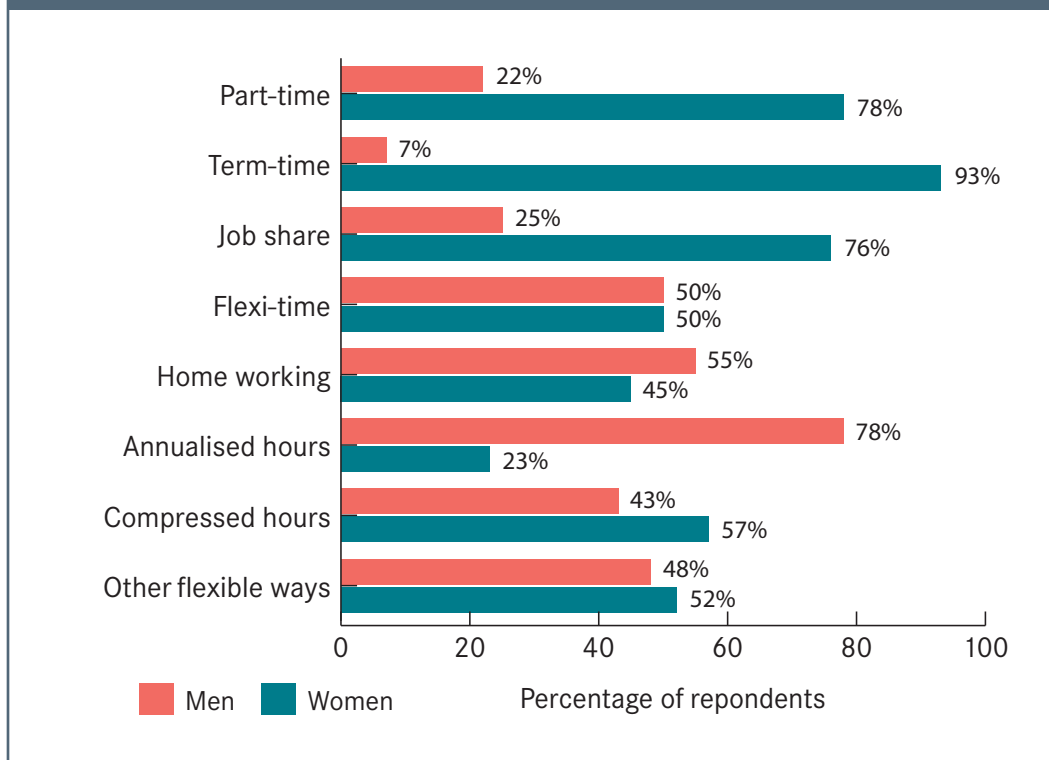| Table 1: Proportion of employees in Scotland using formal flexible working at their workplace	2011	2013	2015
Uses one or more type of flexible working	43.2%	46.0%	42.8%
Part-time	23.9%	26.7%	23.8%
Term-time	3.8%	4.1%	2.7%
Job share	1.7%	1.8%	1.1%
Flexi-time	12.0%	13.6%	12.3%
Homeworking	4.0%	4.6%	4.9%
Annualised hours	0.8%	1.3%	0.8%
Compressed hours	2.0%	2.5%	2.6%
Other forms of flexible working	5.5%	4.5%	4.0%

The above proportions include employees who work flexibly in more than one way e.g. those working part-time in combination with flexi-time are included in both individual flexible working categories but only once in the "one or more" category. The years reflect the end of the period during which the survey data was collected, e.g. 2011 covers survey data collected in the period January 2010 to December 2011 (wave 2). Data are weighted. Source: Understanding Society (University of Essex, 2016).

The percentage uptake of flexible working reported above differs from other studies. This is likely to be due to the wide definition of part-time work which is not always interpreted as flexible working when it is instigated by the employer rather than employee and may explain the lower incidence of part-time work reported in this study compared to others (Scottish Government, 2014). Differences may also be explained by the definitions of flexible working used in other studies. For example, shift work is included in the Labour Force Survey statistics (ONS, 2017) while career sabbaticals and mobile working are included in others (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2016).

Gender differences

Of the 43% of employees who used one or more forms of flexible working in wave 6, almost two thirds were women and almost half of these employees worked part-time. The gender split differed depending on the type of flexible working used. Part-time, term time and job share, those flexible working options associated with reduced hours, were more widely used by women. For example, of the 23.8% of employees working part-time in wave 6, 78% were women, which aligns with other labour market data. There was a more even gender split in terms of flexi-time, home working and compressed hours as shown in Fig.1 below.

Figure 1: Formal flexible working in Scotland (uptake by gender in wave 6)

	Men	Women
Part-time	22%	78%
Term-time	7%	93%
Job share	25%	76%
Flexi-time	50%	50%
Home working	55%	45%
Annualised hours	78%	23%
Compressed hours	43%	57%
Other flexible ways	48%	52%

Source: Understanding Society (University of Essex, 2016)

The main results of the logistic regression models are as follows:

Who works flexibly in Scotland?

As a whole, formal flexible working in Scotland appears more likely to be used by female parents of dependent children, those working in the largest firms and those working in the public sector. Women are also more likely than men to work flexibly regardless of parenting responsibilities. During the period 2010 to 2015 there appears to have been little change in this picture with the exception of the use of flexible working in the public sector; the gap between the public and the private sector in the use of flexible working appears to be narrowing.

Looking at formal flexible working as a whole presents only a very general picture of flexible working in Scotland and does not reveal the differences between the individual forms. Given the gender differences presented above, to further understand these results it is necessary to look at the different forms of flexible working on an individual basis. The relatively small uptake in Scotland of a number of the flexible working options meant that the statistical modelling opportunities were restricted however it was possible to build models for the two most popular forms of flexible working in Scotland: part-time and flexi-time.

Part-time working, defined as 30 hours a week or less, continues to be associated with women with dependent children. Female parents are up to six times more likely than male parents to work part-time and this relationship appears to have strengthened over the period 2010 to 2015. Female employees are up to three times more likely than men to work part-time, even after taking into account caring responsibilities although this effect has decreased over the period of the study.

On the other hand, flexi-time is not associated with caring responsibilities, dependent children or otherwise. It was found to be more likely to be used in the largest organisations compared to the smallest, by those working in a management role and those working in the public sector. While it was more likely for male employees and employees educated to degree level this was not a statistically significant difference. In terms of changes over the period of the study, the differences in the use of flexi-time between the private sector and the public sector appears to be decreasing however managers have become more likely to work flexi-time.

These results suggest differences between employees who use part-time work which is flexible working involving reduced hours compared to flexi-time which often involves full-time hours. Part-time work is more likely to be used by women whereas flexi-time is more equally used by men and women. Flexi-time appears to be related to the type of job an employee has and the organisation in which they work rather than their personal situation. This is likely to reflect in part that flexi-time is often implemented on an organisation-wide basis.

An analysis of the occupations in which part-time and flexi-time work are most used provides further insight. Tables 2 and 3 display this information for some of the largest occupational groups in Scotland. As expected, many of the more female-dominated occupations have relatively high proportions of employees reporting that they work part-time. However, some of these same occupations have relatively low proportions of employees reporting that they work flexi-time. For example, 26.6% of employees in caring personal service occupations work part-time whereas only 3.7% of them work flexi-time. On the other hand, 30.5% of the science and technology professional occupational group works flexi-time whereas only 4.3% work part-time. Some occupations appear flexible in both ways, for example, administrative occupations have relatively high proportions of employees using both part-time (31.5%) and flexi-time (28.0%).

Table 2: Rates of part-time work by occupational group			
Highest rates	**%**	**Lowest rates**	**%**
Sales*	66.6	Corporate Managers	7.7
Secretarial and related*	42.9	Science and technology professionals	4.3
Health and social welfare associate professionals*	33.3	Business and public service professionals	9.5
Administrative occupations	31.5	Protective service occupations	7.7
Customer services	29.5		
Caring personal service*	26.6		

*Occupations with over 70% female employees.
Source: Understanding Society (University of Essex 2016). Occupational groups are based on the Standard Occupational Classification codes 2000 and have been truncated into the sub-major SOC groups.

Table 3: Rates of flexi-time work by occupational group			
Highest rates	**%**	**Lowest rates**	**%**
Business and public service professionals	36.7	Elementary administrative and service	5.6
Science and technology professionals	30.5	Caring personal service occupations*	3.7
Administrative occupations	28.0	Leisure and other personal service occupations*	3.8
Corporate Managers	16.2	Customer services	4.6
		Customer services	1.8

*Occupations with over 70% female employees.
Source: Understanding Society (University of Essex 2016). Occupational groups are based on the Standard Occupational Classification codes 2000 and have been truncated into the sub-major SOC groups.

5. Discussion

On the whole, the use of formal flexible working in Scotland appears to have changed very little over the period of the study (2010 to 2015) and there is no early evidence of an increase since the extension of the right to request legislation in June 2014. This in part may be explained by employee perceptions of the availability of flexible working; only 70% of employees indicated that they had formal flexible working available at their workplace, even after June 2014. Indeed, previous research has found a gap between the types of flexible working employees believe employers offer and what employers actually provide. This may indicate a potential lack of communication linked to inconsistent implementation of flexible working policies and line manager discretion on flexible working decisions. It may also indicate the existence of both employer and employee perceptions that flexible working is only available to certain types of employees such as those with caring responsibilities (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; CIPD, 2012).

Secondly, this finding highlights the limitation of the current right to request regulations that an employee wishing to apply to work flexibly must have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks before they are able to invoke their statutory right. This affects those trying to move jobs but also those trying to access the labour market after a period of inactivity and may particularly disadvantage women returners (Rubery, Keizer and Grimshaw, 2016). Indeed, recent research (Timewise, 2017) has found that amongst higher earning jobs in Scotland (defined as those paying an annual salary of £20,000 or more), only 11.9% are advertised with flexible working options at the outset. Finally, the lack of an overall increase suggests the persistence of other barriers to flexible working that are often cited such as negative line manager attitudes and operational issues (CIPD, 2012) together with a general organisation-wide cultural resistance.

It is noted however that the gap between the use of flexible working in the private and public sectors appears to be narrowing with small increases in the use of flexible working in the private sector combined with small decreases in its use in the public sector. The reduction in public sector jobs, as a result of public spending cuts, may be a factor but it may also indicate a private sector response to the extension of the right to request flexible working; indeed a small increase is noted in the use of flexi-time in private sector organisations. Future patterns in this area

should be examined. There have also been small increases and decreases within the individual forms of flexible working. For example, the small increase in the uptake of flexi-time, home working and compressed hours may reflect a move to a more general culture of flexibility which has in part been enabled by technological advances. Yet the small decline in the use of term-time only working and job shares is concerning, particularly as these types of reduced hours flexibility are most used by women.

Reduced hours flexible working such as part-time continues to be much more likely to be used by female parents than male parents, with little sign of change. Indeed, while there is increasing evidence of dual earner families and female breadwinners, recent UK research (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, 2014; Connolly et al., 2016) suggests that the one and a half breadwinner model (i.e. male full-time, female part-time) dominates in mixed sex households. This suggests that normative beliefs about gender in the family and in the workplace persist which, together with the policy context, are barriers to mothers increasing their hours and to fathers reducing their hours.

The finding that women are more likely to work part-time than men regardless of caring responsibilities is interesting. Some women may continue to work part-time after their children reach adulthood despite no longer being perceived to "need" it or indeed they may anticipate needing it again due to future caring responsibilities for elderly relatives or grandchildren. Such a situation may create a barrier to other women and men, who wish to work part-time, in order to balance caring responsibilities but may have their requests to work part-time refused by organisations who struggle to manage large number of employees who work part-time. It is also important to note that once a flexible working application is approved any contractual change is permanent, potentially limiting future choices; a better solution may be to enable employees to reduce their hours for a fixed period of time.

Job sharing may seem a viable alternative to part-time but this is not widely used and job shares have their own particular challenges, for example in terms of the increased need for effective communication and complexities regarding the career progression of the job share partners (Watton and Stables, 2016). Term-time working also offers an alternative to part-time working however its use has declined over the period of the study and examination of the figures suggest its use is concentrated in areas such as teaching, and caring and personal service occupations. There is limited academic research which focuses on job sharing and term-time only work therefore this is an area which warrants further attention.

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The more equal gender split and increase in those employees using full-time flexible working options such as flexi-time and home working hints at a move away from the norm of the ideal worker (Appelbaum et al., 2002) in the sense that when and where the work is done may be less of a concern. However, this type of flexibility is not widely available across occupational groups and is more likely to be used by employees with managerial roles, who are more likely to be men. Indeed, one obstacle to flexible working has been found to be the nature of the work and those jobs requiring a physical presence in the workplace or those requiring high levels of supervision may not be appropriate for home or flexi-time working (Blake Beard et al., 2010; Michielsens, Bingham and Clarke, 2013). Yet while operational reasons may be cited as barriers to flexibility others argue that male-dominated working environments may contribute to the scepticism around flexible working with few line managers challenging the status quo (Cooke, 2012). Previous research has found that the availability of flexi-time is an important element in enabling female parents to work more hours (Alakeson, 2012; Chung and van der Horst, 2018) yet flexi-time was not found to be associated with caring responsibilities; while parents used it, they were no more likely than non-parents to do so. This, together with the lack of widespread use of flexi-time across occupations, is a cause for concern; it raises questions about the current focus on encouraging a flexible working culture for all employees, given the limited flexible working options that are currently available to those with caring responsibilities, mostly women, who are those most in need of flexibility.

Finally, while this research predominantly focuses on formal flexible working, the importance of informal flexibility must not be forgotten. Differences in organisational size have been found in the use of formal flexible working and previous Scottish research suggests that smaller organisations may be more likely to rely on informal flexibility such as time off in lieu and staggered working hours (Maxwell et al., 2007). The above findings show that over half of employees feel that they have access to informal flexibility however 20% of employees answered that neither formal nor informal flexible working was available at their workplace; there remains much progress to be made.

6. Recommendations

The above findings clearly show the existence of a number of barriers to the increase in use of flexible working in Scotland. There are a range of actions that employers can take to improve flexible working opportunities, which has demonstrable business benefits. Close the Gap recommends that employers consider the following actions:

1. Gather gender-disaggregated data on flexible working uptake, including requests, refusals and reasons for refusals, by department or team, where possible, and analyse this information to identify gendered patterns to flexible working across the organisation.

2. Map the distribution of workers who work part-time and/or flexibly across the organisation to identify whether a lack of flexibility and quality part-time work is preventing women from progressing, or from doing stereotypically male jobs.

3. Deliver training to all line managers with responsibility for decision-making on flexible working, including implementing the policy, managing flexible working requests and the business case for flexible working.

4. Build capacity in line managers to generate creative solutions to operational barriers to flexible working, and enable them to challenge the status quo in their teams.

5. Advertise all jobs as being considered for part-time and/or flexible working, unless there is a strong business case not to.

6. Consider using the Family Friendly Working Scotland strapline "Happy to talk flexible working" when advertising jobs.

7. Gauge current awareness and perceptions of the organisation's flexible working practice. This may be done through staff engagement mechanisms such as a staff survey, focus groups or through trade union engagement.

8. Where awareness is low, share profiles of employees on different working patterns at different levels, for example senior employees who work part-time and employees in lower grades who do homeworking or work flexi-time.

9. SME employers should use Close the Gap's Think Business, Think Equality online self-assessment tool to see how their flexible working practice measures up, and obtain a tailored action plan.

10. Large employers should use Close the Gap's Close Your Pay Gap online tool to identify how changes to their flexible working practice can reduce their gender pay gap.

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Appendix

Explanatory notes to the models

Employees only were asked the flexible working questions. The definition of employee includes those on permanent contracts but also non-permanent work classed as seasonal work, fixed term contracts, agency temping, casual type of work and other forms of non-permanent work.

The survey questions related to the availability and use of flexible working in the employee's main job and were worded as follows:

1. I would like to ask about working arrangements at the place where you work. If you personally needed any, which of the arrangements listed on the card are available at your workplace? Do you currently work in any of the following ways, if so which ones? The options given were part-time (defined 30 hours a week or less), term-time, job share, flexi-time, home working, compressed hours, annualised hours and other.

2. Do you currently work in any of the following ways, if so which ones?

3. Aside from any formal arrangements for flexible working you have, are you able to vary your working hours on an informal basis, for example by re-arranging your start or finish times if you need to?

Close the Gap resources for employers

Think Business, Think Equality online tool for SME employers

Think Business, Think Equality is an online self-assessment tool specifically designed for SME employers. The tool features six tests which align with the causes of the pay gap, including flexible working. After answering a series of short questions, the user receives a score and a bespoke action plan, based on their answers, which identifies the steps that their business can take to improve their flexible working and other equalities practice. Guidance on flexible working can also be downloaded. Think Business, Think Equality is available at: **www.thinkbusinessthinkequality.org.uk**

Close Your Pay Gap online tool for larger employers

The Close Your Pay Gap tool is an online resource to support large employers who are required to report their gender pay gap information. The tool uses an organisation's gender pay gap information, along with a series of questions, to identify priority areas for their business and includes a tailored action plan. The tool also includes a set of calculators to support employers to calculate their gender pay gap and bonus gap information. It provides advice and guidance, and a bespoke action plan to support employers to enhance their flexible working and other equalities practice. Close Your Pay Gap is available at: **www.closeyourpaygap.org.uk**

Acknowledgements

Work and Equalities Institute

The agenda of the Work and Equalities Institute (WEI) is to identify and promote the conditions for more inclusive and fair work and employment arrangements.

The Institute aims to develop world-leading interdisciplinary research, focused around four key themes: business transformation and work futures, fair treatment at work, inequalities and the life course, and regulation and representation.

Details of all projects and activities are available on the WEI's website:

www.wei.manchester.ac.uk

Work and Equalities Institute
University of Manchester
Alliance Manchester Business School
Booth St West
Manchester
M15 6PB

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Close the Gap works in Scotland on women's labour market participation. We work with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's inequality at work.

Close the Gap
166 Buchanan Street
Glasgow
G1 2LW
0141 572 4730

info@closethegap.org.uk
www.closethegap.org.uk

Twitter: @closethepaygap
Facebook: /closethepaygap

Published April 2019