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National Flexi-work Partnership

work-life balance project



The Effects of Flexible Working on Work-Life Balance and Social Inclusion:
evaluation of a series of pilot projects



margret fine-davis • mary mccarthy
 • ciara o'dwyer • grace edge • mairéad o'sullivan

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The National Flexi-Work Partnership, a collaborative venture between the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Trinity College Dublin, FÁS, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Aware, and Age Action Ireland, carried out pilot projects to encourage the development of flexible working arrangements for working parents, carers, older workers and people with mental health difficulties in a project on Work-Life Balance. This project was funded by the European Social Fund through the EQUAL Community Initiative and administered through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

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1 INTRODUCTION



1.1 Background

The National Flexi-Work Partnership, a collaborative venture between the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Trinity College Dublin, FÁS, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Aware, and Age Action Ireland, carried out a series of flexible working pilot projects in order to encourage the retention in employment of groups of workers who have traditionally been excluded by virtue of inflexible working patterns as well as stigma. The primary purpose of the project was to examine the effects of flexible working on the work-life balance and well-being of workers. This was carried out in the context of a broader project on Work-Life Balance, funded by the European Social Fund through the EQUAL Community Initiative and administered through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

The groups of workers targeted to take part in the pilot projects were: working parents and carers, older workers and people with mental health problems. Innovative flexible working pilot schemes were developed and implemented in a number of organisations that collaborated in the Project. In addition, research on a "pre" and "post" basis was carried out to evaluate the schemes and the effects they had on the respondents' ability to balance the demands of their work and personal life. The aim of these pilot projects was to examine empirically the extent to which flexible working facilitated work-life balance and well-being among these often marginalised groups.

1.2 Rationale

Utilising and facilitating diversity, as well as providing equal opportunities, are issues of vital importance to the workplace of today and tomorrow. These factors are crucial if Ireland is to create an inclusive and fair labour market, which can be a source of potential advantage to both employers and employees.

The Forum on the Workplace of the Future has called for a “focus upon specific groups in society whose labour power is, to date, underutilised”, in order to increase labour force participation (NCPP, 2005). The groups they refer to include: women, older workers, marginalised people and workers from overseas.

In the same report, it was estimated that in Ireland, 40% of workers will be over the age of 45 by 2015. The number of young people entering the workplace is declining as the drop in birth rates witnessed in this country over the last thirty years or so begins to affect the working age population. The large numbers of educated young graduates entering employment will eventually begin to decline considerably. If economic growth is to be sustained and built upon, other sources of labour must be identified.

The labour force participation of under-utilised groups cannot be dictated by economic necessity alone. Equal opportunities and diversity must always underpin workplace practices, regardless of the status of the supply of labour. Instead it should be recognised that creating practical policies for equal opportunities and diversity in the workplace are beneficial to everyone. Employers will benefit as they begin to access the full pool of employees whom they have not been able to reach before. Staff turnover will also decline as policies for equal opportunities and diversity are implemented at a practical level in the organisation. The dividend for existing employees is a workplace that can adapt to their needs and for potential employees, access to employment which had not been possible before.

Work and its function and meaning have long been the subject of psychological and social research. Fromm (1955) sees work as providing an opportunity for autonomy and self-expression. Jahoda (1982) suggests that, in addition to economic needs, employment meets many ‘latent functions’, e.g. interpersonal contact, time structure, activity, status, purposefulness and sense of control. He also identifies work as providing an opportunity for: skill use, external goal and task demands, variety, environmental clarity, securing an income, physical security and valued position. Consequently the ability to access and retain employment is of critical importance, not only to an economy facing a potential labour shortage, but also to the happiness, welfare and confidence of individuals in society.

1.3 Work-life balance

Work-life balance has been defined by the National Framework Committee for Work-Life Balance Policies as a “balance between an individual’s work and their life outside work”. They also state that, “that balance should be healthy, that personal fulfilment is important inside work and that satisfaction outside work may enhance employees’ contribution to work (www.worklifebalance.ie).

According to the *Quality of Life in Europe* survey, carried out in 28 countries, work-life balance is an increasingly important issue across Europe (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2004). The survey found that issues such as working conditions, time spent at work, life-long learning, provision of services by the public sector (e.g., childcare) and pensions were all important factors which feed into the balance struck between an individual’s work and personal life. The report by the Forum on the Workplace of the Future (NCPP, 2005) also cites work-life balance policies as being a key factor in improving the quality of working life for employees.

In their submission to the Forum, IBEC identified work-life balance as being the “biggest issue” in the Irish workplace in 10 years’ time. They call for the promotion of work-life balance within the context of diversity management so as not to stigmatise or adversely affect the careers of those who take up flexible arrangements (NCPP, 2005). In their submission to the Forum, the EQUAL Community Initiative indicated that employers who effectively meet the evolving work-life balance needs of employees will have “effected widespread cultural change and reorganisation of work” (*ibid*).

The provision of flexible working arrangements has been recognised as one of the most important drivers in the facilitation of work-life balance. In their 2004 Annual Report, the Equality Authority indicated that, “flexible working arrangements are necessary to accommodate a range of different needs including the needs of those reconciling work and caring responsibilities, the needs of older people for phased retirement, the needs of minority ethnic workers to meet cultural imperatives, or the accessibility requirements of people with disabilities” (Equality Authority, 2004, p.15). Recent statistics show, however, that flexible working arrangements are often not widely available to all workers. Flexible arrangements tend to be more accessible to staff in the public sector rather than in the private sector and to staff in lower grades and in workplaces where unions are present (Woodland, Simmonds, Thornby, Fitzgerald

and McGee, 2003). Research carried out for the NCPP found that varying modes of flexible working are available to different levels of workers, for example, with part-time work being more available to lower level workers and tele-working more available to more senior staff (O'Connell, Russell, Williams and Blackwell, 2004). One of the main reasons for the irregular spread of flexible working arrangements across the workforce is the limited awareness of the benefits of work-life balance policies and the fact that senior managers are often not sufficiently committed to their introduction (OECD, 2003). In addition, the idea of work-life balance is still often confused with 'family-friendly', and workers frequently believe that flexible working arrangements are only available to working parents. Every individual should have the right to request a flexible working arrangement, regardless of his or her family status.

Evidence from a survey carried out by the Forum of the Workplace of the Future (NCPP, 2005) suggests that Irish workers are experiencing increasing levels of pressure and stress. The number of households where all adults are working has increased sharply; the number of lone parents in the work force is growing; due to an aging population, it follows that more people are involved in caring for elderly relatives, and one in three people in the workplace is a working parent with a child under 15.

These changes indicate that work-life balance policies are of critical importance for a growing number of employees and potential employees and that there is an ever-increasing demand for workplace practices which enable employees to reconcile their work and private lives. Thus flexible working arrangements are essential in providing employees with a mechanism to facilitate this reconciliation. The implementation of work-life balance policies by employers will lead to the retention of existing employees as well as attracting potential employees who would otherwise be unable to access employment. This is of vital importance to employers who are operating in a tight labour market. It will also ensure a good quality of life in the workplace for those in, and looking for, employment.

SPECIFIC NEEDS OF DIVERSE GROUPS IN THE WORKFORCE

Flexible working as a workplace policy can have benefits for different groups of workers in different ways. Our project addresses the needs of three different target group: working parents and carers, older people, and people with mental health problems. We briefly describe below the needs of each of these groups in relation to work and work-life balance.

2.1 Needs of working parents and carers

2.1.1 Working parents & carers and employment

The last 20 years, including the arrival of the Celtic Tiger, have heralded huge societal and economic changes in Ireland. There have been major alterations in the composition of the family, with the nuclear family no longer being classified as the norm. Co-habitation is increasingly common and lone parent families, usually headed by women, make up 16% of families in Ireland (NCCP, 2005). The traditionally high levels of fertility have also decreased, affected by the availability of contraception, the decreasing influence of the Catholic Church, and changing social norms. Such changes have facilitated, *inter alia*, a sharp increase in the numbers of women participating in paid employment. As more women have entered the labour force, the interface of work and family/personal life has become increasingly important.

One in three people in today's workplace are working parents with a child under 15 (NCCP, 2005). The workforce participation rate of mothers is now 47.8% (CSO, 2004). Almost 149,000 persons aged 15 years and over are carers, providing regular unpaid personal help to a friend or relative with a long-term illness, health problem or disability (CSO, 2002). Sixty-one per cent of all carers are female and 85,000 carers are in paid employment (*ibid*). The figures above highlight the large numbers of people with caring responsibilities who are either employees or potential employees.



The interaction between the workplace and life outside work is becoming increasingly complex for working parents and carers, as they endeavour to balance work and caring responsibilities. In the case of working parents, this is aggravated further by the fact that there is currently no statutory child-care policy in Ireland, and public provision for the 0-3 age group is extremely limited (Fine-Davis, 2004). Working arrangements are still not sufficiently flexible to enable parents and carers to manage to fulfil their roles as workers and as carers. Rigid nine to five working hours lead to all kinds of problems for these groups, including scheduling problems in dropping off and particularly in picking up children from crèches, childminders and schools and in the case of carers, difficulty in scheduling meal times for the dependent. The fact that most of the workforce works the same hours also contributes to build up of traffic congestion and long frustrating commuting times.

2.1.2 Benefits of flexible working

Within the 25 – 34 age group, 43% of women hold a third-level qualification compared to 36% of men (CSO, 2003). However the workforce participation of women with third level skills is 13% lower than that of their male counterparts (OECD, 2002). The Lisbon Agenda targets for female participation in the labour force are 57% by the end of 2005 and 60% by the end of 2010 (CSO, 2004).

It is clear that there is a serious underutilisation of women's high standards of education and skills. Certain barriers, both to accessing and maintaining employment, must be removed if the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda are to be met. Workplace policy has not kept pace with nor is adequately responding to the work-life balance difficulties facing its employees and potential employees. The availability of flexible working arrangements is of central importance to working mothers when trying to maintain or access employment. The availability of such arrangements or lack thereof can be a critical factor in working mothers' decisions to stay in or access employment and has a huge impact on the quality of their lives. It will also mean that employers will retain current staff and broaden the spectrum of potential employees *vis à vis* the availability of flexible working arrangements.

Fathers should not be ignored when discussing the benefits of flexible working in facilitating work-life balance. In Ireland, there are few flexible working arrangements and work-life balance policies that are specifically intended for fathers, meaning that the Government, employers, and male workers do not encourage their use. McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney (1998) note, however, that the international evidence on fathers' involvement suggests that there has been some increase in participation in childcare and domestic activities. They suggest that the implications of their analysis is that:

“public policy should seek to create family-friendly measures, especially in the workplace, which maximise the choices men and women have to negotiate roles and responsibilities and will allow fathers as well as mothers the time and space for childcare.” (Ibid.).

Such policy should reverse some “workplace culture” which automatically expects male workers to prioritise work over family commitments. It would also facilitate a more egalitarian redistribution of childcare and domestic tasks in two parent households.

2.2 Working needs of older workers

2.2.1 Older workers and employment

The appearance of the Celtic Tiger in the mid-1990's and the rapid economic growth that accompanied it contributed to a reversal of the earlier trend in the declining labour force participation of older people in Ireland, as the country faced an overall shortage of qualified workers. Indeed, Ireland is one of the few countries in Europe to have now reached the Stockholm target of 50% of older workers in employment (Age Action Ireland, 2004) compared to the EU average of 39% (NCPP, 2005).

In the context of the EU population as a whole, census reports show that Ireland has a relatively young population. However the challenges which an ageing population presents will face Ireland in the next generation as the demographic profile here falls into line with the EU average. The aging of the population (and as a result, the workforce) will present major issues, as increasing numbers of active older people will demand new social structures and opportunities. However this time lag affords us a period in which we can create clear-cut and coherent practice based on the principle of equality in relation to the retention of older workers in the workplace. In order to facilitate an increase in labour force participation, certain barriers to employment faced by older workers must be removed. One of the most serious obstacles blocking older workers from taking up or maintaining their place in the workforce is age discrimination.

2.2.2 Age discrimination and stigmatisation

A recent report in England found that age discrimination is the most commonly experienced prejudice across all age groups and that people over 55 are twice as likely to suffer from this in comparison to other forms of discrimination (Age Concern, 2005). With regard to participation in training, evidence suggests that older workers have a lower participation level in training than the rest of the work force. A recent survey found that only 40% of workers aged 55 years and over reported training activity in the previous two years, compared to 50% of workers in the 25-39 years of age (Equality Authority, 2002).

2.2.3 Benefits for older workers, society and the economy from the increased participation of older workers in the labour force

Meaningful work... is a central aspect of society, and is essential to the dignity and well being of individuals.

The choices that we, as a society make with regard to workplace development in the coming years will have a lasting impact on individuals, families, enterprises and the on-going success of our economy (NCCP, 2005)

This statement by the NCCP indicates the importance of increasing the participation of older workers in the labour force. The individual worker, society as a whole and the economy, at both a micro and macro level, all benefit from the employment of older people. Increasing participation amongst this group represents a society that values and embraces the experiences of its older citizens. From the point of view of the individual worker, increased participation allows for the utilisation of skills and knowledge, which have been gained over the course of a lifetime. At a demographic and economic level we must realise that as numbers of young people entering the labour market declines, other sources of labour supply will have to be identified if labour shortages are not to become a critical constraint on growth (NCCP, 2005).

2.2.4 Flexible work arrangements – a practical mechanism for facilitating employment for older workers

In order to make use of this valuable resource, working conditions need to be adapted in order to utilise and facilitate older workers. The National Flexi-work Partnership has identified the availability of flexible working arrangements to be a crucial factor in increasing the participation of older workers in employment. According to the Forum on the Workplace of the Future, improved flexibility in working hours aimed at enabling older workers to combine work and personal life is an essential pre-condition for maximising labour force participation by older workers who otherwise may not be favourably disposed to, and/or physically capable of, working full-time beyond their mid-sixties (NCCP, 2005).

2.3 Mental health issues and the workplace

2.3.1 Mental health and employment

Research has indicated that depression is the fourth leading cause of disease worldwide (Usten, Ayuso-Mateos, Chatterji, Mathers and Murray, 2004). In Ireland, it has been estimated that 300,000 people suffer from depression (McKeon, Healy, Bailey and Ward, 2000).

For people with mental health difficulties, work can hold paradoxes. Work and the stresses it encompasses, can exacerbate someone's fragility, while at the same time it can provide all the factors – an opportunity for control, skill use, interpersonal contact, external goal and task demands, variety, environmental clarity, availability of money, physical security and valued position that can contribute to a person's recovery and reintegration into normal life (Warr, 1987). There is also research evidence that work can be a protective factor (Brown & Harris, 1989). For people with mental health difficulties, particularly depression, being able to hold down a job provides objective evidence to their return to well being; thus being able to remain in employment has double significance. Several studies have suggested that the main benefit of employment to people with mental health issues may be affiliative rather than economic. Employment provides the opportunity of meeting this need in addition to a sense of fulfilment and identity. In an article on work and mental health rehabilitation, Foster (1999) puts forward the view that "opportunities for employment are crucial to rehabilitation".

2.3.2 Stigmatisation and disclosure

The National Institute of Mental Health in England found that "people with mental health problems are less likely to be employed than any other group of disabled people". It is little wonder then that disclosure and the perception of the stigmatisation that disclosing one's mental illness may arouse, are of central importance in the employment of people with mental health problems.

2.3.3 Benefits for people with mental health problems from flexible working

The provision of flexible working arrangements is critical if the needs of people with mental health problems are to be adequately met. For this group, the option of flexible working arrangements can make a vital difference. On the practical side, it provides a continued opportunity to engage in the world of work with all the advantages of social inclusion, income continuance and personal fulfilment. More importantly, the employee derives social and

psychological support through the mechanism of flexible working. The operation of these schemes gives a message to the employee that the organisation values them, that the organisation believes that the person will get better and that, even at times when the person is not well, they can still make a contribution to the organisation.

2.4 Overall benefits for employers from flexible working

Flexible working is not only beneficial to many groups of workers, there are also advantages to employers from developing and implementing flexible working arrangements.

In an article on Workplace Stress in Ireland, Armstrong (2001) refers to the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) finding that "policies benefiting worker health also benefit the bottom line". In a tightening, aging Irish labour market, broadening the spectrum to identify potential employees is of central importance for organisations and the economy in general. Thus a balanced work-life organisational culture is vital business.

Emmott and Hutchinson (1998) and Fynes, Morrissey, Roche, Whelan and Williams (1996) are quoted in Humphreys, Fleming and O'Donnell (2000) as having identified the following advantages to employers for providing flexible working arrangements to staff:

- ability to match work provisions more closely with customer/product demand
- reduced fixed costs, e.g. by the use of tele-working
- improved recruitment and retention of employees
- increased productivity and efficiency
- improved staff morale and loyalty
- reduced stress and sick leave
- reduced absenteeism
- access to a wider pool of potential employees

Every organisation has its own ethos. Organisations who respond to the work-life balance needs of their employees demonstrate a commitment to and appreciation of their workforce, as well as sending a positive image of the organisation to the wider public.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

3.1 Background: The development of the pilot projects

The Work-Life Balance Project of the National Flexi-Work Partnership invited employers to collaborate in the Project. IBEC was instrumental in facilitating contact with employers. Those employers expressing an interest in participating were invited to join a Working Party of Employers. This Working Party met several times and then convened subgroups on special areas of interest: Working Parents and Carers, Older People and People with Mental Health Problems. These subgroups in turn discussed the kinds of flexible working that was already available in their organisations and what else might be possible. Organisations were invited to design innovative modes of flexible working for each of the target groups and to host pilot projects to test the effectiveness of these innovative modes in their organisations.

Some of the organisations did create innovative modes of flexible working in response to the Project, while other companies were already at the 'cutting edge' in this area. They had a wide variety of innovative modes of flexible working patterns available to employees and there did not seem to be a need to devise new modes. It was the view of the partners in the National Flexi-Work Partnership and of the Social Partners in particular, that

it would also be valuable to capture information about the innovative modes of flexible working which were already out there and to date undocumented.

An example of a response tailored to the specific needs of their work force was developed by a company in the financial services sector. This organisation was relatively new and their young work force (average 25-35) needed different flexible arrangements. For example, they offered five days' paid paternity leave and also up to three paid leave days per annum for fertility treatment. They found that there was an increasing number of working mothers availing of maternity leave and returning to work. As a response to the present Project, this company carried out a survey on the experience of these employees and adjusted their policies in response to the outcome of this survey.

Another example of an organisation designing an innovative mode of flexible working to meet the individual needs of their organisation was the development of a plan for 'Flexible Fridays' for the months of June, July and August. The object of this plan was to give employees the opportunity to take time off in the summer.



There was also an added bonus for some employees – a group who often worked overtime but found themselves unable to take time off in lieu because of the particular demands of their business. The arrangement this company put in place was simple: employees could work up extra time during the week and take up to three and a half hours off on a Friday afternoon. This scheme ran during the months of June, July and August. Flexible Fridays were introduced in 2003 and continued in 2004 and 2005 because of the positive feedback from staff.

Two of the organisations involved in the Project, both with an older workforce, have designed and developed innovative phased retirement programmes for their employees. In one, a phased retirement scheme has been made available to staff on reaching 55 years of age. Depending on length of service, the scheme allows an employee up to four months away from the organisation spread over the two years prior to retirement. Another organisation is offering a gradual retirement package of working part-time for two years prior to retirement. The employee's pension contributions are paid in full so that upon retirement, the employee receives full pension benefit.

We also found that part-time working among managers, both male and female, was widespread in one company and many of these managers are included in our study. In addition, two of the NGOs participating in the Project provide part-time work for people with mental health problems and for older people under the FÁS Community Employment Scheme. These two programmes are also evaluated in the study reported here.

In addition, we came across a number of other innovative ideas, some of which we were not able to evaluate specifically, but which are very much worth noting. These included term time working which was available for grandparents (including grandfathers) on the production line; tele-working at home one day a week and working in the office four days a week; and emergency child care purchased by the company in a nearby centre and available to parents when their primary childcare arrangement breaks down. We also came across a pattern of managers who had total time flexibility and who could work away from the office. This had the benefit of allowing them to meet child care needs on an *ad hoc* basis (e.g., attend a child's performance at school). The price for this flexibility was that the person was 'on call' at all hours and often put in a 50 hour week or more.

We found that in addition to flexible working arrangements options *per se*, companies that aim to be 'employers of choice' are continuously fine-tuning their arrangements to meet their employees' changing needs and are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their staff to ascertain these needs and respond to them in an appropriate manner.

3.2 Overview of research design

The approach taken in the study involved the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The first part of the study involved a quasi-experimental procedure in which we gathered data before the flexible working and after in order to try to measure its effects. The second part of the study involved conducting two focus groups with two of the target groups in order to gain additional qualitative insights into the issues.

3.2.1 Pre-test/Post-test design

The aim in relation to the pre-test/post test design was to collect data at two points in time: 1) before the respondents began flexible working, in order to measure aspects of their work-life balance before the onset of the flexible working regime (the "pre-test") and 2) then again after a significant period of time (approximately six months to one year) in order to assess the effects of the flexible working on the person's work-life balance and overall well-being (the "post-test").

While such purity of design can be obtained in experimental settings, it is difficult to achieve this degree of purity in the real world. In reality, what happened was that while we attempted to obtain the pre-test data before the flexible working began, this did not always occur. In some cases the respondents had started flexible working a couple of weeks or a month prior to the interview. In some cases it transpired that they had been on flexible working for a year or longer. In order to optimise the research design we decided to administer the post-test only to those who we had "caught" just before the flexible working or for those who had only been doing it for a very short time. These individuals (n=17) constituted the "pre-test" group. An additional 19 who had been doing flexible working for a longer period were administered the pre-test questionnaire, but were not followed up. This group was called the "once-off" group.

The pre-test, once off and post-test interviews were carried out using structured questionnaires which also allowed for open ended responses. We present in this report both the quantitative and the qualitative results from these interviews.

3.2.2 Focus groups

In addition, we carried out two focus groups. The first included a group of employees with mental health problems, in order to gain in-depth qualitative information from this group and to augment the limited number of individual interviews with people in this group. The second focus group consisted of older women, most of whom were retired. This was carried out to gain additional information about older people's attitudes and to augment the individual interviews with older people. The focus groups generated purely qualitative data. Selected quotes from these group interviews are included in the qualitative comments throughout this report.

3.3 Sample

The total sample consisted of 52 people. Of these, 36 were interviewed individually. These included 18 working parents and carers, 10 older workers, 5 employees with mental health problems (to be referred in the report as "mental health workers") and 3 "flexible workers", that is workers who worked flexibly, but did not belong to any of the other groups. Of these, 17 were interviewed both before and after the flexible working.

In addition, the sample included 16 people in two focus groups, the first consisting of seven employees with mental health problems (six women and one man), and the second consisting of nine older women, seven of whom were retired and two of whom were working part-time.

3.4 Instruments

Questionnaires were used to collect data in the individual interviews. A basic questionnaire was designed with common questions including demographic characteristics of the respondent, commuting, caring responsibilities (for children, elderly and ill or disabled people), workplace characteristics, availability of various forms of flexible working, attitudes to flexible working, measures of work-life balance, perceived attitudes of employer, supervisor and colleagues, and overall well-being.

The basic questionnaire was adapted to be appropriate to each of the groups studied: 1) working parents and carers; 2) older people; 3) people with mental health problems. In addition, separate sets of questions for designed for each of these groups.

A list of questions was used in the focus groups to elicit attitudes to work, work-life balance and flexible working.

3.5 Data collection procedures

Individual interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis generally in the respondent's place of employment, in a private room. Interviews took on average 45 minutes to complete. The pre-test interviews were conducted during the period August 2003 to January 2005 and the post-test interviews were conducted between November 2004 and June 2005. The minimum time which elapsed between a pre test and a post test was six months and the maximum was one year and six months.

The focus groups were held in May and June 2004. The focus group with people with mental health needs was held at Aware and the focus group with older people was held at Trinity College.

3.6 Data analysis

We were able to collect pre and post test data on 17 of the 36 respondents who were interviewed on an individual basis. However, the remaining 19 had already begun the flexible working at the time of the pre-test interview. Since all 36 respondents were asked about their attitudes to flexible working, we focus in the Results section primarily on the pre-test data for all 36 respondents, with breakdowns by sub-group. We then present analyses of comparisons between the various groups (utilising t-tests) in order to examine the effects of flexible working on measures of work-life balance and well-being.

Qualitative data from the individual interviews and the focus groups are presented throughout the Results section to illustrate from a more human point of view the aggregated data.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Background

4.1.1 Demographic characteristics of the sample

A total of 39% of the sample were male and 61% female (see Table 4.1). The gender breakdown of the sample as a whole was also true of the 18 working parents in the sample. Ten of the older workers (60%) were male and 40% were female. Of the five Mental Health Workers, 80% were female and 20% male; all of the three Flexible Workers were female.

Half (50%) of the Working Parents and Carers were in their thirties, the next largest group was in their forties (22%), and a further 16.7% were in their fifties. Very few (5.6%) were in their twenties (see Table 4.2). The age profile of the “Older Workers” was naturally older.



Ninety per cent were over 50, with 50% in their fifties and 40% in their sixties. The remaining 10% consisted of one respondent who was in his forties; he was included with the Older Workers, since he was involved in a phased retirement scheme.

The Mental Health Workers were mainly in the age group 30-39 (40%). The remainder were older, with one

Table 4.1: Gender breakdown of the sample, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Male	38.9	60.0	20.0	-	38.9
Female	61.1	40.0	80.0	100.0	61.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.2: Age profile of the sample, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
20-29 years	5.6	-	-	-	2.8
30-39 years	50.0	-	40.0	100.0	38.9
40-49 years	22.2	10.0	20.0	-	16.7
50-59 years	16.7	50.0	20.0	-	25.0
60+ years	5.6	40.0	20.0	-	16.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

respondent in the forties age group (20%), one in the fifties (20%) and one in the sixties (20%). All of the “Flexible Workers” were in their thirties.

As can be seen in Table 4.3, it is evident that this is a well-educated group overall, with approximately 60% having a university degree or post-graduate degree. Only 8.4% had Junior Certificate or less and 19.4% had obtained the Leaving Certificate. Thus, just over a quarter of the sample (27.8%) had secondary education only, whereas the remaining 72.2% had some sort of third level education, ranging from a certificate or diploma (11.1%) or university degree (27.8%) to a post-graduate certificate or diploma (13.9%) or postgraduate degree (19.4%). A comparison of the different groups showed that this high level of education applied to all of them, with at least 60% of each group having a third level qualification. The one exception to this was the Mental Health group, of whom a slightly smaller proportion (40%) had third level qualifications.

4.1.2 Caring arrangements

All of the respondents were asked to give details on their caring commitments of children, older people and ill/disabled people in order to get a picture of the difficulties they faced in balancing their work and personal lives.

It was found that two-thirds of the respondents had caring commitments for children. Almost 90% of the Working Parents and Carers had caring commitments for children (see Table 4.4). Forty-four percent had responsibility for one child, 33.3% responsibility for two children and 11.1% had responsibility for four children. The children of Working Parents and Carers ranged from infants to over 18s; 36.6% had one or two children aged 0-2, 25% had one or two children aged 3-5, and 25% had one or two children aged 6-12. Just under a fifth had one or more children aged 18 or over living with them.

Table 4.3: Highest Educational Qualification, by Group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Primary	-	-	20.0	-	2.8
Secondary (Junior Cert.)	11.1	-	-	-	5.6
Secondary (Leaving Cert.)	5.6	40.0	40.0	-	19.4
Undergraduate Certificate/Diploma	16.7	10.0	-	-	11.1
University Degree	22.2	30.0	20.0	66.7	27.8
Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma	27.8	-	-	-	13.9
Postgraduate Degree (Masters, Doctorate)	16.7	20.0	20.0	33.3	19.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.4: Number of children for whom respondents have caring responsibilities, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
0	11.1	50.0	80.0	100.0	38.9
1	44.4	20.0	20.0	-	30.6
2	33.3	30.0	-	-	25.0
4	11.1	-	-	-	5.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

The difficulty in balancing their working hours with their childcare arrangements was one of the biggest problems faced by working parents. The majority of the parents (93.3%) reported that they were at least somewhat satisfied with the childcare arrangements they currently had (46.7% were very satisfied), while just one was dissatisfied. However, a few had to use a number of different methods of childcare to cover the time they were in work, or were travelling to work. For example, one respondent had an arrangement with a friend who also had young children, whereby she would mind both sets of children one day a week, and the friend would mind them another day. She then employed a childminder to care for her children another day during the week, and one of her parents minded them the other two days.

Both parents with preschool children and children of school-going age reported that they felt stressed trying to ensure that they left work on time every evening in order to pick up their children from the crèche or childminder's. As Working Parents often had no childcare arrangement for emergency situations, they often felt guilty having to refuse to work late. The pressure associated with childcare arrangements was another reason why many chose to change their working hours or the way their working hours were organised.

It appears that the traditional division of labour operates within at least some of the respondents' families, as many of the males do not seem to have the same level of caring commitments as their wives:

"...I'm very satisfied with my childcare arrangements – my wife is at home full-time."

Male Working Parent, Professional in his forties

"...I'd bring my daughter to school if my wife was unavailable."

Male Working Parent, Professional in his fifties

In contrast, many of the female Working Parents seemed to have the bulk of responsibility in arranging childcare for their children:

"...I leave home at 6 am and drive into Dublin, where I leave my daughter with a friend, who'll mind her until 8am and then bring her into the crèche. It means that I can leave work early and pick her up in the crèche before 6pm."

**Female Working Parent,
Administrator in her thirties**

Fifty percent of the Older Workers had responsibility for children. These tended to be aged 6-12 or 18+. Several of the Older Workers reported that they carried out a wide range of caring activities for school-going children, grandchildren, elderly parents or parents-in law and relatives, partners or siblings with disabilities. However, none saw themselves as being a primary carer.

Again, it was often the females among the two groups who were more heavily involved in caring activities than their male counterparts.

"...I look after my grandchild one day a week; they live out of town. It takes ages to get there so it was really difficult for us before."

Female Older Worker, Executive in her fifties

"My daughter is a single mum, so my wife and I help out a lot."

Male Older Worker, Manager in his sixties

Some of the Older Workers had children still at school and were grateful for the additional free time they had as a result of flexible working.

"...We married late so we have young children. It's nice to have more time with the youngest. I now see what I missed with the others."

Male Older Worker, Middle Manager in his fifties

Twenty per cent of those with mental health needs had childcare responsibilities. As with the older workers, while none of the Mental Health Workers reported having primary caring responsibilities, they still had some caring demands on their time, and similarly, older children require a certain level of care.

"...I chose flexible hours. I didn't want work all the time, even though my kids were 20 to 24, they still needed me. Older children are very demanding - you have to be there for them."

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group**

Almost 20% (19.5%) of the sample had responsibility for care of elderly relatives (see Table 4.5). This included 16.7% of the Working Parents and Carers, 30% of the Older Workers and 20% of the Mental Health Workers. In some cases, this involved care of two elderly people. A further 8.3% of the sample had care responsibilities for ill or disabled relatives (see Table 4.6). This individual was in the Working Parents and Carers group.

Respondents who have caring arrangements other than for their own children also tend to be female, and faced similar problems. One Carer indicates that, in taking on the responsibility for her mother’s needs, she is sacrificing her advancement up the career ladder, at least for the time being:

“...My working part-time is the only option. My mother has always had someone with her that she knows, which is why I go up to her. My main concern at the moment is my mother, not my career.”

Female Carer, Professional in her thirties

With an increasingly ageing population, Older Workers, although classified as ‘old’ themselves, are often involved in the care of elderly parents.

“...My wife’s mother lives with us. She does not like to be left alone at all. It is very trying for my wife so we are able to share this.”

Male Older Worker, Senior Manager in his fifties

Sometimes a respondent’s partner, while not disabled, needed a lot of care – someone to take them to hospital visits and therapeutic centres.

“...It’s great to have the time for this without juggling my work time”.

Male Older Worker, Senior Professional in his sixties

The respondents also spoke about vulnerable family members who, although they lived independently, relied on their support.

“...I tidy the place up for him once a week. I drop in on him every couple of days. All that’s not as pressured now.”

Male Older Worker, Senior Professional in his fifties

If one looks at the total caring responsibilities of the respondents, as shown in Table 4.7, it may be seen that two-thirds of the sample (66.7%) have caring responsibilities for one or more persons. One quarter of the sample had responsibilities to care for one person, 30.6% had responsibilities to care for two people, 2.8% had responsibilities to care for three people and 8.3% had responsibilities to care for four people. These workers with care responsibilities are in three of the four groups of workers in our sample: Working Parents and Carers, Older Workers and Mental Health Workers. It is clear that these people need flexible working in order to meet their caring responsibilities.

Table 4.5: Number of elderly people for whom respondents have caring responsibilities, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
0	83.3	70.0	80.0	100.0	80.6
1	11.1	30.0	-	-	13.9
2	5.6	-	20.0	-	5.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.6: Number of ill /disabled relatives for whom respondents have caring responsibilities, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
0	83.3	100.0	100.0	100.0	91.7
1	16.7	-	-	-	8.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

4.1.3 Commuting

Cross-cultural research has demonstrated that one of the key factors contributing to work-life balance is commuting (Fine-Davis, Fagnani, Giovannini, Hojgaard and Clarke, 2004). Long commutes can be a stress factor and short commutes can contribute to work-life balance and quality of life. In the present sample it was found that the most common form of transport for getting to work was the car. Three-quarters of the sample took a car to work (see Table 4.8). The remainder used buses (16.7%) and trains (22.2%) (Dart, Luas, etc.). Car usage was highest among the Working Parents and Carers (94.4%), and next highest among Older Workers (80%). Flexible Workers were equally likely to use cars or trains. Mental Health Workers were most likely to use the bus and next most likely to use trains.

Among the entire sample, not a single respondent reported using a bicycle, motorcycle or walking. While the high usage of cars corroborates national patterns, it surpasses them. The CSO found that over half of Irish people in employment drove a car to work in the first quarter of 2000 (CSO, 2000). In a study of working parents in

Dublin, 70.1% were found to use a car to get to work (less than in this sample where it is 94.4%). That study showed that 20.4% of working parents used buses and trains, which is similar to the figure obtained in the present study. However, in that study 3.2% used bicycles and motorcycles and 12.8% walked (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2004). One respondent in the present study explains why alternative means of transport to the car create difficulties:

“...Living closer to the job would be a less stressful alternative. Near where I live, there’s a lack of road space for buses and the bus stop is very far from my work.”

Male Carer, Maintenance Staff in his thirties

The respondents in the present study reported that it took on average 49 minutes to get to work. This was highest among the Flexible Workers, who reported it took them 55 minutes, and next highest among the Working Parents and Carers, for whom the commute to work took on average 51 minutes. The issue of the long commute is particularly relevant to younger workers who have been forced to move outside Dublin to buy a house, due to the rise in house prices. The commute to

Table 4.7: Total number of people for whom respondents have caring responsibilities

	Working Parents & Carers (n=13)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=2)	Total (n=30)
	%	%	%	%	%
0	5.6	50.0	60.0	100.0	33.3
1	38.9	10.0	20.0	-	25.0
2	38.9	30.0	20.0	-	30.6
3	-	10.0	-	-	2.8
4	16.7	-	-	-	8.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.8: Type of transport used to travel to work, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Car	94.4	80.0	-	66.7	75.0
Train (DART, Luas)	11.1	10.0	20.0	66.7	16.7
Bus	11.2	20.0	80.0	-	22.2
Bicycle	-	-	-	-	-
Motorbike	-	-	-	-	-
Walking	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Responses total more than 100%, as people could give more than one reply

work, while still long, was less for Older Workers and Mental Health Workers, ranging from 44.5 - 46 minutes on average. The length of the commute varied widely – from 15 minutes to 120 minutes, with the median commute being 40 minutes.

Respondents varied greatly in their assessment of how easy or difficult they found the commute to work: 56.6% reported that it was easy to one degree or another, with 20% saying it was ‘very easy’, 23.3% saying it was ‘easy’, and 13.3% saying it was ‘somewhat easy’ (see Table 4.9). On the other hand, almost half said that it was at least somewhat difficult: 16.7% finding it ‘somewhat difficult’, 10% finding it ‘difficult’ and 16.7% finding it ‘very difficult.’

The ease vs. difficulty of the commute varied by group. The Working Parents and Carers were more likely to find it difficult, with 53.9% saying it was difficult to one degree or another (23.1% found it ‘very difficult’). Older Workers and Mental Health Workers were less likely to find the commute to work difficult; 70% of Older Workers and 80% of Mental Health Workers said their commute was easy.

Table 4.9: Ease/difficulty of commuting to work, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=13)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=2)	Total (n=30)
	%	%	%	%	%
Very Easy	-	30.0	60.0	-	20.0
Easy	23.1	30.0	20.0	-	23.3
Somewhat Easy	23.1	10.0	-	-	13.3
Somewhat Difficult	15.4	10.0	-	100.0	16.7
Difficult	15.4	-	20.0	-	10.0
Very Difficult	23.1	20.0	-	-	16.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Throughout the course of the interviews, it emerged that commuting was one of the biggest problems faced by many Working Parents and Carers:

“...With commuting, it’s an eleven-hour day.”
Female Working Parent, Administrative Staff in her fifties

“...The commute is horrible. I need the car.”
Female Working Parent, Manager in her thirties

Some of the Working Parents and Carers were able to use flexible working to resolve the commuting issue. One respondent says that she would prefer to get a job nearer to where she lives, just outside Dublin, but being able to change her work schedule has made her commute a good deal less stressful. Another respondent also feels that her company’s flexibility, including allowing her to work from home if needed, has allowed her to stay in her job.

“...I leave work early and work an extra hour at home. It’s too long a commute otherwise.”
Female Working Parent, Administrator in her forties

Many changed their work schedules in order to overcome the long time that they were forced to spend sitting in their cars.

“...My flexible hours suit me, because it means I can go into work early and get out before the traffic starts in the evenings.”
Male Working Parent, Professional in his forties

In contrast, the issue of commuting was perhaps not as critical for Older Workers or Mental Health Workers as it was for the Working Parents and Carers. This may be because, being older, they had been able to buy homes near their work, making the actual commuting itself somewhat easier. However, even some of those who reported the actual journey as ‘easy’ or ‘somewhat easy’ sometimes described the experience itself as ‘stressful’.

“...I found the commute quite stressful when I was working full time and under time pressure - another anxiety I don’t have to worry about now”.

Female Mental Health Worker, Executive in her thirties

While it was seen above that there was variability in terms of how “easy or difficult” people found their commute to work, when respondents were asked how “stressful or unstressful” their commute to work was, this appeared to elicit a somewhat different dimension. It was found that among Working Parents and Carers, as well as the Mental Health Workers, the commute to work was stressful for a significant proportion of them, 61.6% of the Working Parents and Carers and 60% of Mental Health Workers (see Table 4.10). Indeed, among all workers, 46.7% found the commute to work stressful to one degree or another.

4.1.4 Work characteristics of the sample

Just under two-thirds (61.1%) of the sample were employed in the private sector, just over a quarter (27.8%) in the public sector and the remainder (11.1%) in community organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (see Table 4.11). Working Parents and Carers and Flexible Workers were more likely to be employed in the private sector. Mental Health Workers were more likely to be employed in the public sector (40%) or by NGOs (60%). Older Workers were fairly equally distributed between the private sector (50%) and the public sector (40%), with a minority working for NGOs.

Most of the respondents had worked for their present employer for a long time. Just over 60% (61.1%) had been with them for seven years or longer (see Table 4.12). A quarter (25%) had been with their present

Table 4.10: Perceptions of stressfulness of commute to work, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Very Unstressful	-	20.0	20.0	-	10.0
Unstressful	30.8	40.0	-	-	26.7
Somewhat Unstressful	7.7	20.0	20.0	50.0	16.7
Somewhat Stressful	23.1	-	20.0	50.0	16.7
Stressful	30.8	-	40.0	-	20.0
Very Stressful	7.7	20.0	-	-	10.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.11: Sector of employment, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Public	16.7	40.0	40.0	33.3	27.8
Private	83.3	50.0	-	66.7	61.1
Community/NGO	-	10.0	60.0	-	11.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

employer for 3-6 years and the remainder (13.9%) had been with them for only 1-2 years. Not surprisingly, the Older Workers had been with their employers for the longest time; 90% had been with them for seven years or more. However the Working Parents and Carers, most of whom it will be recalled were in their thirties, also had a record of long and stable employment with their current employer, with 55.6% of them having worked for them seven years or more and 38.9% having worked there for 3-6 years. The Flexible Workers had all been with their current employer for at least 3-4 years. Mental Health Workers were divided, with 60% having been with their current employer for 1-2 years and 40% there for seven years or longer. This reflects the fact that three of the respondents in this group were employed in an NGO on a Community Employment Scheme. Such schemes are generally time delimited and by their nature do not involve long term employment.

As can be seen in Table 4.13, a very high proportion of the workers were on permanent contracts (86.1%). This was true of all of the Working Parents and Carers and Flexible Workers. A high proportion of the Older Workers (80%) were on permanent contracts and the

remainder on temporary contracts. Mental Health Workers were notable in that only 40% were on permanent contracts and the majority were on temporary contracts. This again reflects the nature of the Community Employment Scheme.

It may be seen that slightly over half of the sample (52.8%) worked full-time and the remainder worked part-time (41.7%) or job-shared (5.6%) (see Table 4.14). All of the Flexible Workers were working full-time, while 61.1% of the Working Parents and Carers were. The remainder of the Working Parents and Carers either worked part-time (27.8%) or job-shared (11.1%). The Older Workers and Mental Health Workers were more likely to work part-time (70% of the Older Workers and 60% of the Mental Health Workers) and the remainder of each group worked full-time.

Given the relatively high proportion of the sample working part-time and job-sharing (47.3% in total), it is interesting to note that quite a high proportion were managers. As may be seen in Table 4.15 below, 64% overall were managers and 36% were non-managers. The majority of the Older Workers (80%) were man-

Table 4.12: Length of time worked in organisation, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
1-2 years	5.6	10.0	60.0	-	13.9
3-4 years	22.2	-	-	66.7	16.7
5-6 years	16.7	-	-	-	8.3
7+ years	55.6	90.0	40.0	33.3	61.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.13: Type of contract, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Permanent	100.0	80.0	40.0	100.0	86.1
Temporary	-	20.0	60.0	-	13.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

agers, as were 67% of the working parents. Amongst the Mental Health Workers, 40% were managers. Of the Flexible Workers, two-thirds were managers.

The high representation of managers in the sample is due to several factors. Firstly, it was one of the main goals of the research to evaluate part-time work and flexible work among managers. Given the widely held belief that managers must work full-time, and indeed are often expected to work overtime, one of the main aims of this research was to test how effectively managers could work if they were working part-time or flexible hours. Also, the companies who participated in the research tended to provide the names of personnel in management for the research, even though respondents in all grades were requested. It was noted in the course of the research that flexible working was less available, for example, on production lines in some of the companies which collaborated.

One quarter of the total sample was contracted to work less than 20 hours a week (see Table 4.16). Just under a

third (30.6%) were supposed to work 20-34.9 hours, exactly a third (33.3%) 35-37.9 hours and 11.1% 38 or more hours per week. This corresponds to their report above of working full-time or part-time. Thus, 55.6% worked under 35 hours per week and 44.4% worked 35 hours or more.

As can be seen in Table 4.17, respondents in both the Older Workers and Mental Health Workers groups were more likely to start work later than Working Parents and Carers. It may be seen that the Working Parents and Carers tended to start work the earliest, with over 55% starting at 8 a.m. or earlier. Given that many may have had to drop children off at the crèche before work and then go on to work is indicative of the very early start many of this group had to their working day.

In contrast, the Mental Health Workers tended to start later in the day. This may relate to the structure of the Community Employment Scheme, in which 60% of them were involved. However, it also relates to the fact that people with depression often have difficulty getting started in the morning and the flexibility to have a later

Table 4.14: Type of Employment, by Group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Full-time	61.1	30.0	40.0	100.0	52.8
Part-time	27.8	70.0	60.0	-	41.7
Job-share	11.1	-	-	-	5.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.15: Managerial status, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Manager	66.7	80.0	40.0	66.7	66.7
Not a Manager	33.3	20.0	60.0	33.3	33.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

start can be the very thing that enables them to remain in the workforce.

As can be seen in Table 4.18, there was wide variability in the usual time of finishing work. This was as early as 12:15 pm and as late as 7 pm. Most of the people finished work some time between 4:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. (64%); however, almost 20% finished work later than 6 p.m.

Over half of the respondents (55.6%) reported that they regularly worked longer than their contracted hours (see Table 4.19). Almost half of all respondents who worked overtime (47.2%) stated that the main reason for this was that they had too much work to carry out in their normal working hours, prompting one respondent to remark that the distribution of work within his department needed to be revised, as he had more work than he could cope with, which meant he needed to

Table 4.16: Number of hours contracted to work per week, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Less than 20 hrs	27.8	10.0	60.0	-	25.0
20 to 34.9 hrs	22.2	50.0	20.0	33.3	30.6
35 to 37.9 hrs	33.3	30.0	20.0	66.7	33.3
38 or more hrs	16.7	10.0	-	-	11.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.17: Usual time of starting work, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=13)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=2)	Total (n=30)
	%	%	%	%	%
Between 6.30am and 7.59am	27.8	20.0	-	-	19.4
8.00am	27.8	20.0	-	33.3	22.2
8.01am to 8.59am	27.8	10.0	20.0	33.3	22.2
9.00am to 9.59am	11.1	40.0	20.0	33.3	22.2
10.00am or after	5.6	10.0	60.0	-	13.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.18: Usual time of finishing work, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Before 4.30pm	22.2	10.0	20.0	-	16.7
4.30pm to 4.59pm	22.2	20.0	-	33.3	19.4
5.00pm	27.8	30.0	40.0	-	27.8
5.01pm to 5.59pm	11.1	20.0	40.0	-	16.7
6.00pm to 7.00pm	16.7	20.0	-	66.7	19.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

work longer hours to ensure all his work was done. However, a small number of respondents who worked overtime felt pressure to work additional hours (see Table 4.20).

A number of respondents referred to the presence of a 'long hours culture' or 'organisational culture' within their workplace, where employees were rewarded for working extra hours. In some of the companies, working long hours were considered the norm, whether or not respondents were happy with this:

"...It's taken for granted that you will put in the extra hours. It's assumed and expected of you."

Female Flexible Worker, Consultant in her thirties

In addition, some respondents were unhappy being tied to set hours, but feel that it was not the responsibility of their employer to accommodate them:

"...The day is long – I could do with a little bit more flexibility. I'd love to leave at five o'clock, but that would cause problems for my employer."

**Female Working Parent,
Administrative Staff in her fifties**

4.2 Flexible working

4.2.1 Awareness of statutory and non-statutory entitlements

One of the key factors behind the successful implementation of flexible working arrangements is the extent to which employees are familiar with their availability. Respondents were asked whether various flexible working arrangements, both statutory and non-statutory, were available to them and also whether or not they availed of them. Overall, respondents were well aware of the various arrangements available to them, although a small number were uncertain about some of their entitlements, illustrating that companies need to make a better effort to ensure their employees are aware of their

Table 4.19: Percentage of respondents who regularly work longer than their contracted hours, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	55.6	50.0	40.0	100.0	55.6
No	44.4	50.0	60.0	-	44.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.20: Reasons for working longer than contracted hours, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Demands of the work	50.0	40.0	40.0	66.7	47.2
Part of contract	5.6	-	-	33.3	5.6
Shortage of staff	-	-	-	33.3	2.8
Machine breakdowns	-	-	-	-	-
To get more overtime	-	-	-	-	-
To get extra leave	-	-	-	33.3	2.9
Part of organisational culture	5.6	10.0	-	-	5.6
Other	16.7	20.0	-	-	13.9
N/A	38.9	50.0	60.0	-	41.7

Note: Responses total more than 100%, as people could give more than one reply

entitlements, including statutory policies. For example, 27.8% of the Working Parents and Carers group stated that they did not know whether unpaid parental leave was available to them and 50.0% did not know whether Carer’s Leave was available. However, only one respondent stated that they did not know Emergency/Special Leave, or Force Majeure was available to them. A small number of respondents were also unsure as to the company policies in operation; 42.9% of respondents said that they did not know whether paternity leave was available to them.

4.2.2 Types of flexible working used by respondents

The respondents were engaged in a variety of different types of flexible working, as may be seen in Table 4.21. Just under a quarter of the sample was engaged in part-time work in which they worked half-time or less. This mode was availed of by 80% of the Mental Health Workers, 30% of the Older Workers and just 5.6% of the Working Parents and Carers. Job sharing, on the other hand, as a mode of part-time work, was engaged in by 11.1% of the Working Parents and Carers and none of the other groups. Other forms of reduced hours was a popular mode of flexible working, being availed of by almost a fifth of the sample overall. It was chosen by all groups apart from the Mental Health Workers. Working from home (tele-working or doing piece work) was not widespread; however 11.2% of the Working Parents and Carers reported that they utilised this mode of flexible working. A significant proportion of the Working Parents and Carers reported that they were engaged in “Other forms of flexible working.” In the case of Older Workers, for some this involved phased retirement in

which they had several months off per year in the last two years before retirement. In the case of Working Parents and Carers, this referred to pilot projects introduced by the different organisations to facilitate the Pilot Project, for example, the practice used by one firm, whereby staff can work up enough hours during the week to enable them to leave early on Friday.

When asked how they expected their new working arrangement would affect their work-life balance, the vast majority said they expected it to have a positive effect. None of the respondents expected any negative effect. Overall, 21.2% said their new arrangement would have a “somewhat positive” effect on their work-life balance, 42.4% said it would have a “positive” effect and 36.4% said it would have a “very positive” effect (see Table 4.22). The groups with the most positive expectations were the Older Workers, with 60% saying it would affect their work life balance “very positively.” Mental Health Workers were also highly enthusiastic about the effect of flexible working for them, with 50% saying it would affect their work-life balance “very positively.” Working Parents and Carers, while also optimistic, were somewhat less so than the other groups, with only 23.5% saying they thought their new arrangement of flexible working would affect their work-life balance “very positively”.

When asked what other flexible working arrangements, if any, they would like to have, 21 of the 36 respondents (58%) mentioned that they would like some additional or different kinds of flexible working.

These 21 were then asked to indicate what their preferred modes of flexible working would be. The most popular modes of flexible working were reduced hours (men-

Table 4.21: Type of flexible working arrangements utilised, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Part-Time (1/2 time or less)	5.6	30	80	-	22.2
Job share	11.1	-	-	-	5.6
Other reduced hours	22.2	20	-	33.3	19.4
Flexi-Time	-	-	-	33.3	2.8
Other flexible hours	-	-	20.0	-	2.8
Work, home-telework	5.6	-	-	-	2.8
Work, home-piece work	5.6	-	-	-	2.5
Other forms of flexible working	50.0	50.0	20.0	33.3	44.4

Note: Responses total more than 100%, as people could give more than one reply

tioned by 33.3%) and working from home (mentioned by 28.6%) (see Table 4.23). Amongst the Working Parents and Carers, reduced hours were cited by 23.1%, and part-time work, term-time working and working from home were each cited by 15.4% of the sample. Older Workers favoured part-time work (cited by 50%), reduced hours (cited by 50%), working from home (cited by 50%). A smaller proportion cited job sharing (25%) and flexible hours (25%). Mental Health Workers favoured reduced hours (100%) and working from home.

4.2.3 Attitudes to flexible working

The qualitative data obtained in the study reflect the feelings and attitudes of the respondents in the various groups towards flexible working. While most of the attitudes were positive, some respondents also saw some drawbacks to flexible working. In this section, we present a selection of the diversity of attitudes expressed by the respondents in the interviews.

Some of these comments include attitudes of managers, from the point of view of managing flexible working. The post-test questionnaire included a section for those

Table 4.22: Expectation of how new working arrangement will affect work-life balance, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=17)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=4)	Flexible Workers (n=2)	Total (n=33)
	%	%	%	%	%
Very negatively	-	-	-	-	-
Negatively	-	-	-	-	-
Somewhat Negatively	-	-	-	-	-
Somewhat Positively	41.2	-	-	-	21.2
Positively	35.3	40.0	50.0	100.0	42.4
Very Positively	23.5	60.0	50.0	-	36.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.23: Other flexible working arrangements desired, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=13)	Older Workers (n=4)	Mental Health Workers (n=1)	Flexible Workers (n=1)	Total (n=21)
	%	%	%	%	%
Part-time working	15.4	50.0	-	-	19.0
Job-sharing	7.7	25.0	-	-	9.5
Flexible hours (Flexi-time)	7.7	25.0	-	-	9.5
Reduced hours	23.1	50.0	100.0	33.3	33.3
Term time working	15.4	-	-	-	9.5
Working from home	15.4	50.0	100.0	33.3	28.6
Other	46.2	-	-	33.3	33.3
Gradual retirement	-	50.0	100.0	-	14.3

Note: Responses total more than 100%, as people could give more than one reply

respondents who also were managers in order to ascertain their attitudes to managing flexible working. Of the 17 respondents who completed the post-test, seven had managerial responsibilities. Some of their comments are included in this section.

“...I get to see my children a lot more – I have a better life and can do things after dinner. I don’t have to cram everything in after 6pm.”

Female Working Parent, Administrator in her forties

The Mental Health Workers felt that the option of flexibility, while critical for people with depression, is necessary for everyone.

“...I’m only at work a certain number of hours a week and the fact that I can pick the days/hours that suit me, I can fit in the things I want to do in the meantime. It’s definitely a big plus. If I was stuck rigidly to a timetable, it would certainly add much more pressure.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her thirties**

Several respondents hinted at being able to be more productive at work because of the reduction of stress levels.

“...Now that I’ve time to unwind, I am able to give my all to the time I’m here.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her sixties**

The opportunity to take time off with the company’s permission also reduced stress levels.

“...I already work the necessary hours – it gives me the option to take time off, guilt free.”

Male Working Parent, Professional in his forties

Many of the Older Workers viewed phased retirement in a positive light. In the pilot Project they were in, their pension arrangements did not suffer from the take up of flexible working arrangements. In fact, one company provided incentivised payments to encourage the take up of the scheme. One of the main positive aspects mentioned was the opportunity it afforded as preparation for full-time retirement.

“...People should be allowed to work part-time up to retirement – because ‘bang!’ at 65 you’re doing nothing!”

Retired Older Woman, Older People’s Focus Group

Several mentioned having seen colleagues working flat out until the day before retirement.

“...It all ended so abruptly... it was such a shock to the system.”

Male Manager in his sixties

They reported how difficult it had been for some members of this group to adapt to being retired.

“...It took them ages to adjust, some of them never did.”

Male Manager in his fifties

In spite of the benefits of flexible working, respondents also noted that it created some problems, often because of a perception that such arrangements did not have their company’s full support. Some felt that they would be ‘punished’ for failing to devote long hours to the company by being passed over for promotion:

“...My career is on hold at the moment. My chances of promotion are limited.”

Female Working Parent, Professional in her thirties

Others indicated that there was a difficult trade-off in working fewer hours, as it meant reduced pay and additional work, and pressure:

“...There are financial implications to flexible working that make such options unattractive. They could also damage your career prospects.”

Male Working Parent, Manager in his thirties

“...I get to spend more time with the baby, but I’m not doing five days’ work in four.”

Female Working Parent, Senior Manager in her forties

Many of the respondents also worried that their colleagues would perceive them as engaging in less work, and worried about the repercussions of this:

“...A lot of people wouldn’t know you’re working at home. They might look at it negatively from their own point of view. They need to make everyone aware that the option is there.”

Female Working Parent, Manager in her twenties

Some saw flexible working as company cost cutting:

“...It’s all wrapped up as a plus for employees and, don’t misunderstand me, it can be. However, I’ve seen them refuse a woman flexible working arrangements because they think it is likely that she may leave if the pressure gets too much... they should be more honest about it.”

Male Older Worker, Manager in his forties

Many of the managers noted that the staff within their departments worked better due to increased morale and a sense of autonomy within the company. However, some managers expressed concerns about flexible working, indicating that staff are sometimes not available when needed, and can take advantage of the flexible working system.

It appears that the flexible working arrangements available within a particular organisation may not be the most suitable to meet the needs of staff. For example, the practice used by one firm, whereby staff can work up enough hours during the week to enable them to leave early on Friday did not appear to be suitable for many staff, as the work of the company was event-driven, with many deadlines on Friday afternoons:

“...This organisation is client-focused. There’s a difficulty if you are not accessible for the client.”

Female Working Parent, Senior Manager in her forties

“...Deadlines for projects are sometimes 5pm on a Friday so you may not have the staff available.”

**Male Working Parent,
Professional/Manager in his thirties**

In spite of the difficulties respondents associated with flexible working, most thought that they could be overcome, with many mentioning the need for increased communication and co-operation on the part of both staff and management:

“...There is a need for flexibility and understanding on both sides... People need to get things in perspective sometimes.”

Female Working Parent, Senior Manager in her forties

Respondents who managed staff on flexible working arrangements were asked about the effects of flexible working on their department. Only one of the seven managers felt that flexible working impacted negatively on how staff carried out their work, yet only one of the

managers felt that having staff on flexible working impacted positively on the ability of the department to achieve its overall goals and targets. This shows that managers’ fears about the productivity of flexible working on the department might contribute to a negative mindset about Work-life Balance policies in general.

4.3 Workplace needs of employees and perceptions of employers’ response

4.3.1 Workplace needs of working parents and carers, older workers and mental health workers

Each of the groups has particular needs in relation both to work-life balance and working in general. Working Parents and Carers have the conflicting commitment of caring for children and, in some cases, elderly or disabled relatives. Many Older Workers also have caring commitments. Many may have the need for less pressure and more leisure time, as they begin to phase into retirement. Mental Health Workers have to deal with their illness and need to balance this aspect of their life with their working life. In order for employers to be able to respond to the needs of their employees, it is necessary for them to understand the types of problems they are likely to have.

Working parents and carers

As can be seen from above, finding suitable childcare arrangements and dealing with the long commute every day are the two main problems faced by Working Parents and Carers interviewed, and it is often for one of these reasons that people in this group changed their working hours or the way their working hours were organised.

“... We don’t really have a life outside work.”

**Female Working Parent,
Administrative Staff in her fifties**

Often, working parents and carers are forced to choose between their work and their family or personal lives:

“...A few years ago, I had to decide whether I wanted to go higher – I made a decision not to.”

**Male Working Parent,
Senior Professional/Manager in his fifties**

Organisational culture and time pressures can make it difficult to strike the balance:

“...It’s harder for a woman – she has to be a mother, a housewife, a wife, career person. There is the guilt factor of being a working mother and trying to balance the lot. I found being a housewife full-time was not for me: I was starved of conversation. The attitude of neighbours who are housewives makes me feel guilty too – I feel like a bad mother.”

Female Working Parent, Manager in her thirties

“...There’s pressure to get home but I feel guilty leaving work early.”

Female Working Parent, Administrator in her forties

Some respondents were pushed to extreme measures before recognising the need for work-life balance:

“...I had a health scare, and learned that life is more important than work.”

**Male Working Parent,
Senior Professional/Manager in his fifties**

Older Workers

A set of six statements was presented to the older respondents in the sample to see what they felt about certain issues and stereotypes concerning Older Workers. The results of these are shown in Table 4.24. When presented with the statement, “Older Workers are as capable of learning new technology as any other workers”, a whopping 90% said they were; 40% moderately agreed and 40% strongly agreed with the statement. Indeed, it was found that, in general, a ‘wide range’ of training was available to Older Workers. Sometimes this obviously related to their current work and sometimes related to what they intended to do in their ‘retirement’.

However, the majority (60%) felt that “older workers are viewed as less able to adapt at the workplace.” On the topic of recognition of their contribution to the workplace, respondents in general concentrated on how well this had been recognised in the past.

“...To be honest, they know that I am only putting in the time. We are both disengaging now; they are not really interested.”

Male Manager in his fifties

Some exceptions emerged where the respondent had been assigned a special project or was mentoring a younger staff member to take over a special role.

“...I’m doing a really useful project now. To tell you the truth, I was very despondent before this came up...but I feel my old self again...I was chuffed when they approached me.”

Male Older Worker, Manager in his fifties

Some of the respondents also felt that older people are not respected in general:

“...Older people are made to feel no longer important members of society, even though they had most interesting pasts – people who have contributed immensely to society – they are now on the scrap heap.”

**Retired older woman, previously a civil servant,
Older People’s Focus Group**

Many respondents indicated that it can be difficult to apply for jobs as an older worker:

“...Once they looked at me I think they thought ‘what’s this one doing here?’”

Retired older woman, had done voluntary work in hospitals and teaching, Older People’s Focus Group

While many Older Workers favour flexible working, including part-time working, they feel that “people who work part-time prior to retirement lose their clout in the organisation,” a statement with which 80% agreed. In addition, most felt that “pension requirements/concerns prevent many people from taking up flexible working” (60% felt this way) (see Table 4.24).

Mental Health Workers

As in the case of Older Workers, employees with mental health problems also have issues particular to their circumstances and attitudes in the workplace can be critical to their successful functioning and well-being. A set of four statements was presented to the sample of Mental Health Workers, to which they were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement. The responses to these are contained in Table 4.25. It must be borne in mind that this is a very small sample of only five individuals, so that their responses cannot necessarily be generalised. Nevertheless they are true of this group.

Overall the responses were positive regarding organisational climate. Eighty per cent said that “All employees are treated equally in this company.” Furthermore, 60% said that “In this organisation, employees with mental

Table 4.24: Older Workers' Attitudes to Workplace Issues and Perceptions of Older People (n = 10)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
a. All employees are treated equally in this company, regardless of their age	11.1	22.2 (44.4)	11.1	11.1	22.2 (55.5)	22.2	100.0
b. Pension requirements /concerns prevent many people from taking up flexible working	30.0	10.0 (40.0)	-	20.0	30.0 (60.0)	10.0	100.0
c. Older Workers are viewed as less able to adapt to changes at the workplace	10.0	30.0 (40.0)	-	20.0	20.0 (60.0)	20.0	100.0
d. Older Workers are viewed as more loyal and more reliable than younger workers	-	20.0 (50.0)	30.0	10.0	30.0 (50.0)	10.0	100.0
e. People who work part-time prior to retirement lose their clout in the organisation	10.0	- (20.0)	10.0	10.0	50.0 (80.0)	20.0	100.0
f. Older workers are as capable of learning new technology as any other workers	-	- (10.0)	10.0	10.0	40.0 (90.0)	40.0	100.0

health needs are viewed as equally capable of contributing to the workforce as any other employee.” However, 40% disagreed with this. All of the respondents (100%) felt that “flexible working is crucial to support people with mental health needs.” There was quite strong feeling about this, with 40% moderately agreeing and 60% strongly agreeing on the critical importance of flexible working for this group.

In fact, there was a general consensus that, on the whole, being at work in itself contributes to mental well being.

“...In my last job, they weren’t willing to hold my job for me when they knew I had post- natal depression. But I had to go back to work; I felt okay about going back...It’s nice to feel normal, have a normal routine.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her thirties**

“...The best thing I’ve ever done was to go out to work. I was 20 years at home, I just couldn’t get out to work. Then I got this job and it was like a second chance in life for me to meet other people and I couldn’t believe there was another world out there... it was like a different life.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group**

As was mentioned earlier, people with mental health problems do not often tell their employer or colleagues that they suffer from mental health problems. Therefore, it was interesting to note that in 40% of the cases, people said that in their place of employment “people do not discuss or disclose mental health problems.” In 60% of cases respondents disagreed and it may be assumed that disclosure and openness regarding one’s mental health was acceptable. However, given that 60% of the mental health sample was employed in an NGO with great sensitivity to this issue, we cannot

Table 4.25: Mental Health Workers’ Perceptions of Workplace Attitudes and Policies regarding Mental Health (n = 5)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
a. All employees are treated equally in this company	-	20.0 (20.0)	-	-	60.0 (80.0)	20.0	100.0
b. In this organisation people do not discuss or disclose mental health problems	20.0	40.0 (60.0)	-	-	40.0 (40.0)	-	100.0
c. In this organisation, employees with mental health needs are viewed as equally capable of contributing to the workforce as any other employee	-	40.0 (40.0)	-	20.0	20.0 (60.0)	20.0	100.0
d. Flexible working is crucial to support people with mental health needs	-	- (0.0)	-	-	40.0 (100.0)	60.0	100.0

assume that the figure would hold for all places of employment. Fuller attitudes to this issue were gained from the Mental Health Focus Group, who discussed their experiences with many employers over the course of their lives.

Only a small number had disclosed their own illness to their employer with positive reactions.

“...I didn’t disclose at that time. There is definitely a stigma. Also you feel you’re not as good as the other people. You feel people think you’re some kind of freak when you say you suffer from depression. You go through mood swings I mean you could be ready to quit some days and the next day you’d be very lively. You have things on your mind; you’re afraid when people really don’t take that into consideration. They think you’re different, a bit strange.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group**

“...I didn’t disclose at the interview. I wanted to let my employer know ‘she’s not lazy’ In fact it came out by accident. I don’t regret saying it but I wouldn’t want anyone else to know.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her forties**

Yet, few of the same people who had disclosed to their own employer would advise a friend in the same circumstances to do the same, indicating that those who disclosed may have felt their employer was an exception, or that other employers might not take on someone with mental health problems, or would not promote them.

“...You’d want to feel comfortable with your employer before you’d say anything like that.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group**

“...In my experience, an employee in a very senior position suffering from depression would be very reluctant to go to his boss about it. If there’s a promotion coming up, he’d be afraid that he’d be last to be considered because of the depression, especially if employers thought that they would be taking two months sick out of twelve... People would be very reluctant to tell their boss or colleagues that they have this problem.”

**Male Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group**

One respondent indicated that all employers were not as understanding as her present boss:

“...In my last job, they weren’t willing to hold my job when they knew I had postnatal depression.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her thirties**

In addition to the fear of the stigma and fear of damage to future career prospects, many also feared the invasion of privacy.

“I think they know (about the illness in general). They know about the depression but I have not told them the core problem. The other day, I heard a manager and another person saying something about one of the employees. I don’t want that.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her sixties**

“...People view you differently. You’re marked as being different.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her forties**

Some were worried that the disclosure would be met with an uninformed or inadequate response.

“...There can be misunderstandings. You can be discriminated against. They can bully you because you are vulnerable.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Retail Assistant in her forties**

However, those who had disclosed the fact that they have mental health problems reported feeling an overwhelming sense of relief and the stress of carrying this secret was gone.

“...A huge burden was lifted, I wasn’t carrying it alone.”

**Male Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group**

Other advantages of disclosure identified by the respondents included the fact that this disclosure enabled them to seek and accept support. Through the act of disclosure, respondents felt that they were not only informing their employers, but they themselves were accepting the fact that they were ill. Prior to this they said that would just feel useless and of little value.

“...I felt by disclosing I was saying out loud that I was ill; I was acknowledging the reality of it to myself. My GP had told me four years ago that I had to slow down but I paid no attention. Before that I thought I ‘should just pull myself together’. I identify disclosure as the start of my recovery. It makes the illness real to you.”

Male Mental Health Worker, Professional in his fifties

“...I realised I wasn’t a failure, I was ill.”

**Female Mental Health Worker,
Mental Health Focus Group.**

4.3.2 Perceptions of the supportiveness of the organisation in relation to work-life balance

In view of the particular workplace needs of each of these groups outlined above, one might ask, how well are supervisors, colleagues and employers taking into account the special needs of these groups?

This question was asked of the respondents in various ways. Working Parents and Carers were asked: “How well do you think your supervisor, employers and colleagues take into account the fact that you have child-care or other caring commitments?” This was posed *vis à vis* their immediate supervisor, their employer and their colleagues.

Older Workers were asked, “How well do you think your supervisor, employers and colleagues take into account your work needs as a whole, e.g., flexible working, gradual retirement, training, etc.?”

Mental Health Workers were asked: “How well do you think your supervisor, employer and colleagues take into account your work needs as a whole, e.g., flexible working, supports at work, leaves, etc.?”

As reflected in Table 4.26, the majority of respondents felt that their employer and immediate supervisor took their needs into account well or very well. Many of the respondents indicated throughout the course of the interviews that their company was doing all that it could to accommodate their needs. Some also praised their own manager:

“...My boss is very good. He just says ‘go’. He is very family-oriented himself. It makes a huge difference.”

Female Working Parent, Administrator in her forties

Most of the Older Workers also reported that their employer and managers had a positive approach to flexible working, particularly to phased retirement. For example, one organisation had the phased retirement scheme of four months pre-retirement leave phased in over the last two years of a person’s working life, as described previously.

“...I don’t consider it my employer’s responsibility to facilitate my work and family life. I took on the job, I knew the hours. But when the time comes, I hope they will facilitate me – they do it for the senior people after all.”

Female Working Parent, Administrative Staff in her fifties

“...I feel very positive about it. The company has introduced succession planning recently; this means a smooth handover to one’s successors. Also it’s good to know that work one has done will have continuity.”

Male Older Worker, Senior Manager in his sixties

“...I have problems but it’s my choice. I’ve chosen to start work at 8am.”

Female Working Parent, Administrator/Supervisor in her thirties

However, some commented that it was not the responsibility of their employer to help them balance their work and personal life:

“...They’ve been very helpful. I don’t really put the pressure on them.”

Male Carer, Maintenance Staff in his thirties

A large proportion of the respondents indicated that the relationship with their employer remained good as long as the status quo was maintained.

Table 4.26: Perception of how well immediate supervisors take into account the work needs of respondent, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
N/a	5.6	60.0	20.0	100.0	32.3
Not too well	-	10.0	-	-	3.2
So-so	5.6	-	-	-	3.2
Well	22.2	10.0	-	-	16.1
Very well	66.7	20.0	80.0	-	45.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.27: Perception of how well employer takes into account the work needs of respondent, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
N/a	-	60.0	-	100.0	29.0
Not too well	-	-	-	-	-
So-so	11.1	20.0	20.0	-	12.9
Well	22.2	10.0	-	-	16.1
Very well	66.7	10.0	80.0	-	41.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

“...If the client is not suffering, everything is fine.”

Female Working Parent, Administrator in her forties

There was also some evidence that managers, mostly male, did not understand the needs of their staff, particularly the females. Two of the managers interviewed, both male, indicated that they wished to avail of a flexible working arrangement (usually informal) to ‘play golf’ or ‘have a longer weekend’, illustrating that they don’t need to have flexible working arrangements on a regular basis for caring arrangements and might thus not understand the needs of subordinates in their department. In addition, one manager remarked that flexible working arrangements were “a difficult thing to police”. He indicated that having a formal flexible working arrangement “nails the employees to the floor” so that they are obliged to work their full quota of hours, rather than slipping out of work early. This shows that some managers, while acquiescing in providing flexible working opportunities, still think in terms of a ‘clocking in’ mentality.

In relation to perception of management attitudes, reference was made to the lack of understanding of mental health problems in general:

“...They don’t seem to take depression very seriously.

They dismiss it like, you know... ‘You are having a bad day, you’ll be all right tomorrow’. They don’t understand that it is a genuine illness the same as heart or lung disease.”

Male Mental Health Worker, Mental Health Focus Group

Almost all of the respondents felt that their colleagues take their caring commitments into account well or very well (see Table 4.28). Several respondents indicated that their colleagues were very understanding:

“...My colleagues have their own children, so they can identify.”

Female Working Parent, Administrative Staff in her fifties

However, many of the Working Parents and Carers interviewed mentioned that there appeared to be some opposition from colleagues in their utilisation of flexible working arrangements to manage their caring responsibilities. In fact, one respondent remarked that it is often women with children who work full-time who are often the most resentful of other female staff who avail of flexible working arrangements. This perhaps indicates that colleagues who themselves require flexible working arrangements, but are unable to avail of them for one reason or another, may be resentful of those who can avail of them. Indeed, several women revealed that colleagues had commented on their absence from the workplace. One female respondent who worked from 7.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m. five days a week remarked:

“...I feel pressure to get home but feel guilty leaving work earlier than my colleagues.”

Female Working Parent, Administrator in her forties

In addition, many of the women interviewed were availing of formal flexible working arrangements which meant that they did not work a typical working day from 9-5. Rather, some worked part-time or reduced working hours, and many either started work late or left work early. This meant that their flexible working arrangement was more noticeable to colleagues than some other flexible arrangements.

Table 4.28: Perception of how well colleagues take into account the work needs of respondent, by group

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
N/a	-	60.0	-	100.0	29.0
Not too well	5.6	-	-	-	3.2
So-so	5.6	10.0	20.0	-	6.5
Well	38.9	10.0	20.0	-	25.8
Very well	50.0	20.0	60.0	-	35.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

As noted previously, more of the female respondents interviewed have caring responsibilities than their male counterparts. This means that they are often tied to tight schedules, which they require their employer or supervisor to take into account. However, many of the female respondents appear to feel guilty about this:

“...Some people make snide comments, like ‘It’s well for some, another half-day!’ This really gets to me.”

**Female Working Parent,
Senior Professional/Manager in her forties**

In contrast, few men remarked that their colleagues were not supportive. However, as almost all of the males were not responsible for collecting their children after their working day, they were more available for after-hours meetings, and thus more flexible in responding to the needs of other staff, than were their female counterparts.

4.3.3 Respondents’ perceptions of the organisational climate regarding flexible working

In addition to ascertaining respondents’ perceptions of how well they thought their work-life balance needs were being met, other more indirect measures were also administered to the respondents in order to obtain their assessment of the receptiveness of the organisational climate in relation to flexible working. Utilising measures developed in the research on working parents in four countries (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2004), respondents were presented with a series of statements concerning how people who work flexibly are perceived.

Table 4.29 below shows responses to the statement: “Men who work part-time/job share are viewed as less serious about their career.” It will be seen that a large majority agreed with this – almost 70% of the sample. Those most likely to agree were Working Parents/Carers and Older Workers. When the same statement was posed in relation to women, there was a high proportion of agreement, however it was somewhat less than in relation to men (64%), indicating that people feel that working part-time work may have a negative impact on one’s career, particularly if one is male (see Table 4.30).

A fairly large proportion of the sample also thought that those who work flexible hours are “viewed as less serious about their career”. It may be seen in Table 4.31 that 41.7% thought this was true in relation to men who worked flexible hours. It was less true of women working flexibly. Only 22.3% thought that women who worked flexible hours were perceived as less serious about their career (Table 4.32). It is interesting to note that it was the Older Workers who were more likely to hold these views (60% of them thought this was true in relation to men and 50% in relation to women). This reflects the gender role attitudes and expectations that they grew up with. However, it appears from the attitudes of the other groups that such attitudes are dying out. Nevertheless, it is still apparent that, even though the level of agreement on the part of the other groups is not on the side of strong agreement, there is slight agreement and lack of strong disagreement, indicating that there is still a residue of prejudice – or perceived prejudice - out there in relation to perceptions of flexible working. Unless attitudes change further in this area, men are unlikely to avail of part-time work and/or job sharing and will even be wary of availing of other flexible patterns.

Table 4.29: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: “Men who work part-time/job share are viewed as less serious about their career”

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	-	20.0	40.0	-	11.1
Disagree	22.2	-	20.0	33.3	16.7
Somewhat Disagree	5.6	-	-	-	2.8
Somewhat Agree	44.4	40.0	-	33.3	36.1
Agree	16.7	20.0	40.0	33.3	22.2
Strongly Agree	11.1	20.0	-	-	11.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

This is corroborated by the attitudes reflected in Table 4.33, which shows that 64% believe that “working flexible hours is seen as a more suitable option for women than for men.”

In the case of this statement, the Older Workers are not the only ones who agree with it. There is solid agreement from the Working Parents and Carers also (61%), as well as from the other two groups. These attitudes are bolstered by the widespread view that “working part-time is seen as a more suitable option for women than for men.” Eighty-six per cent of the sample agreed that this was true (see Table 4.34).

However, comparing attitudes to part-time work and job sharing with attitudes to flexible working, it is clear that attitudes to flexible working are far more positive or

tolerant than attitudes to part-time working and job sharing. Thus it would seem that people will be less fearful of using flexible hours than they will be of working part-time or job sharing, given the perceptions of others. It is also clear that women are allowed far more leeway in this area than men.

Further exploration of perceived attitudes in the workplace towards flexible working shows that there is not a great deal of resentment on the part of other colleagues if someone works flexible hours. Most of the sample (64%) felt that there would be no resentment, while about a third thought there would be some resentment (see Table 4.35). Those most likely to think that working flexible hours would often be resented by colleagues were the Working Parents and Carers, of whom 50% thought so. Given that this group would be highly likely to need

Table 4.30: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: “Women who work part-time/job share are viewed as less serious about their career”

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	11.1	10.0	20.0	-	11.1
Disagree	16.7	10.0	40.0	33.3	19.4
Somewhat Disagree	11.1	-	-	-	5.6
Somewhat Agree	27.8	30.0	20.0	33.3	27.8
Agree	22.2	30.0	-	33.3	22.2
Strongly Agree	11.1	20.0	20.0	-	13.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.31: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: “Men who work flexible hours are viewed as less serious about their career”

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	5.6	10.0	-	-	5.6
Disagree	38.9	30.0	60.0	33.3	38.9
Somewhat Disagree	16.7	-	-	66.7	13.9
Somewhat Agree	33.3	20.0	-	-	22.2
Agree	5.6	30.0	40.0	-	16.7
Strongly Agree	-	10.0	-	-	2.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.32: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: "Women who work flexible hours are viewed as less serious about their career"

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	5.6	30.0	40.0	-	16.7
Disagree	50.0	20.0	60.0	33.3	41.7
Somewhat Disagree	27.8	-	-	66.7	19.4
Somewhat Agree	16.7	30.0	-	-	16.7
Agree	-	20.0	-	-	5.6
Strongly Agree	-	-	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.33: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: "Working flexible hours is seen as a more suitable option for women than for men"

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	5.6	-	20.0	-	5.6
Disagree	27.8	10.0	20.0	-	19.4
Somewhat Disagree	5.6	-	20.0	66.7	11.1
Somewhat Agree	5.6	20.0	-	-	8.3
Agree	44.4	40.0	20.0	33.3	38.9
Strongly Agree	11.1	30.0	20.0	-	16.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

to work flexible hours due to childcare and other caring commitments, this attitude must act as a negative reinforcer and one which very likely produces guilt feelings.

One of the issues which is often raised in relation to work-life balance is the fact that in many companies there is a "long hours culture" and the culture of "presenteeism." To the extent that this is an actuality, it works against employees' needs for flexibility in order to take care of the other aspects of their lives, such as caring. In order to tap the extent to which this was true we asked respondents to tell us the extent to which they felt people had to "work over and above the normal hours in order to get ahead." A very sizeable majority (70%) agreed with this statement: of these, 30% moderately agreed and 23.3% strongly agreed (see Table 4.36). This belief was particularly strongly held by the Older Workers and by the Working Parents and Carers.

This belief was augmented by the belief that "to be viewed favourably by management, employees have to put their job ahead of family or personal life." A majority (55.6%) agreed with this statement, as can be seen in Table 4.37 below). Mental Health Workers and Older Workers endorsed it most strongly.

Table 4.34: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: "Working part-time is seen as a more suitable option for women than for men"

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	-	-	-	-	-
Disagree	5.6	20.0	20.0	33.3	13.9
Somewhat Disagree	-	-	-	-	-
Somewhat Agree	16.7	30.0	-	33.3	19.4
Agree	55.6	30.0	60.0	33.3	47.2
Strongly Agree	22.2	20.0	20.0	-	19.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.35: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: "Other staff would often resent a colleague taking flexible time"

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	5.6	10.0	-	-	5.6
Disagree	44.4	60.0	40.0	100.0	52.8
Somewhat Disagree	-	10.0	20.0	-	5.6
Somewhat Agree	33.3	-	-	-	16.7
Agree	11.1	10.0	40.0	-	13.9
Strongly Agree	5.6	10.0	-	-	5.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.36: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: "To get ahead, employees have to work over and above normal hours"

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	7.7	-	20.0	-	6.7
Disagree	7.7	10.0	40.0	-	13.3
Somewhat Disagree	7.7	20.0	-	-	10.0
Somewhat Agree	23.1	10.0	-	50.0	16.7
Agree	30.8	20.0	40.0	50.0	30.0
Strongly Agree	23.1	40.0	-	-	23.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 4.37: Percentage agreement/disagreement with: "To be viewed favourably by management, employees have to put their job ahead of family or personal life"

	Working Parents & Carers (n=18)	Older Workers (n=10)	Mental Health Workers (n=5)	Flexible Workers (n=3)	Total (n=36)
	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly Disagree	11.1	10.0	-	-	8.3
Disagree	22.2	10.0	-	-	13.9
Somewhat Disagree	22.2	20.0	-	66.7	22.2
Somewhat Agree	22.2	10.0	60.0	33.3	25.0
Agree	22.2	30.0	40.0	-	25.0
Strongly Agree	-	20.0	-	-	5.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

4.4 Effects of flexible working on work-life balance

4.4.1 A comparison of two groups: one pre-flexible working and one with experience of flexible working (pre-test group vs. post-test group)

It was a major aim of the pilot projects to evaluate the effects of flexible working. As discussed in the Method section of the report, it was the intention to collect data on employees before they started flexible working in order obtain baseline data, and to then interview them after a significant amount of time (e.g., six months to a year) on flexible working to measure what, if any, the effects were.

However, the real world being what it is, it was not always possible to collect data at precisely the right moment. As a result, we obtained 17 interviews in which we caught the people before they started or just at the very beginning of flexible working (the "Pre-test" group). However, it transpired that in the case of a number of other interviews the people had already been on flexible working for some time (the "Once offs"). There were 19 of these people and we did not do a post-test with them. In addition we followed up on the original 17 and did a "Post-test."

We compared the results of the Pre-test and Post-test groups on a range of measures, with the mean scores (averages) compared using t-tests. This did not yield any significant results. However, a comparison of the percentage responses to some of these same measures revealed a tendency toward positive shifts in work-life balance.

It may be seen from Table 4.38 that whereas 60% of the Working Parents found combining work and family life

Table 4.38: Percentage breakdown of ease vs difficulty in combining work and family/personal life: pre- and post-test comparison of working parents and carers (N = 10)

	Pre-test (n=10)	Post-test (n=10)
	%	%
Very Easy	-	-
Easy	20.0	30.0
Somewhat Easy	20.0	40.0
Somewhat difficult	60.0	20.0
Difficult	-	-
Very difficult	-	10.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 4.39: Percentage breakdown of ease vs difficulty in combining work and family/personal life: pre- and post-test comparison of all workers (N = 17)

	Pre-test (n=17)	Post-test (n=17)
	%	%
Very Easy	5.9	11.8
Easy	17.6	23.5
Somewhat Easy	17.6	33.3
Somewhat difficult	52.9	11.8
Difficult	5.9	11.8
Very difficult	-	5.9
Total	100.0	100.0

difficult prior to flexible working, as measured in the pre-test, only 30% said it was difficult while they were working flexibly (as measured in the post-test). Conversely, 40% found it easy in the pre-test while 70% found it easy in the post-test.

This comparison was also carried out for the total sample which was studied in the Pre-test and the Post-test. This sample included the 10 Working Parents and Carers, two Older Workers, two Mental Health Workers and three Flexible Workers, for a total of 17 who were compared at two points in time. As may be seen in Table 4.39, 58.8% of this sample found it difficult to combine work and family/personal life before starting on flexible working, whereas only 29.5% found it difficult once they were working flexibly. Conversely, while 41.1% found it easy before flexible working, 68.6% did so once they were on flexible working.

Thus, a positive shift in work-life balance is evident from these results.

4.4.2 A comparison of two groups: one pre-flexible working and one with experience of flexible working (pre-test group vs. "once-off" group)

In view of the fact that our sample contained a large number of workers who had already been working flexibly for some time at the time of the pre-test, we decided to utilise this to further test the effect of flexible working on work-life balance.

We thus carried out comparisons between the "Once offs," (who we shall now refer to as "Flexible Workers" - that is, people who had been carrying out flexible working for some time) with the Pre-test group. These comparisons are contained in Table 4.40.

It may be seen that the number of hours that the pre-test group was contracted to work was 33 hours per week on average. This contrasted with that of the Flexible Workers, who were contracted to work 27.7 hours per week on average. This difference was statistically significant. Both groups were also compared on the number of hours they usually worked per week. It may be seen that both groups tended to work more than their contracted hours, with the Pre-test group tending to work on average 37.5 hours per week and the Flexible Workers working on average 29.8 hours per week.

Both groups were asked if the Hours they worked Created problems in their Caring Arrangements (e.g.,

for child care, elder care, etc.). As shown in Table 4.40, the Pre-test group was significantly more likely to say that their hours did create such difficulties for them and the Flexible Workers, who worked fewer hours per week, were less likely to say so.

The Pre-test group was also more likely to say that it was Difficult to Combine Work and Family/Personal Life than were the Flexible Workers. Those in the Pre-test group with child care responsibilities were more likely to express lower levels of Satisfaction with their Child Care Arrangements than were those Flexible Workers with child care responsibilities.

The Pre-test group further expressed a greater Desire for more Personal Time than did the Flexible Workers, a difference which was also significant.

Finally, both groups were asked How they thought their New Working Arrangement would affect their Work-life Balance. The Pre-test group tended on average to say "Positively", whereas those who had been on flexible working for a period of time (the Flexible Workers) were more likely to say "Very Positively."

4.4.3 A comparison of two groups: one pre-flexible working and one with experience of flexible working (pre-test group vs the "once offs" and the post-test group)

Given the fruitfulness of the foregoing analysis, we decided to explore if the differences obtained in this analysis would hold up if we also included the Post-test group (that is the Pre-test group at time 2). Such an analysis would provide a larger comparison group of workers with experience of flexible working. The number of respondents in the Pre-test group remained the same at 17 and the number of respondents in the Flexible Worker group increased from 19 to 36. These comparisons are presented in Table 4.41.

It may be seen that most of the significant results which were obtained previously were also obtained in this analysis. It also shows that the "Once off" group of flexible workers was actually quite similar to the Post-test group.

Again we see that the number of hours worked per week was lower in the Flexible Worker group (29.6 hours per week on average compared with 33 hours per week for the Pre-test group). This difference, is not however, statistically significant. Again we also see that the actual hours worked per week was lower in the Flexible group

(32.1, as compared with 37.5 in the Pre-test group). This difference is also not significant, but approaches significance ($p = .06$).

As was found in the previous analysis, the Flexible Workers were significantly less likely to say that their Hours Created Problems in their Caring Arrangements and they tended on average to be more Satisfied with their Child Care Arrangements, where applicable. They were also less likely to express a need for more Personal Time. Finally, they found Combining Work and Family or Personal Life significantly easier than did those in the Pre-test group.

These results point to the benefits accruing to individuals who are engaged in flexible working, especially where this involves somewhat fewer hours per week – even a difference of 3.4 hours less per week makes a difference. It can be concluded that flexible working has been shown to lead to improved work-life balance for the respondents who participated in this pilot research. As these respondents included a diverse group of working parents and carers, older workers and workers with mental health problems, it may be concluded that flexible working contributes not only to work-life balance, but it also serves to retain groups in the labour force who might otherwise be excluded due to reasons of age, mental health difficulties or caring responsibilities.

Table 4.40: Comparison of Respondents with No Experience of Flexible Working (Pre-tests) and those with Experience of Flexible Working (Once-offs) (N = 36)

	Group 1 Pre-test, Prior to flexible working (n=17)		Group 2 People who have been working flexibly (Once-offs) (n=19)			
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	df	t-value
1. Hours Contracted to Work per Week	33.0	6.8	27.7	8.8	33	2.04*
2. Hours Usually Worked per Week	37.5	8.8	29.8	10.8	34	2.34*
3. Hours Create Problems in Caring Arrangements	2.2	1.1	1.5	0.8	20	2.05*
4. Ease vs Difficulty in Combining Work and Personal Life	3.4	1.1	2.2	1.3	34	2.94**
5. Desire for more Personal Time	4.0	0.4	3.5	0.8	26	2.67**
6. Satisfaction with Childcare Arrangements (Group 1: n = 9, Group 2: n = 7)	4.7	1.2	9	0.4	10	-2.75*
7. How new arrangements will affect work-life balance	4.9	0.7	5.4	0.7	31	-2.15*

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

Table 4.41: Comparison of Respondents with no Experience of Flexible Working (Pre-test) and All Respondents with Experience of Flexible Working (Once-offs and Post -test) (N = 36 respondents, 53 observations)

	Group 1 Prior to flexible working (Pre-test) (n=17)			Group 2 People who have been working flexibly (Post-tests and Once-offs) (n=36)		
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	df	t-value
1. Hours contracted to work per week	33.0	6.8	29.6	8.5	39	1.5 N.S.
2. Hours usually Worked per Week	37.5	8.9	32.1	10.4	36	1.9 N.S. (p = .06)
3. Hours Create problems in scheduling Caring Arrangements	2.2	1.1	1.4	0.7	16	2.36*
4. Desire for more Personal Time	4.0	0.3	3.7	0.8	51	2.12*
5. Satisfaction with Childcare Arrangements (Group 1: n = 9, Group 2: n = 7)	4.7	1.2	5.6	0.5	10	-2.20*
6. Ease vs Difficulty in Combining Work and Personal Life	3.4	1.1	2.6	1.4	40	2.15*

* p ≤ .05

5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Background and purpose

The National Flexi-Work Partnership, a collaborative venture between the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Trinity College Dublin, FÁS, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Aware, and Age Action Ireland, carried out a series of flexible working pilot projects in order to encourage the retention in employment of groups of workers who have traditionally experienced difficulties by virtue of inflexible working patterns as well as stigma, and to assess the effects of flexible working on the work-life balance and, hence, the well-being of workers. These pilot projects were carried out in the context of a broader project on Work-Life Balance, funded by the European Social Fund through the EQUAL Community Initiative and administered through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

5.2 Collaboration with employers

The Partnership invited employers to collaborate in the Project. The resulting Working Party of Employers, which included 21 employers in the public, private and

NGO sectors, met several times to discuss and design innovative modes of flexible working for each of the target groups and to host pilot projects in their own organisations to test the effectiveness of these innovative modes of flexible working.

Some of these companies/organisations did create new modes of flexible working in response to the Project; others already had a variety of innovative modes of flexible working patterns available to their employees. It was decided that it would also be valuable to capture information about the effects of these innovative modes of flexible working which were already out there and to date undocumented.

5.3 Sample and method

The groups of workers targeted to take part in the pilot projects were: working parents and carers, older workers and people with mental health problems. The approach taken in the evaluation of the pilot projects involved the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The first part of the evaluation involved a quasi-experimen-



tal procedure in which data were gathered before the flexible working and after in order to try to measure its effects. The second part of the study involved conducting two focus groups with two of the target groups in order to gain broader qualitative insights into the issues.

The total sample consisted of 52 people. Of these, 36 were interviewed individually. These included 18 working parents and carers, 10 older workers, 5 employees with mental health problems (to be referred in the report as “mental health workers”) and 3 “flexible workers”, that is workers who worked flexibly, but did not belong to any of the other groups. Of these, 17 were interviewed both before and after the flexible working. These 36 individuals were employed in seven of the organisations represented on the Working Party of Employers. Four of these organisations were in the private sector, two in the public sector and one was an NGO.

In addition, the sample included 16 people in two focus groups, the first consisting of employees with mental health problems and the second consisting of older people, the majority of whom were retired and two of whom were currently working part-time.

While the sample in this study is small and non-representative, the study is one of the first to examine the effects of flexible working on work-life balance in a pre-test/post-test design. It is also one of the first to focus on flexible working for a variety of marginalised groups.

5.4 Results

5.4.1 Background Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 39% of the sample were male and 61% female. The age range in the sample was very broad, going from the twenties to the sixties in the case of the employed interviewees, and the focus group of older people included people in their seventies. The mean age of the Working Parents and Carers was 41.5, with the median age of 35. The Older Workers had a mean age of 56.8, and a median age of 55. The Mental Health Workers had a mean age of 46.4 and a median age of 45 and the small group of “Flexible Workers” had a mean and median age of 35. Overall this was a very well-educated group, with approximately 60% having a university degree or post-graduate degree.

5.4.2 Caring responsibilities

It was found that two-thirds of the sample had caring responsibilities for one or more persons, including children, elderly people and ill or disabled relatives. These

workers with caring responsibilities included Working Parents and Carers, Older Workers and Mental Health Workers. It was clear from the qualitative material that one of the main reasons these people needed flexible working was to meet their caring responsibilities. While this was true mostly of the Working Parents and Carers, it was also true of some of the other groups.

5.4.3 Commuting

Cross-cultural research has demonstrated that one of the key factors contributing to work-life balance is commuting. Long commutes can be a stress factor and short commutes can contribute to work-life balance and quality of life (Fine-Davis *et al*, 2004). In the present sample it was found that the most common form of transport for getting to work was the car. Three-quarters of the sample took a car to work. Car usage was highest among the Working Parents and Carers (94.4%), and next highest among Older Workers (80%). Use of public transportation was relatively low with 22.2% using trains (including the Dart and Luas) and 16.7% using buses. Not a single respondent reported walking to work or using a bicycle. The high usage of car not only corroborates national patterns (CSO, 2000), it surpasses them.

Forty-three per cent of the sample found the commute to work difficult. The ease vs. difficulty of the commute varied by group. The Working Parents and Carers were more likely to find it difficult, with 53.9% saying it was difficult to one degree or another (23.1% found it ‘very difficult’). Older Workers and Mental Health Workers were much less likely to find the commute to work difficult.

Throughout the course of the interviews, it emerged that commuting was one of the biggest problems faced by many Working Parents and Carers and they were able to use flexible working to resolve the commuting issue. Many changed their work schedules in order to overcome the long time that they were forced to spend commuting. Approximately 60% of the Working Parents, Carers, and Mental Health Workers found the commute to work stressful. Among all workers, 46.7% found the commute to work stressful to one degree or another.

5.4.3 Work characteristics of the sample

Just under two-thirds of the sample were employed in the private sector, just over a quarter in the public sector and the remainder in community organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Most of the respondents had worked for their present employer for a long time., with just over 60% having been with them for seven years or longer, reflecting a general pattern of long and stable employment. In the case of the Mental Health Workers, 40% had been with their employer for seven years or longer, while 60% had been with them for 1-2 years. This reflects the fact that three of the respondents in this group were employed in an NGO on a Community Employment Scheme. Such schemes are generally time delimited and by their nature do not involve long term employment.

A very high proportion of the workers were on permanent contracts (86.1%). Mental Health Workers were notable in that only 40% were on permanent contracts and the majority were on temporary contracts. This again reflects the nature of the Community Employment Scheme, on which 60% were employed.

5.4.4 Types of flexible working

Just over half of the sample (52.8%) worked full-time and the remainder worked part-time (41.7%) or job-shared (5.6%). Approximately 60% of the Working Parents and Carers worked full-time and the rest either worked part-time or job-shared. The Older Workers and Mental Health Workers were more likely to work part-time (70% of the Older Workers and 60% of the Mental Health Workers), with the remainder of each group working full-time. Other forms of reduced hours and other forms of flexible working were also reported by many of the respondents. Flexible starting and finishing times were prevalent among many of the managers. In the case of Older Workers, for some this involved phased retirement in which they had several months off per year in the last two years before retirement. In the case of Working Parents and Carers, this referred to pilot projects introduced by the different organisations as part of the Pilot Project, for example, the practice used by one firm, whereby staff could work up enough hours during the week to enable them to leave early on Friday, a programme known as “Flexible Fridays.”

5.4.5 Managers working flexibly

Given the relatively high proportion of the sample working part-time and job-sharing (47.3% in total), it is interesting to note that quite a high proportion of the sample (64%) were managers. The majority of the Older Workers (80%) were managers, as were 67% of the working parents. Amongst the Mental Health Workers, 40% were managers. Of the Flexible Workers, two-thirds were managers.

This, in itself is quite revealing, as it shows that management activities can successfully be carried out in the context of a wide variety of types of flexible working, from part-time work to job-sharing, to flexible hours to phased retirement. It also shows that management activities not only can be carried out in a flexible way, but they can be carried out by a diverse work force, which includes older workers, people with mental health problems, and working parents and carers. In all cases these diverse groups of flexible workers included both males and females.

Given the widely held belief that managers must work full-time, and indeed are often expected to work overtime, these results show that management can be carried out, and indeed is being carried out successfully in many organisations, in a more flexible way.

5.4.6 Employees’ expectations of how flexible working would affect their work-life balance

When asked how they expected their new working arrangement would affect their work-life balance, the entire sample said they expected it to have a positive effect. Overall, 21.2% expected their new arrangement would have a “somewhat positive” effect on their work-life balance, 42.4% said it would have a “positive” effect and 36.4% said it would have a “very positive” effect. The group with the most positive expectations was the Older Workers, with 60% saying it would affect their work life balance “very positively.” Mental Health Workers were also highly enthusiastic about the effect of flexible working for them, with 50% saying it would affect their work-life balance “very positively.”

5.4.7 Other modes of flexible working desired

All respondents were asked if there were other modes of flexible working which could be of assistance to them, in addition to what they were already doing. Of the 36 respondents, 21 said there were. The most popular modes of flexible working were reduced hours (mentioned by 33.3%) and working from home (mentioned by 28.6%). Amongst the Working Parents and Carers, part-time work and term-time working were also seen as desirable. Older Workers strongly favoured part-time work (cited by 50%), reduced hours (cited by 50%) and working from home (cited by 50%). Mental Health Workers favoured reduced hours and working from home (100%).

5.4.8 Workplace needs of diverse groups of employees

Each of the groups has particular needs in relation both to work-life balance and working in general. Working Parents and Carers have the conflicting commitment of caring for children and, in some cases, elderly or disabled relatives. Many Older Workers also have caring commitments. Many may have the need for less pressure and more leisure time, as they begin to phase into retirement. Mental Health Workers have to deal with their illness and need to balance this aspect of their life with their working life. In order for employers to be able to respond to the needs of their employees, it is necessary for them to understand the types of problems the latter are likely to have.

Working parents and carers

Finding suitable childcare arrangements and dealing with the long commute every day are the two main problems faced by Working Parents and Carers interviewed, and it is often for one of these reasons that people in this group changed their working hours or the way their working hours were organised. Organisational culture to work longer hours, together with time pressures, often made it difficult to strike the balance. In spite of the pressure to get home, some working mothers also felt guilt about leaving early.

Older workers

Older workers are faced with stigmatisation and stereotypes in the workplace. For example, 60% of the older workers in the sample felt that “older workers are viewed as less able to adapt at the workplace.” Some of the retired respondents, interviewed in the focus group also felt that older people are not respected in general and are made to feel that they are no longer important members of society, even though they have contributed immensely to society. While many Older Workers favoured flexible working, including part-time working, a very large majority (80%) expressed the view that “people who work part-time prior to retirement lose their clout in the organisation.” In addition, most felt that “pension requirements/concerns prevent many people from taking up flexible working.” This is a serious disincentive, as most pension schemes base a person’s pension on their last year’s earnings. This virtually forces people to work full-time until retirement. For this reason, the initiation of phased retirement programmes, demonstrated by two of the collaborating employers, are exemplary and worthy of further study and potential replication, as they allow for part-time working or other modes of phased retirement without any loss of pension benefit.

Mental health workers

As in the case of Older Workers, employees with mental health problems also have issues particular to their circumstances and attitudes in the workplace can be critical to their successful functioning and well-being. All of the respondents (100%) felt that “flexible working is crucial to support people with mental health needs.” There was quite strong feeling about this, with 40% moderately agreeing and 60% strongly agreeing on the critical importance of flexible working for this group. Moreover, there was a general consensus that, on the whole, being at work in itself contributes to mental well being, a finding which is supported by a vast body of literature.

People with mental health problems do not often tell their employer or colleagues that they suffer from mental health problems. Only a small number in this study had disclosed their own illness to their employer with positive reactions. Yet, few of the same people who had disclosed to their own employer would advise a friend in the same circumstances to do the same. While several had had understanding supervisors, there was a general reticence that disclosure could result in not getting a job or not getting promoted. In addition to the fear of the stigma and fear of damage to future career prospects, many also feared the invasion of privacy. Some respondents felt that one could be discriminated against and bullied because one was vulnerable. On the other hand, some who had disclosed the fact that they have mental health problems reported feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. The disclosure was an indication to the person themselves that they were not a failure, they were simply ill.

5.4.9 Perceptions of the supportiveness of the organisation in relation to work-life balance

In view of the particular workplace needs of each of these groups outlined above, one might ask, how well are supervisors, colleagues and employers taking into account the special needs of these groups? The majority of respondents felt that their employer and immediate supervisor took their needs into account well or very well. Many of the respondents indicated throughout the course of the interviews that their company was doing all that it could to accommodate their needs. Some also praised their own manager.

However, there were some indications in the qualitative data, that while acquiescing in providing flexible working opportunities, some managers still think in terms of a ‘clocking in’ mentality, even in relation to flexible hours.

It was also found in relation to perceptions of management attitudes that there was sometimes a lack of understanding of mental health problems in general, illustrated by the comment below:

“...They don't seem to take depression very seriously. They dismiss it like, you know... ‘You are having a bad day, you'll be all right tomorrow’. They don't understand that it is a genuine illness the same as heart or lung disease.”

On the other hand, almost all of the respondents felt that their colleagues were very supportive of their special needs, be they for caring commitments, mental health problems or whatever. An exception to this general trend was evident in the case of some of the female Working Parents. As more of the female respondents interviewed have caring responsibilities than their male counterparts, this means that they are often tied to tight schedules, which they need their employer or supervisor to take into account. However, many of the female respondents appeared to feel guilty about this.

For those who worked a shorter day, this also meant that their flexible working arrangement was more visible to colleagues than some other flexible arrangements and this caused some of them to perceive resentment from some other female colleagues who may not be able to avail of shorter working days.

5.4.10 Respondents' perceptions of the organisational climate regarding flexible working

Utilising measures developed in the research on working parents in four countries (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2004), respondents were presented with a series of statements concerning how people who work flexibly are perceived.

A large majority (almost 70% of the sample) agreed with the statement: “Men who work part-time/job share are viewed as less serious about their career.” When the same statement was posed in relation to women, there was also high agreement, however it was somewhat less than in relation to men (64%), indicating that people feel that working part-time work may have a negative impact on one's career, particularly if one is male.

A fairly large proportion of the sample also thought that those who work flexible hours are “viewed as less serious about their career”. Approximately 42% thought this was true in relation to men who worked flexible hours. It was seen as less true of women working flexibly; only 22.3% thought this to be the case in relation to women.

Comparing attitudes to part-time work and job sharing with attitudes to flexible working, it is clear that attitudes to flexible working are far more positive or tolerant than attitudes to part-time working and job sharing. Thus it would seem that people will be less fearful of using flexible hours than they will be of working part-time or job sharing, given the perceptions of others. It is also clear that women are allowed far more leeway in this area than men. However, unless attitudes change further in this area, men are unlikely to avail of part-time work and/or job sharing and will even be wary of availing of other flexible patterns.

One of the issues which is often raised in relation to work-life balance is the fact that in many companies there is a “long hours culture” and the culture of “presenteeism.” To the extent that this is an actuality, it works against employees' needs for flexibility in order to take care of the other aspects of their lives, such as caring. A very sizeable majority (70%) agreed that people had to “work over and above the normal hours in order to get ahead” : 30% moderately agreed and 23.3% strongly agreed. This belief was particularly strongly held by the Older Workers and by the Working Parents and Carers. This belief was augmented by the belief that “to be viewed favourably by management, employees have to put their job ahead of family or personal life”, to which a majority (55.6%) also agreed.

5.4.11 Effects of flexible working on work-life balance

It was a major aim of the pilot projects to evaluate the effects of flexible working. As discussed in the Method section of the report, it was the intention to collect data on employees before they started flexible working in order obtain baseline data, and to then interview them after a significant amount of time (e.g., six months to a year) on flexible working to measure what, if any, the effects were.

We were able to obtain 17 interviews before people started flexible working or just at the very beginning of flexible working (the “Pre-test” group). These 17 were followed up after a significant period on flexible working and administered the “Post-test.” These 17 consisted of 10 Working Parents and Carers, two Older Workers, two Mental Health Workers and three “Flexible Workers.”

It was found that 58.8% of this sample found it difficult to combine work and family/personal life before starting on flexible working, whereas only 29.5% found it

difficult once they were working flexibly. Conversely, only 40% found it easy prior to flexible working, while 70% found it easy once they were working flexibly. Thus, a positive shift in work-life balance as a result of flexible working is evident from these results.

In view of the fact that our sample contained a significant number of workers who had already been working flexibly for some time at the time of the pre-test (n=19), we decided to utilise this to further test the effect of flexible working on work-life balance.

We thus carried out comparisons between this group (“Once offs” - whom we shall now refer to as “Flexible Workers” - that is, people who had been carrying out flexible working for some time) with the Pre-test group.

It was found that the Pre-test group was contracted to work 33 hours per week on average, whereas the Flexible Workers were contracted to work 27.7 hours per week on average. Both groups tended to work longer than their contracted hours, with the Pre-test group actually working 37.5 hours per week and the Flexible Workers working 29.8 hours per week on average.

Both groups were asked if the hours they worked created problems in their caring arrangements (e.g., for child care, elder care, etc.). The Pre-test group was significantly more likely to say that their hours created difficulties and the Flexible Workers, who worked fewer hours per week, were less likely to think so.

The Pre-test group was also more likely to say that it was difficult to combine work and family/personal life than were the Flexible Workers. Those in the Pre-test group with child care responsibilities were more likely to express lower levels of satisfaction with their child care arrangements than were those Flexible Workers with child care responsibilities.

The Pre-test group further expressed a greater wish for more “personal time” than did the Flexible Workers, a difference which was also significant.

Finally, both groups were asked how they thought their new working arrangement would affect their work-life balance. The Pre-test group tended on average to say “positively”, whereas those who had been on flexible working for a period of time (the Flexible Workers) were more likely to say “very positively.”

Given the results obtained in this analysis, we decided to explore if the differences obtained would hold up if we also included the Post-test group (that is the Pre-test group at time 2). Such an analysis would provide a larger comparison group of workers with experience of flexible working. The number of respondents in the Pre-test group remained the same at 17 and the number of respondents in the Flexible Worker group increased from 19 to 36.

It was found that most of the significant results which were obtained previously were also obtained in this analysis.

These results point to the benefits accruing to individuals who are engaged in flexible working, especially where this involves somewhat fewer hours per week – even a difference of 3.4 hours less per week makes a difference. This corroborates findings of O’Connell, Russell, Williams and Blackwell (2005) for the NCPP (2005) to the effect that each additional hour worked per week increases stress levels. It can be concluded that flexible working has been shown to lead to improved work-life balance for the respondents who participated in this pilot research. As these respondents included a diverse group of working parents and carers, older workers and workers with mental health problems, it may be further concluded that flexible working contributes not only to work-life balance, but also serves to retain groups in the labour force who might otherwise be excluded due to reasons of age, mental health difficulties or caring responsibilities.

5.5 Discussion and conclusions

The emergence of work-life balance as an issue marks the recognition by Government and the Social Partners that flexible working arrangements are of central importance to both the welfare of the individual and the economy. Workplace change is critical from several perspectives. From a social point of view, work has been shown to meet many human needs and to be associated with well-being. From an economic point of view, particularly given the threat of a future labour shortage, it is essential that the labour market be inclusive of all potential workers. It has been shown that in a constantly evolving world of business and public services, the most successful organisations are those who adapt to change and use it to their advantage. Consequently the ability of groups like parents, carers, older people and people with mental health issues to access flexible working arrangements is vital if we are to witness a real and

meaningful increase in their labour force participation and to reap the benefits of their contribution to the work force.

5.5.1 The availability of flexible working

The availability of flexible working is increasingly being enshrined in legislation in other countries. For example, legislation introduced in April 2003 in the U.K. allows parents of children aged under six or disabled children aged under 18 the right to apply to work flexibly. Their employers have a duty to consider these requests seriously. Three years previously, the Flexible Working Hours Act, which came into force in the Netherlands in July 2000, made provision for an employee to request a change to their working arrangement. The employer has to comply with the employee's request unless there is a sound business case against it.

Whilst a standard, "one size fits all" approach to the implementation of work-life balance policies may be seen to be counter-productive, the implementation of a clear and coherent national strategy, which demonstrates that flexible working can be compatible with, and beneficial to business efficiency, is of central importance. There are many examples of work-life balance practices and policies to choose from, depending on the needs of both employees and employers, with some arrangements being more appropriate than others, depending on the circumstances.

5.5.2 Diverse needs of employees

The implementation of any kind of strategy in relation to flexible working arrangements has to take into account the diverse needs of *all* employees. The focus has moved beyond a consideration solely of the needs of working parents. Rather it must now focus on effectively managing the diverse needs of all employees, among them carers, older workers and people with disabilities, including mental health problems. It should also be remembered that categories such as "older worker," "working parent," "carer," etc. are not mutually exclusive. A person can be both an older worker and a carer, an older worker and a working parent, a working parent and a person with mental health problems, etc. We must learn to think outside of the box and must begin to devise flexible working policies which are relevant for and accessible to many different types of workers.

5.5.3 Issues of gender and occupational status in the provision and take-up of flexible arrangements

To date flexibility in working conditions has mainly

been applied to and taken up by women (Connell, 2003). For example, in Ireland three quarters of all part-time staff are women (NCCP, 2005). Ironically, flexible-working arrangements such as this, introduced in part to provide equal opportunity in accessing the labour market, may actually be reinforcing the gendered division of labour in the home, whereby women have main responsibility for domestic tasks and child care, giving them a 'dual burden.' This situation renders women less able to maximise their contribution to the labour force. Such a situation also serves indirectly to perpetuate traditional gender role attitudes and behaviour.

Further, the gap in pay between men and women, which currently stands at 18% in Ireland (NCCP, 2005), and the high cost of childcare are among the factors which affect parental decisions when it comes to the take up of flexible working arrangements. Working fathers are also less willing to take up flexible arrangements due to a perceived fear of endangering promotion prospects at work (Fine-Davis *et al.*, 2004). The present study showed that such attitudes continue to exist and that part-time work in particular and working flexible hours to a lesser extent are still seen to jeopardize how one is perceived in the workplace. These attitudes are particularly true *vis à vis* male behaviour.

Workplace policy needs to find strategies to motivate men to make equal use of employment flexibility provisions and to steer the workplace towards greater gender equality in terms of provision and take-up of flexible working. Creating an equal take up among the sexes of flexible working arrangements will maximise the impact of work-life balance policy in the workplace. From a societal and equality viewpoint it will assist with the breakdown of traditional gender role attitudes, thereby creating a fairer society. From an economic point of view, it will facilitate a widening of the pool of potential employees in a market facing a future shortage in the supply of labour.

Flexible working options for managers - including among them part-time work and job-sharing - should also be embraced more fully, so that talented managers of both sexes can continue to contribute their high level skills, without sacrificing their work-life balance. It is unfair to the individuals and lacking in foresight on the part of the organisation if they cling to the notion that managerial posts must of necessity entail full-time hours. Indeed research carried out for the NCCP (2005) found that full-time and part-time workers were equal-

ly committed (O'Connell *et al.*, 2005). In the study presented in this report we found many examples of successful managers of various sexes and ages in this study working part-time and in other flexible ways, thus debunking this myth. These various modes of flexible working for managers included not only part-time work and job sharing, but also tele-working at home part of the week, having reduced hours with flexible timing, and having phased retirement.

Indeed, such options should be available to staff at all levels. While flexible working patterns are increasingly prevalent in both the public and private sectors (NCPP, 2005), there are some areas of work in which there still appear to be barriers to flexible working. For example, it was observed in some cases in the present research that production line workers had less access to a range of flexible working patterns. Where this exists, it too needs to be re-considered. Production line workers also have child care responsibilities and other work-life balance needs which need to be taken account of creatively. Indeed, much research points to the economic benefits to employers of providing flexibility to their staff. This is repaid manifold in reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover, increased productivity, increased staff morale and improved company image.

5.5.4 Other factors relevant to work-life balance

Flexible working arrangements are one piece of the total work-life balance picture. Other issues, including commuting and the availability of high quality, accessible, affordable childcare also have a major impact on an individual's ability to reconcile work and personal life. The results from this report indicate that the interface between commuting and childcare is critical for working parents, particularly when rising property prices are forcing a lot of families into the so-called "commuter belt" outside of Dublin. Our study has shown that this group is struggling with the lack of adequate public transport, which leaves many with no other option than to use the car, further adding to the traffic chaos often witnessed on the roads in and around the capital. This further aggravates the already stressful business of dropping a child to the crèche or childminder on the way to work. Almost half of all respondents found the commute to work stressful, with working parents finding it particularly so.

Other issues identified in this research include the existence of stigma *vis à vis* both older workers and workers with mental health problems. There is a great need for education and attitude change on the part of employers

and society at large so there will be a greater understanding and receptivity of these groups and the contribution that they can make and are making to the labour force and to society. Work-life balance policies for these groups in particular need to go farther than we have seen at present and need to take into account the real human needs, as well as real human potential, which are at stake here.

5.5.5 Conclusion

The development of an effective framework for flexible working, executed within a national strategy on work-life balance is hugely important if Ireland, both as a society and an economy, is to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow. Such a national strategy should support individual and organisational participation in the development of clear, coherent and effective work-life balance policies, with priority given to the implementation of flexible working arrangements, which can facilitate the reconciliation of work and personal life and social inclusion. Thus organisations must be encouraged to move towards best practice and work in partnership with employees to develop a systematic and inclusive approach towards dealing with diversity, equality and flexibility. If such policies are implemented, these issues will become the norm, becoming subsumed into mainstream business policy. New thinking and openness, both on the part of Government, employers and employees will be required if flexible working arrangements and work-life balance policies are to become a reality for all workers.

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