

Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

19 May 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Flexible working beyond COVID-19

In 2019, just 5% of the UK workforce said they worked mainly from home.¹ 45% of parents that took part in Working Families' 2020 *Modern Families Index* did not work flexibly. More than three quarters (77%) indicated they want to. Almost a third (32%) reported that flexible working was 'not available' where they work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that flexibility can be unlocked in many, many more jobs than previously thought. The Office for National Statistics 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 are working from home.²

But the opportunity to work from home has been unevenly distributed, with higher paid workers being the most likely to benefit³. 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. There is a similar split 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.⁴

Working Families' most recent research⁵ indicates parents and carers do not want their employer to revert to business as usual after lockdown is lifted. To help ensure more flexible working remains in place after this pandemic has run its course, and to extend more genuinely flexible working opportunities to all parents and carers, the UK government needs to act.

¹ ONS, 'Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK labour market: 2019', 24 March 2020:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/article/coronavirusandhomeworkingintheuklabourmarket/2019>

² ONS, 'Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain', 12 June 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.

³ This was the case prior to the pandemic. Working Families' 2020 *Modern Families Index* showed flexibility is linked to seniority: https://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Modern_Families_Index_2020_Summary-Report_FINAL.pdf

⁴ 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.

⁵ <https://workingfamilies.org.uk/publications/covid-19-and-flexible-working>

We have come together to call 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.⁶ 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-lockdown⁷ 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 workers⁸.

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.

We would welcome an update on the government's next steps on flexible working since its consultation in the autumn and the Queen's Speech in December, and the opportunity to discuss taking forward the issues raised here. Contact julia.waltham@workingfamilies.org.uk to arrange a meeting.

Best wishes

Helen Walker, Chief Executive
Carers UK

Adrienne Burgess, Joint CEO and Head of Research
Fatherhood Institute

Dave Devenney, Director
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Gemma Rosenblatt, Head of Policy and Campaigns
The Fawcett Society

Rehana Azam, National Secretary
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Ros Brag, Director
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Angela McConville, Chief Executive
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Cassie Raine, Co-founder and Director
Parents and Carers in Performing Arts

Jim Minton, CEO
Toynbee Hall

Christina McAnea, Assistant General Secretary
Unison

⁶ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/women-bear-brunt-of-coronavirus-economic-shutdown-in-uk-and-us>

⁷ Coronavirus and how people spent their time under lockdown: 28 March to 26 April 2020, Office for National Statistics, 2020

⁸ 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>

Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary
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Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director
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Jane van Zyl, Chief Executive
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Joe Levenson, Director of Communications and
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CC. Paul Scully MP, Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets

Liz Truss, Minister for Women & Equalities

Baroness Berridge, Minister for Women