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How inclusive workplace support can unlock employment potential for UK working families

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Key takeaways

1. Flexible work by design: The Employment Rights Bill (ERB) introduces a day-one right to request flexible working, but legal entitlement alone won't guarantee equitable access. Flexibility must be proactively embedded into job roles, particularly in sectors like healthcare or education where remote work is limited, using creative, context-specific solutions.
2. From Fixed Flex to genuine flexibility: 'Flexible' work often means long-term, minor amendments to rigid schedules. True flexibility allows tailored, short-term adaptations that respond to shifting family needs.
3. Family-friendly beyond flexibility: Flexibility alone is insufficient. Broader support including childcare access, leave for non-legal caregivers, and targeted policies for single-earner households, is essential.
4. Supporting the full spectrum of family life: Workplace support must move beyond narrow definitions of 'family'. Policies should explicitly include diverse caregiving roles including stepparents, LGBTQ+ co-parents, single parents, and informal carers.
5. Culture makes policies work: Policies only succeed in supportive cultures. Leaders must value outcomes over presence, remove stigma, and ensure flexibility does not create overwork.

1. Introduction

The nuclear family, defined as a married couple living with their biological children (Schaefer et al., 2025), is in decline. In 2022, 44% of children born in the UK at the start of the century had not lived with both biological parents throughout childhood, up from 21% for those born in 1970 (De Souza, 2022). Yet many flexible working and family-friendly policies still rest on outdated assumptions about family life, typically modelled on the nuclear family and traditional gender roles (Lyonette and Baldauf, 2019). Such assumptions fail to reflect diverse realities, including single parents, dual-career couples, LGBTQ+ families, and blended households.

Workplace practices often reinforce this mismatch. The prevailing 'ideal worker' model assumes uninterrupted professional commitment, sidelining caregiving (Acker, 1990; Radcliffe et al., 2022). Uptake of flexible work remains gender-biased and uneven

(ONS, 2025), and when flexible working is the exception rather than the norm, gender inequalities are reinforced, with particular negative impacts on mothers (Gatrell et al., 2014; Penny and Hirst, 2022). Such stigma discourages adoption and limits access for those who need it most (Radcliffe et al., 2022; Schaefer et al., 2025). This disadvantages all caregivers by treating care as secondary to paid work (Gatrell et al., 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these weaknesses, amplifying gendered divisions of labour and placing strain on families balancing paid and unpaid work (Ashman et al., 2022).

Recent government measures represent progress. The [Employment Rights Bill \(ERB\)](#) introduces day-one flexible working rights, stronger protections for caregivers, and a proposed "right to switch off," alongside the [Plan to Get Britain Working](#) and the [Parental Leave and Pay Review](#). These additional rights aim to provide more power and flexibility for employees. However, legislation

alone is insufficient. Without tackling narrow definitions of family, workplace stigma, and structural barriers, particularly in roles with limited flexibility, there is a risk these reforms will not have the intended positive impacts.

This briefing draws on research from across the [Future Families Work](#) network to argue that while recent reforms to flexible working and family-friendly workplace policies mark a positive step, embedding flexibility by design and broadening family-inclusive policy are essential to achieve lasting change.

2. Policy gaps and family realities: who gets left behind

This briefing is based on peer-reviewed, empirical studies conducted by the [Future Families Work](#) network, an interdisciplinary team of researchers specialising in work-family dynamics across diverse family configurations. These studies draw on interdisciplinary literature reviews and in-depth qualitative data from interviews and diary studies with over 200 UK-based participants across a variety of job roles and industries, including dual-earner couples, single parents, blended, and LGBTQ+ families.

Findings highlight persistent barriers to inclusive and effective flexible working and family support. Where flexibility is treated as an exception rather than the norm, and long-hours culture is rewarded, employees face pressure to conform to “ideal worker” norms – working beyond contracted hours to prove their commitment. Many feel obliged to repay the ‘gift’ of flexibility by working extra hours, while accepting that career progression is unlikely if they deviate from standard working patterns (Radcliffe and Cassell, 2015; Radcliffe et al., 2022).

These dynamics exacerbate work-life conflict and mental health pressures, with

disproportionate impacts on women (Ashman et al., 2022; Kelland et al., 2025) and single parents (Radcliffe et al., 2022), reinforcing existing inequalities. Stigma and unequal access compound the problem: single parents often work to counter stereotypes that they are less capable or committed, making them less likely to seek support or more likely to accept career penalties when they do (Radcliffe et al., 2022). Men, across all family forms, remain deterred from requesting flexibility by persistent gender norms (Gatrell et al., 2014; Radcliffe and Cassell, 2015; Radcliffe et al., 2023).

As well as those deterred from using flexible working policies by stigma or fear of career penalties, many caregivers remain structurally excluded from them altogether. For instance, stepparents and LGBTQ+ co-parents, are frequently excluded from formal leave entitlements and HR systems due to narrow legal definitions of parenthood (Schaefer et al., 2020; 2025). Organisational assumptions about family structures often fail to recognise chosen families, informal caregiving roles, or the unique needs of those navigating fertility or surrogacy pathways (Schaefer et al., 2025).

Traditional flexible working policies are rarely designed for the fluctuating and unpredictable needs of more complex family arrangements (Ashman et al., 2022; Radcliffe et al., 2022; Schaefer et al., 2025). Shaped around stable, predictable caregiving patterns, they leave little room for employees whose responsibilities shift unexpectedly or cyclically. For lone parents and families spanning multiple households, this rigidity heightens precarity and forces reliance on informal, and often unsustainable, coping strategies.

Family type	Key challenges	Policy gaps and implications
Blended families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complex and shifting caregiving roles across multiple households Stepparents providing daily care often lack formal recognition or rights (Schaefer et al., 2020; 2025) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statutory leave (e.g. parental, bereavement, Shared Parental Leave) tied to legal/biological parenthood excludes many stepparents Flexible working commonly fixed to set patterns, incompatible with dynamic caregiving routines Organisational language and HR systems reflect nuclear assumptions, resulting in inconsistent decisions and limited responsiveness
Single parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sole responsibility for caregiving and income generation High childcare costs and limited wraparound care Increased emotional and logistical pressures make flexible and family-friendly working (FFW) critical (Radcliffe et al., 2022) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welfare-to-work policies and workplace norms often ignore realities of solo caregiving Flexible working denied, too rigid, or stigmatised (e.g. perceived as signalling reduced commitment or receiving special treatment) Shared Parental Leave inaccessible for single parents Policies assume dual-parent households, halving leave entitlements and increasing pressure Ideal worker norms inhibit uptake of flexible working, risking burnout, underemployment, and career stagnation
LGBTQ+ families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diverse family formation routes (adoption, surrogacy, donor conception) often go unrecognised Fear of disclosure or stigma discourages accessing benefits Non-biological or informal caregiving roles frequently overlooked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policies still rely on heteronormative and legal-parenthood definitions despite legal advances Organisational language often reinforces invisibility of non-traditional caregivers HR systems may overlook non-biological/non-legal co-parenting arrangements, excluding chosen families from leave and benefits

Table 1: Key challenges and policy gaps in family-inclusive workplace policies

Taken together, these findings reveal a stark mismatch between the realities of modern family life and the assumptions underpinning workplace and government policy. Many policies remain anchored to an outdated nuclear family model, creating blind spots that systematically disadvantage those outside it. Addressing

these gaps is not a matter of marginal adjustment, but of redesigning policy frameworks to reflect the diversity and complexity of today's families. Table 1 provides examples of specific challenges and policy gaps, and what inclusive policy responses should consider.

These gaps in recognition across UK statutory policy and organisational practice signal a need for systemic reform. The UK Government's [Plan to Get Britain Working](#), alongside the complementary [Make Work Pay](#) scheme, aims to tackle labour shortages, reduce economic inactivity, and improve workforce participation in the post-pandemic era. It proposes the right to request flexible work from 'day one' in a new job, banning exploitative contracts, and closing the gender pay gap, all of which are included in the Employment Rights Bill, which is expected to pass into law later this year.

While this marks a step toward inclusive employment, there is a risk that implementation will remain uneven. Many of the aims of the legislation could be undermined by rigid employer practices, persistent narrow definitions of the family, and cultural resistance. There is growing recognition of this issue amongst policymakers. For instance, parliamentary [debates](#) on the Employment Rights Bill included proposed amendments to introduce statutory kinship care leave (leave for care provided by relatives or close friends). Although these proposals were voted down by MPs, this reflects an explicit acknowledgement of non-traditional caregiving arrangements and the need to reshape workplace protections to reflect modern family structures. This underscores the continuing need for broader legal definitions of family and more inclusive workplace protections. Without legislative recognition, and without a shift in organisational culture and leadership mindset, the proposed measures alone are unlikely to deliver equitable access to sustainable employment for working families, particularly amidst media narratives that stigmatise remote or hybrid working models (Working Families, 2024).

3. Recommendations

These recommendations are drawn from the Future Families Work project and targeted at UK policymakers and organisational leaders aiming to design policies that reflect the realities of modern caregiving, driving equity, inclusion, and economic resilience.

Universal flexibility for all employees

1. Enforce real flexibility from day one: redesigning work around people

Once law, the [Employment Rights Bill](#) will provide a statutory day-one right to request flexible working. To ensure this delivers meaningful change, government and employers must focus on enforcement, implementation, and cultural shift. Flexibility should be embedded as a standard feature of job design, particularly in sectors where remote work is limited. However, delivery will be especially challenging in the context of public service funding constraints. For example, despite national commitments ([set out in the NHS Long-Term Workforce Plan](#)), many NHS employees continue to face obstacles in accessing flexible working due to staffing and resource pressures, highlighting the need for workforce planning to support implementation. Creative, context-specific models such as job sharing, digital rostering, and shift-swapping can provide autonomy while meeting operational needs (Department for Education, 2019; Timewise, 2023). A government-led incentive scheme encouraging innovation in flexible job design would support consistency across sectors and ensure flexibility is not treated as a favour.

2. Recognise and support diverse families through inclusive policy design

Statutory and workplace policies must broaden definitions of family to reflect lived caregiving relationships. Policies should *explicitly* include stepparents, LGBTQ+ co-parents, single parents, and chosen families. Benefits and leave entitlements must be extended to non-legal caregivers, supported by inclusive and sensitive language (Schaefer et al., 2025; Radcliffe and Cassell 2015). Employers should also provide tailored support for solo or complex caregiving arrangements such as flexible return-to-work programmes, accessible childcare solutions, and leave for fertility or adoption-related needs.

Implementation and protection

3. Provide clear guidelines to prevent flexi-overwork

The [Employment Rights Bill](#) introduces a limited “right to switch off,” giving workers the right not to be contacted outside working hours except in exceptional circumstances. However, it lacks specific obligations on employers to provide guidance, or mechanisms for enforcement. To be effective, the right to disconnect must be underpinned by stronger regulation. Employers should be required to establish written policies on after-hours boundaries, sector-appropriate response expectations, and protections from digital overreach. Flexible working arrangements must be accompanied by clear policies that prevent overwork. Employers should establish sector-appropriate guidelines and implement a clear right to disconnect outside contracted hours to mitigate work-life conflict and promote well-being.

4. Build managerial capacity for inclusive work environments

Inclusive organisational practices fail when managers are distrustful or offer limited support. Training managers to understand and effectively implement policies is essential. This includes developing an awareness of the challenges faced by employees with caregiving responsibilities, training to promote equitable use of flexible work arrangements, and building a culture that enables work-life boundaries for all, ensuring leaders see performance, not presence, as demonstrative of commitment. The [Future Families Work](#) toolkit can provide managers with practical guidance and strategies to implement inclusive workplace policies effectively.

4. Conclusion

A work model designed over a century ago is unfit for today’s workforce. The future of work must be one where flexibility is not the exception but the norm and where the societal importance of unpaid caregiving is taken seriously. Employers and policymakers must move away from assuming that workers should fit into outdated job structures with 9 to 5 working patterns and instead build inclusive models of work and support that better aligns with the realities of modern families, based on outputs rather than hours worked.

By adopting these recommendations, organisations can support an inclusive workplace culture, where employees can maximise their employment over the longer term. This will strengthen the labour market, drive economic recovery, and help to achieve the broader aims of the UK Government’s proposals to increase employment and boost productivity.

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For further resources, visit: [Future Families Work](#)

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Future Families Work is a research initiative led by University of Liverpool scholars exploring how diverse families—parents, carers, single and same-sex couples, and those with caring responsibilities—navigate evolving work-life dynamics. The network develops evidence-based resources and guidance to support inclusive, flexible, and family-friendly workplace cultures.

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