



Flexible working in Camden Schools

Short Report

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WHY FLEXIBLE WORKING?

Flexible working has become a critical issue for schools. During the pandemic, adapted practices in schools demonstrated some benefits particularly for staff work-life balance. In the years following, graduate-level jobs outside education have become increasingly flexible and hybrid. Nationally, lack of flexibility is a growing reason for teacher attrition: 47% cited it as a reason for considering leaving the profession in 2024, up from 34% in 2023. The Employment Rights Act seeks to make flexible working 'the default' and may formalise arrangements for support staff through the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB). For Camden schools, addressing flexible working is essential for staff wellbeing, retention, and sustaining a healthy teaching profession.

According to the DfE, flexible working can be thought of as variations in the

- Number of hours worked (e.g. part-time and job-shares)
- Timing of that work (compressed or staggered hours, or wellbeing days)
- Location of the work (such as off-site PPA or hybrid working)

02

KEY FINDINGS IN CAMDEN SCHOOLS

Current Practices

The most common flexibility is ad hoc variation of hours for personal/family needs, followed for teachers by part-time work and wellbeing (or gratitude) days, for support staff part-time work and different start/finish times, and for leaders occasional off-site working and wellbeing days.

- 👁️ Job shares (e.g. for teachers split 3/2 or 4/1 days)
- 👁️ The '14 in 15' model at Heath School
- 👁️ Hybrid working for support staff and occasional PPA at home for teachers
- 👁️ Job-crafting, where roles are changed to make the most of flexible working
- 👁️ Term-time only working for admin staff
- 👁️ Expanded hours (eg working 3 days over 4)

- Few schools have **formal flexible working policies** and most operate reactively to requests as they arise rather than proactively promoting flexible working.
- Requests primarily come from parents (especially mothers returning from maternity leave), staff nearing retirement and those seeking a better work-life balance.
- Most schools are open to requests at any time of the year, with as much notice as possible.
- Decisions are made following conversations to understand what is needed and the possible impacts, and to consider pros, cons and alternatives.
- Most flexible working arrangements are made on a temporary or trial basis, usually for a year.

Benefits

For staff

Improved wellbeing and feeling valued, better retention, opportunities for career progression and personal development, and (for those who are parents) time to build relationships with their own children's schools.

For schools

Enhanced retention, recruitment and loyalty, reduced absence, and a more creative and engaged workforce.

For pupils

Indirect benefits from a less stressed, more motivated staff, and perhaps a wider diversity of staff expertise leading to greater enrichment opportunities.

Beliefs and Barriers

Leaders value flexibility but worry about:

- Continuity for pupils (and parents), especially younger children and those with SEND
- Timetabling challenges in secondary schools
- Pupil ratios, ensuring enough staff on site, and covering for absences
- Costs and impact on budget
- Cultural resistance - concerns about fairness and operational complexity
- Managing job-shares so that both partners can attend meetings and work with parents
- The impact on their own workload and mental/emotional capacity of managing flexible working.

Leaders' beliefs could be categorised in three sometimes overlapping approaches:

- Flexible working is not compatible with teaching (which is an in-person job) or career progression, flexible arrangements are available to a limited number of staff, and the long holidays compensate for long term-time working hours.
- Flexibility and wellbeing are more important than flexible working; working practices are designed to address workload and working hours for all staff.
- An intention to design a whole-school approach to flexible working, through models or building a culture of openness to trialling and learning from different practices.

03

WIDER LEARNING

National research highlights enablers of flexible working:

- Supportive leadership and open culture
- Clear communication, policies and processes
- Proactive planning
- Creative timetabling
- Piloting and evaluating arrangements
- Clearly defining responsibilities and workload associated with flexible roles

Models trialled elsewhere include 9 day fortnights, phased retirements, TOIL, rethinking PPA time, collaborative job-design and rethinking roles.

Exploring and evaluating flexible working are done through staff surveys and 'stay' interviews, working parties and change teams, as well as reviewing and reflecting on individual requests. Arrangements can be trialled on a fixed term basis, with defined success criteria including impacts and outcomes for staff and pupils. Staff focus groups can help to identify and evaluate problems and offer solutions.

04

PRINCIPLES

The following principles underpin decisions about flexible working in Camden schools:

- **High quality education and pupil experiences** - the needs of pupils and the quality of teaching are prioritised in decisions and closely monitored.
- **Wellbeing and inclusion** - leaders recognise the benefits of flexible working for staff wellbeing, retention and morale. They promote an inclusive culture that values diverse working patterns and have clear expectations for meetings, INSET days, parents' evenings and CPD, ensuring those working flexibly feel included in the staff community.
- **Collaboration** - staff are engaged early in discussions and decisions about individual requests and whole school approaches.
- **Fairness and consistency** - all requests are considered, regardless of the type of flexible working requested or the role; all staff are treated fairly, decisions are aligned with equality legislation, and processes are monitored to spot and address any biases. Those working flexibly are supported to progress in their careers.
- **Transparency and openness** - decisions and responses are communicated clearly, within statutory timeframes as appropriate, and with reasons clearly explained (usually in writing). Job adverts specify which types of flexible working are available and conversations about flexible working are welcomed before or at interview.
- **Willingness to learn** - where possible, flexible working is granted on a trial basis with agreed success criteria, and leaders commit to learning from each experience. Longer term changes have regular review dates.
- **Operational feasibility** - ensuring that resources, costs and staffing are sustainable.

What does this look like in practice?

High quality education and pupil experiences

- Prioritise the needs of pupils and the quality of teaching when evaluating requests and when developing a whole-school approach. This may include timetabling, pastoral care, relationships with parents.
- Assess whether the proposed arrangement or approach could negatively affect performance, workload distribution, or the ability to meet demand. How will it impact scheduling of CPD, staff meetings and shared planning?

Collaboration

- Recognise that collaboration can also improve wellbeing.
- Hold a consultation meeting with individual staff members making requests to clarify details, explore alternatives, and discuss potential challenges. Consider who else to involve in conversations (eg line managers, Heads of Departments).
- Encourage staff to propose ways to mitigate any negative impact on the school or colleagues.
- Consider how best to engage staff in developing proactive whole-school approaches and identifying potential challenges and solutions, whether through surveys, consultation meetings, working groups.
- Consider when to engage governors in the process of whole school planning.

Wellbeing and Inclusion

- Recognise the benefits of flexible working for staff wellbeing, retention, and morale, and particularly of small or ad hoc flexibility that recognises staff needs outside work.
- Consider the impact of flexible working on workload - for those who are working flexibly, their colleagues and the leadership. Discuss ways to mitigate those impacts.
- Understand that offering opportunities for staff to discuss possibilities for flexibility can also improve wellbeing when managed well.
- Promote an inclusive culture that values diverse working patterns. Share successes, and the processes that led to them.
- Understand that staff value the opportunity to request flexibilities, even if they do not take advantage of those opportunities.

Fairness and Consistency

- Treat all requests openly and fairly, ensuring decisions are consistent across staff and aligned with equality legislation.
- Consider reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 for staff with disabilities.
- Offer an appeals process as best practice, even though it's not legally required.
- Allow staff to withdraw requests at any stage, with clear communication about implications.
- Allow staff to opt out of whole-school arrangements at any stage, with clear communication about implications.

Transparency and Communication

- Respond to individual requests within the statutory timeframe (usually 2 months, including appeals).
- When developing whole-school approaches, communicate clearly, regularly and often. Ensure a range of ways for staff to communicate ideas and concerns with you.
- Develop and communicate clear parameters within which flexibility can operate.
- Provide clear written confirmation of decisions, including reasons where possible. For individual requests, include reasons for rejection if applicable.
- Ensure all decisions, agreements, and contractual changes are documented and signed by both parties.

Willingness to learn

- Where possible, agree to a trial period (e.g., one term) to test an individual arrangement or whole-school approach. Consider whether it is appropriate to make it permanent, or whether to make it temporary but longer term (with regular review points). For whole-school models, consider whether to have a 'stop' clause. Make them specific.
- Be clear about the criteria for ending a whole-school arrangement such as: *additional cost burden, detrimental effect on quality or performance - for example pupil behaviour deteriorates, inability to reorganise work or recruit staff - for example to ensure sufficient high-quality teaching in a 9-day fortnight model.*
- Planned structural changes.

Operational feasibility

Consider whether the school can reorganise work among existing staff or recruit additional staff if needed. Evaluate any additional costs and whether they are sustainable. Remember you can reject requests for eight legitimate reasons, which are:

- The burden of additional costs
- An inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff
- An inability to recruit additional staff
- A detrimental impact on quality
- A detrimental impact on performance
- A detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand
- Insufficient work available for the periods the employee proposes to work.
- Planned structural changes to the employer's business



Explore

What would staff like to have?

Schools which have embedded flexible working have conversations early and collaboratively, inviting staff to reflect on what kinds of flexibilities could be helpful, and how those could work in their context. Communication is key, and leaders need to clearly identify who to speak to to understand the demand for flexible working and the concerns of the school community. This is also the time to think creatively about problems and possible solutions.



Experiment

What can we try?

Most schools implement flexible working arrangements on a fixed term basis, building in periods of review, and ensuring that individual arrangements do not become permanent immediately. It can mitigate the problem of a 'first-come-first-served' approach to flexible working. The leadership team can reflect on the impacts of particular practices on staff and pupils, and change as needed.



Evaluate

How is it working?

Schools which implement flexible working approaches well are those which have thought carefully about what success means in their context. Whether flexible working is managed on an individual basis or more holistically, setting shared success criteria and agreeing how and when to review is important both for individual staff and for the school to learn and iterate.

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