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Flexible working in Scottish social work

March 2025

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March 2025

Introduction

This report examines the current state of flexible working for social workers across the Scottish public sector. The data was collected through publicly available sources such as the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) workforce data, Social Work Scotland's (SWS) 2023 Chief Social Work Officer Survey and freedom of information requests to all Scottish public sector social work employers. This report uses data collected by the Social Workers Union (SWU) in [2022](#), [2023](#), and [2024](#) on employers offering part-time and flexible social work roles. We also held several 1-2-1 conversations with social workers in roles of varying seniority.

There are over 10,000 registered social workers ([Registration data from SSSC](#)) in Scotland, and around 6,000 ([SSSC interactive tool](#)) of those are employed by local authorities. The remaining workforce is primarily in the independent and third sectors.

Flexible working is defined by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) as “giving flexibility over where, when and the hours people work”. This can include but is not limited to:

- Part-time working
- Job-sharing
- Flexitime
- Compressed hours
- Annualised hours
- Term-time working
- Working from home
- Hybrid working

This report considers the benefits and also recognises some of the challenges to flexible working for employers and workers.

Social work is an immensely rewarding profession, but we know it can bring a high level of stress if the supports for social workers are not there.

Flexible working arrangements can benefit our communities, our workers and could be a key element in improving both recruitment and retention for social work.

1. Why the focus on flexible working?

1.1 Overview

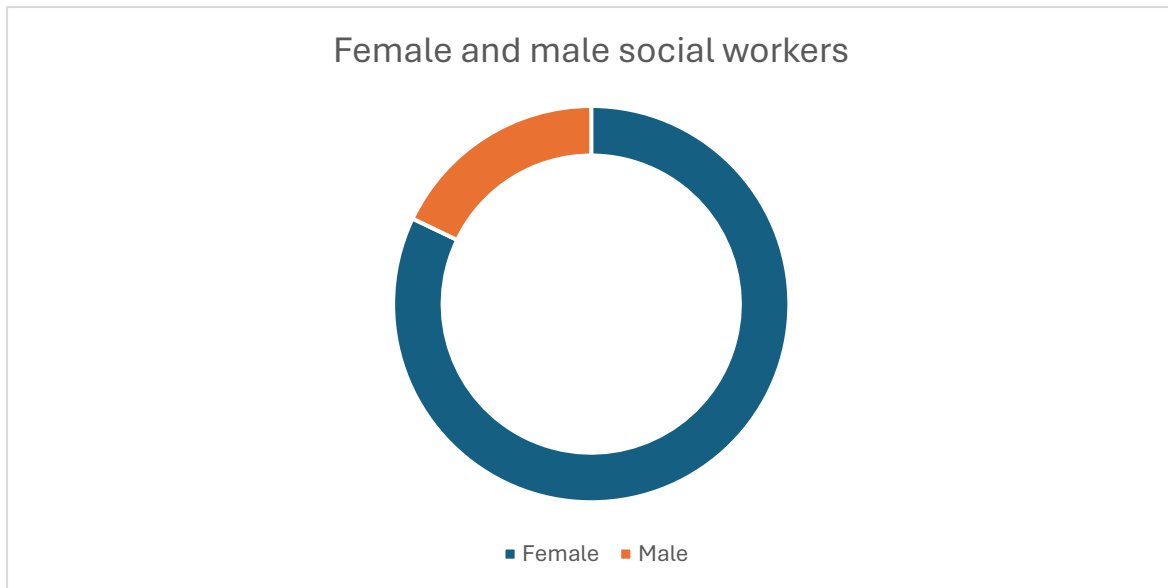
Employment law that came into force in 2024 grants workers the right to request flexible working from day one of their employment. The UK Government has also published a new Employment Rights Bill to increase workers' rights in many ways, including strengthening the right to request flexible working.

There is an increasing demand for flexible working from employees. Research by organisations such as the CIPD ([CIPD Flexible working guidance for people professionals](#)) shows that flexible working can help a sector maintain a happier, healthier workforce. Flexible working opportunities can stop people from leaving a job or sector entirely. It can assist with reducing the gender pay gap by enabling women, who still tend to be the main carers in our families and communities, to remain in and re-enter the workforce. It can support people with caring responsibilities to thrive and excel in the workplace. Therefore, flexible working arrangements should be seen as an important employment tool to support employee wellbeing and aid staff retention and recruitment.

Wellbeing and retention are significant issues for the social work workforce. In recent times, social workers have been operating in an environment where according to the *Setting the Bar* report ([Setting the Bar report](#)) and SSSC data ([SSSC Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey](#)):

- 25% of social workers who graduate leave the profession within 6 years
- 19% of the profession is aged over 55
- 82% of the workforce is female
- There is a 9.3% total vacancy rate across the public sector profession, with most authorities reporting over this average rate

1.2 Flexibility and gender



Flexible working is particularly important to workers with caring responsibilities. 59% of unpaid carers are women according to the 2021 census ([Recognising Female Unpaid Carers](#)).

- Women are more likely to become carers and to provide more hours of unpaid care than men.
- More women than men provide high-intensity care at ages when they would expect to be in paid work ([New report in partnership with Carers UK for Carers Rights Day 2022](#)) and
- Women are twice as likely to give up paid work to care.

Traditional working patterns are usually not compatible with caring responsibilities. Flexible working is a practical means to improve the quality of jobs available to social workers.

The gender gap becomes even more stark when looking at senior roles such as the Chief Social Work Officers (a statutory role with responsibilities in local authorities for the quality of social work). The majority of Chief Social Work Officers are men, in a profession that is overwhelmingly comprised of women.

How we work and live has substantially changed over the last 50 years, but our culture of delivering social work has not significantly adapted to the communities we support. If services adapt, they can better support people as they work and live without the constraints of traditional office hour boundaries ([The truth about weekend working](#)). Families where both parents work are now common, as is shift working which can allow parents and carers to rotate caring for children and others. As various forms of flexible working become more common, alongside a more 24/7 culture, social workers need to be able to work more flexibly while delivering services

at more convenient times and in ways that work better for people who need support and the workers supporting them.

1.3 Flexibility as a reasonable adjustment

Disability and sickness

Various forms of flexible working are often a reasonable adjustment for people with disabilities. Whilst many organisations use reduced hours as a return-to-work support, organisations should consider if they can routinely discuss what forms of flexible working may support employees who live with disabilities, long-term or fluctuating health conditions.

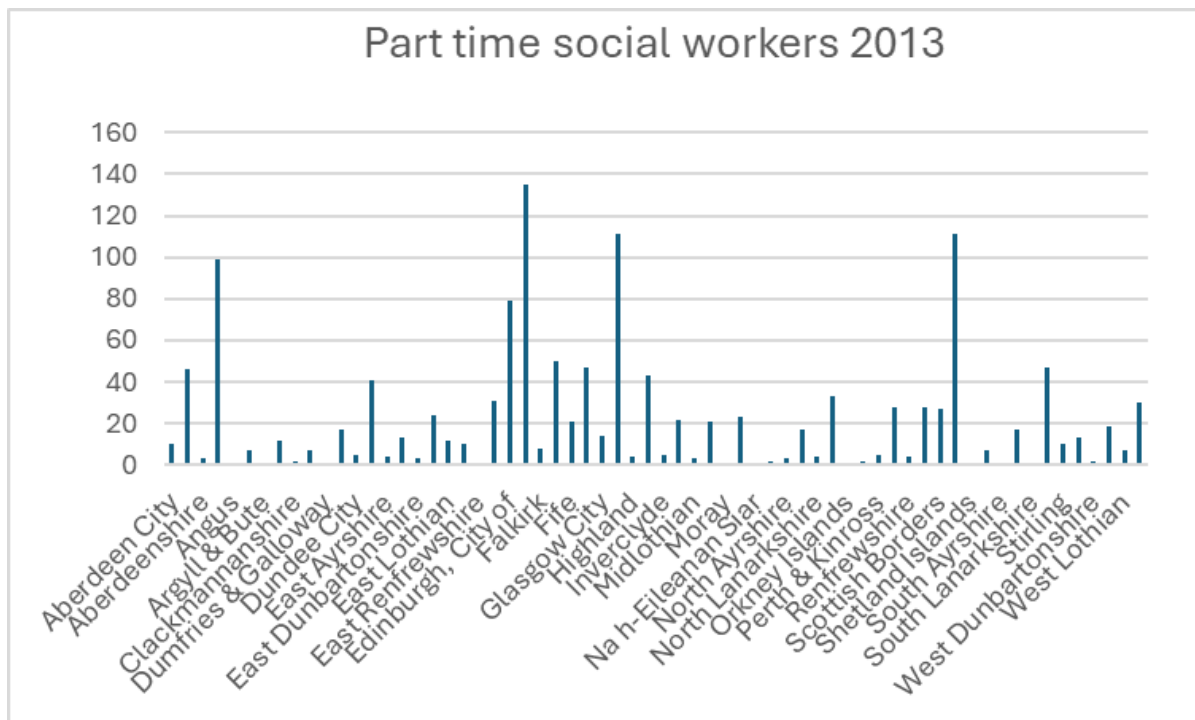
Neurodivergence

The option to work flexibly is important for neurodivergent people. Burnout from life stresses and a mismatch between expectations and abilities without proper supports being in place can happen to any of us but can be particularly experienced by people with some forms of neurodivergence. This can be known as Autistic Burnout ([Understanding autistic burnout](#)). The Neurodiversity Pledge for Social Work Employers outlines actions that organisations can take to make sustainable changes for a neuro-inclusive workplace ([Neurodiversity Pledge](#)).

2. Part-time social workers

2.1 Numbers of part-time social workers

Part-time working has remained stagnant across the Scottish social work workforce over the last decade. In 2013, SSSC reported that there were 1350 part-time social workers and in 2022 the same report shows there were 1307. In 2020 during the pandemic this figure rose slightly, but it has remained largely stable.



Hours may not be filled for several reasons such as:

- Small number of hours that can't be directly recruited into
- The hours may be being held in case the individual wants to return to their previous work pattern
- The budget for hours may be held but then lost, either returned to a central budget at year-end or spent outwith the team, leaving a shortage on the original number of hours that would be worked in the team.

Such gaps are often not filled for some time, perhaps even years, if at all. Keeping data on part-time hours centrally could help organisations pool these low-hour contracts. Job sharing can also be considered in these circumstances. Keeping good data and thinking creatively about the best use of the workforce budget will help improve part-time working in a sector that experiences a high workload and where teams are often under-established and overstretched.

2.3 Part-time social worker caseloads

The concerns about the sheer volume and increasing complexity of caseloads carried by all social workers are not addressed in this report. This is documented elsewhere, such as in Social Work Scotland's *Setting the Bar* report ([Setting the Bar report](#)). That report highlights the need for a national maximum caseload for all social workers.

We continue to hear from part-time workers they often receive a disproportionately high number of caseloads for the number of hours they are working. However, this was not directly addressed by the information we requested from local authorities.

From the information employers sent us, we have found that many employers do not hold flexible working data centrally. This sort of data is often only held in an employee's personnel file. Holding this data on part-time working across their organisation may make it easier for employers to understand the bigger picture across departments and teams.

Successful social work is based on relationships. People who need support often express deep dissatisfaction about the number of different social workers they have had. Social workers gain knowledge and insight about the history of individuals and the dynamics of families and communities that cannot simply be replaced by a new worker.

Of course, there must always be systems in place to deal with urgent matters when social workers are not available because of sickness, leave, or other priorities. We think that employers may hold assumptions that full-time social workers are more available to respond to urgent inquiries than part-time workers. This may not be true depending on the balance between full-time and part-time caseload expectations. The team environment, therefore, becomes highly significant in supporting part-time and flexible working effectively by ensuring urgent matters can get through to

someone who can help – this may be a duty system, coworking arrangements, or similar.

One of the issues around part-time working is that the time spent in meetings and tasks is “time overheads”. The hours required for team meetings and annual training and learning are the same for part-time and full-time workers.

A half-time worker with a 50% caseload may, therefore, struggle and may be seen by other colleagues as problematic. Workloads should consider caseloads alongside other time requirements for the job and be tailored to the contracted hours.

Otherwise, part-time contracts can become counterproductive and lead to struggle and burnout which impacts the wellbeing of the individuals and teams and may cause retention issues for employers.

There may be suitable alternatives to part-time workers carrying a caseload as part of their work. These might include:

- duty roster work
- co-working with less experienced colleagues
- picking up on specific pieces of more complex work

These approaches could ease pressures on overstretched teams and fill establishments where gaps exist.

A ‘buddying’ system is another option. This involves two part-time workers holding their own caseload. This way they may work with their own cases, but they have sufficient knowledge of their colleague’s cases to deal with situations in each other’s absence. This has the additional benefits of being a second pair of eyes on cases and providing peer oversight and support.

Job sharing is an obvious option for bringing two part-time social workers together, to share a caseload. This might most commonly be implemented where workers are working two- or three-day weeks each. They will need time for handovers and joint planning.

The options most suitable will differ from employer to employer and across individual workers. It’s important that employers collect and use data to be successful in matching desires and opportunities for part-time working. Where data about part-time working is held in separate silos across the social work specialisms (adults, children and justice) or locality offices, there may be no direct way to have a clear overview of the establishment and the impact of flexible working options. This will make it difficult to have an organisational approach that makes the best use of capacity. Siloed data can significantly inhibit creative thinking about how social workers, trained as generalists, might be able to work very effectively across service areas.

Employers should regularly review the data on part-time working, job sharing etc. across the whole span of their workforce to consider creative options for flexible working.

3. Flexibility across Scottish public sector employers

3.1 Flexible work in job adverts

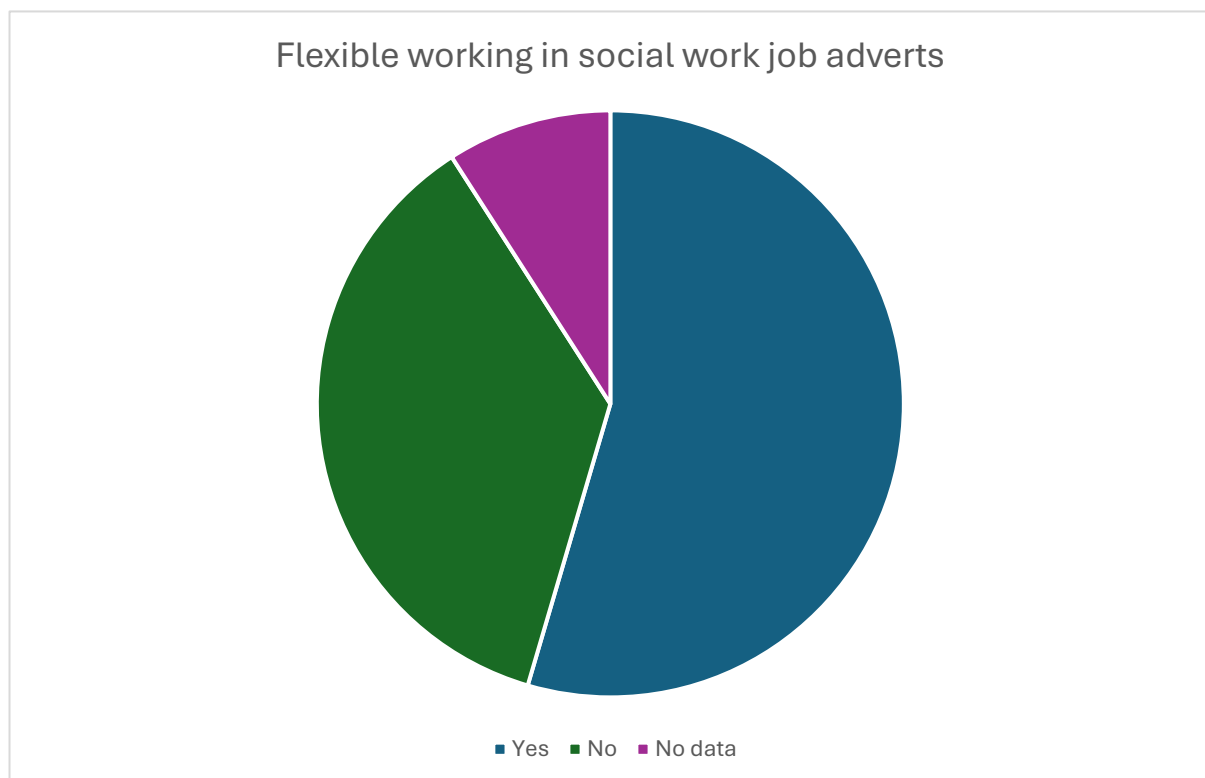
We asked all 32 local authorities and NHS Highland, which also employs social workers, whether they mention flexible work options in their adverts for social work jobs.

The responses have shown that there is a very mixed picture across Scotland.

- 55% of respondents advised us that their authority offers flexible working in their job adverts.
- 36% said that they did not.
- 9% of respondents were unable to answer.

Where respondents were unable to provide an answer, we were told it is because decisions are taken on a local basis, at the discretion of the hiring manager, and not recorded. We were also often pointed to a page on the employer’s website or a flexible working policy that could be given to new employees. Whilst this is positive, it doesn’t replace an employer actively encouraging a conversation on their commitment to flexible working at the first stage.

There are some excellent examples of authorities proactively advertising flexible working opportunities in social work. But there is also a long way to go before every social work employer engages with potential employees in the opportunities of flexible work at the job advertisement stage.



3.2 Number of social workers currently working flexibly

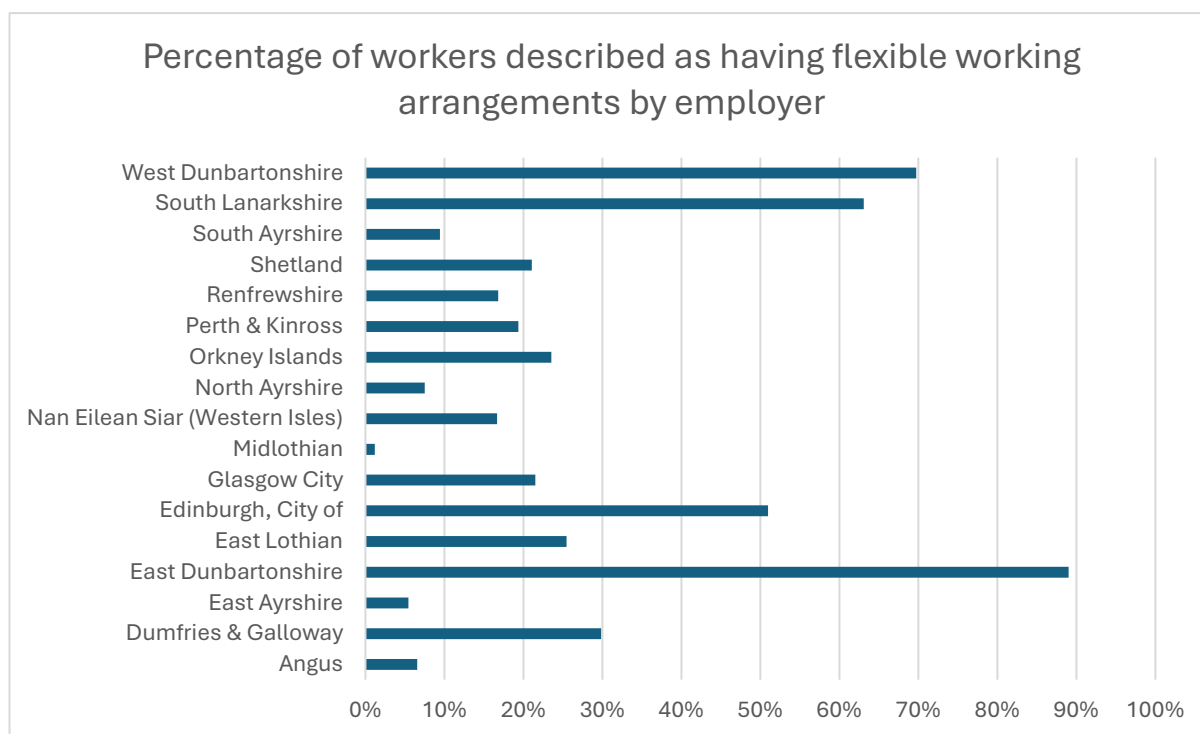
We asked the 32 local authorities and NHS Highland how many social workers currently have formal flexible working arrangements in place. 17 employers held this data.

- In these 17 areas, an average of 28% of social workers have formal flexible working arrangements in place
- The remaining authorities did not hold this information.

However, across the employers who held this information, there is a significant level of variation in the percentage of workers accessing a flexible working arrangement ranging from 1% in one local authority to 89% in another.

Please note that informal flexibility is common, with local agreements between individuals and managers not being recorded anywhere.

This data also includes what is often called 'agile' working arrangements; where an employee can work from various bases and only needs to attend the office on certain days. For the purposes of this report, we are looking at flexible working as something specific to an individual based on their personal requirements. So, this data is only indicative.



3.3 Number of requests for flexible working being made

11 of the 33 employers we asked for information were able to tell us how many social workers had made flexible working requests in 2022-2023 year. These figures are likely already higher than in previous years due to the introduction of the day 1 rights in 2024.

There is a significant variation across employers with the number of flexible working requests from social workers ranging from 0 to 25 in a single year.

Promisingly, the data also shows that nearly all requests were approved, with only 1 refused and 1 partially granted being recorded.

While we lack large amounts of data, this shows that employers can, and are, granting requests where they are made, but that there are significant variations in the number of requests being received across local authority employers.

3.4 Types of flexible working being used in social work

Part-time, hybrid, or flexitime are the most known and understood forms of flexible working. Having a suite of options is key when considering options for workers who are hoping to make changes to how, when, or where they work.

We asked local authority employers what forms of flexible working social workers were using. While the results were patchy, they provided a good indication of the breadth of flexible work that may be suitable for social workers and their employers to consider. Various employers could not comment on the nature and scope of the arrangements.

Types of flexible working we were told all employees can request:

- Condensed hours
- Reduced hours
- Change of working days
- Term-time working
- Staggered or flexitime
- Job-sharing

Several employers told us that all their social workers are automatically included in an agile, or a flexitime working system. We recognise that there are benefits associated with these working arrangements, where workers often have no set base and can work from home or an office location of their choice only having to attend an office location at certain times.

The move to greater working from home was accelerated firstly by the pandemic but also by the need for local authorities to reduce their financial strain in maintaining office space. The positives and negatives of not having an office base are gradually becoming more known.

Social workers need peer support in decompressing from difficult interactions. They need to check in with experienced colleagues as part of assuring their work and they need opportunities for informal and experiential workplace learning as well as the general sense of being part of a team. This is especially true for early career social workers who rely most on the experienced support of their peers. If the office is only used for formal meetings or training, it is worth considering how less formal interaction might be enabled.



4. Flexible working in senior roles

Leadership is key in any organisation. Sustainable leadership, the capacity for people to be a leader in their roles, maintain their wellbeing and thrive, is vital to delivering social work services.

SWS's 2023 Chief Social Worker (CSWO) Survey ([Chief Social Work Officer survey report 2023-24 - Social Work Scotland](#)) raises some serious concerns about the sustainability of the most integral roles in Scottish social work leadership. While the survey examines only the CSWO role, it is an indicator of the type of pressure others in very senior roles in the public sector face. Whilst such senior roles are always going to be pressured and busy, those stresses need to be manageable to avoid burnout, turnover and avoidable mistakes.

The CSWO Survey found that only a quarter of respondents had been in post for over 5 years and a further quarter had been in post for less than 2 years. The survey also shows concerning trends for increased working hours impacting the work-life balance for CSWOs. As the whole report suggests, these drivers of the high turnover make the role largely unsustainable.

The pressures of the job and the scale of each CSWO role are large factors in the challenges of these roles.

The findings around the working hours of CSWOs are striking:

- 81% always work over their contracted hours
- 40% work an additional 10-15 additional hours a week
- 21% work more than 15 hours extra a week

Respondents to the CSWO Survey reported varying working patterns but many outlined long hours and the negative impact this was having on their wellbeing and ability to remain in their role. They also acknowledged that they are not the only ones working over their contracted hours. Social workers in general often need to work significantly more hours than they are contracted, paid, or should be expected to. Across the sector, there is a strong feeling of overwhelm by the nature and scope of the role, the rising demand for services, and diminishing resources.

Flexible working is not a solution to these issues by itself but, organisations that create more manageable hours and a culture of encouraging people to work sustainably may help reduce burnout and make the leadership of the workforce more sustainable.

Additionally, we know that many of those most likely to benefit from flexible working are also more likely to be under-represented in the most senior roles in the profession. With this in mind, although this is a small workforce, we note that 56% of CSWOs are male in a profession where 82% of the workforce is female.

This indicates that there is a need to ensure people who work flexibly are considered equally for promotion and additional training. Working flexibly in any form should never be a barrier to career development ([Flexible Working In Senior Roles: Best Practice | workingmums.co.uk](#)).

This report has highlighted a significant variation in the availability of flexible working data across public-sector employers. Several authorities advised that they are working on digital strategies and upgrading information systems which will make more of this information available. This is welcome news, and we urge employers to do what they can to get a full picture of how they are supporting their social work workforce to work flexibly and to use that data to support new and innovative ways of working.

5. Impact on individuals

Whilst writing this report, we have spoken to or heard from social workers who are at breaking point. These are some extracts of their testimonies, shortened to ensure that they remain anonymous:

Social worker 1

“I am exhausted and will not work beyond 60, I don’t sleep so well, the work commute is tiring, my new colleagues are exhausting, the environment hectic and noisy. The lights bright and it’s just too much.”

Social worker 2

“I’ve been a social worker for 13 years and (am) looking for an exit strategy. We have been told to come into the office more but I struggle with the noise etc. My productivity has definitely dropped, my husband works away and I have two kids and full-time work to balance, so it’s a lot. If only I could retire”.

Social worker 3

“I’ve been a social worker for almost 8 years and am utterly burnt out. There had been more flexibility during COVID where I felt better and was more productive but we have now been told this is no longer an option and we must be office-based. I think it's time for me to explore a career change.”

6. Recommendations

This report makes some recommendations that can support both the employer and employee:

1. Employers should recognise the issues specific to the social work workforce in relation to part-time work and make plans to address them as part of their strategies for recruitment and retention.
2. Part-time social workers should be given caseloads that are commensurate with the number of hours they are contracted to work.
3. Workplaces should have systems to monitor caseloads to ensure they are manageable, especially for part-time social workers.
4. Where flexible working seems incompatible with case-holding duties, employers could consider offering, contracts for specific tasks not directly related to case-holding.
5. Employers should actively encourage and support social work managers to consider how part-time working can be implemented in teams safely and effectively.
6. When it comes to 'office' time, employers should support people to work alongside each other, to collaborate, and to reflect on work. This time should not solely be filled with preplanned activities such as meetings and formal training.
7. Employers should hold the data on who is working flexibly in their teams as a central data set. This could support flexible working requests and provide information to help promote flexibility such as job sharing etc.
8. Flexible working is for everyone and support to work flexibly should extend to those in the most senior roles just as much as with a new starter in a field team. This requires the adoption of a flexible working culture at every level.