

The latest news and announcements from Derbyshire UNISON

## Flexible working

Inconsistent, rigid and unimaginative employers are denying individuals the flexibility they need



## Women in the UK's public services repeatedly denied flexible-work requests

**Three in ten women working in schools, hospitals, care homes, town halls, police stations and other key services have had requests to work flexibly denied, according to a UNISON survey**

The findings - based on responses from just over 44,000 women working in the public sector - suggest employers are being 'inconsistent, rigid and unimaginative' by denying individuals the flexibility needed, says UNISON.

The survey is released to coincide with the start of the union's annual women's conference in Brighton later today. A quarter (25%) of the women who were told they

couldn't alter the way they worked reported that their requests had been denied multiple times.

The data shows more than two fifths (47%) of respondents had requested some flexibility in their jobs so they could achieve a better work-life balance. More than a third (37%) had done so to look after their mental health, 36% to fit around their childcare needs and 29% for physical

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health reasons.

The women were given a range of explanations by employers as to why it wasn't possible for them to work flexibly. More than two fifths (42%) were told it would affect the quality of the service provided, and 28% that there wouldn't be enough colleagues to cover their duties. A fifth (20%) were denied any flexibility because their managers said it would prompt colleagues to ask for similar working patterns. Around one in seven (15%) were given no reason at all.

From this April, a new flexible-working law comes into effect in England, Scotland and Wales. This gives employees a statutory right to request flexible working from their first day at work (as opposed to the current situation that requires a six-month wait).

While UNISON believes this move is a step in the right direction, the union wants more to be done to allow employees to work flexibly. This is because it's all too easy for employers to turn down flexible-working requests, says UNISON. For example, one woman said she'd been asking to work flexibly for five years but all her requests had been rejected.

In the survey, one in four (25%) women also said the new law didn't go far enough. And more than half (58%) think there should be an automatic right to flexible working.

Commenting on the findings, UNISON general secretary Christina McAnea said:

"It's disheartening to see many employers continuing to deny their staff the opportunity to work flexibly. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

"But sadly many women who find they need to inject some flexibility into their working lives are coming up against employers with inconsistent, rigid and unimaginative attitudes.

"While there's no one-size-fits-all solution, some form of flexible working is achievable in most workplaces.

"Helping women to balance work with caring commitments not only improves morale, but can also help employers fill

hard-to-recruit jobs. And with fewer vacancies, services provided to the public are likely to improve.

"Too many employers are still turning down flexible-working requests, which means the right to request is pretty meaningless for many women. The right to work flexibly from day one would be beneficial for staff and employers alike, and help bring workplaces into the 21st century."

Women told UNISON of their struggles to work flexibly. One disabled woman, whose employer kept rejecting her requests for flexible adjustments to her hours, said her condition had deteriorated and she'd had to go on long-term sick leave.

Others described requests being rejected the same day they were submitted, or being told to use annual leave, resign or buy their own IT equipment if they wanted to work in a different way. As a result, many women had simply handed in their notice, even quitting secure jobs for less-reliable agency or zero-hours roles in some cases.

UNISON is pushing for all employers include flexible-working options in job adverts to help ensure more requests are agreed.

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UNISON carried out the survey from 2 to 7 February 2024. The findings are based on 44,065 responses from women working across the public sector in the UK.

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### **Case studies (names have been changed):**

Emily, an employee in the energy sector, was only able to sort her flexible return to work from maternity leave days before she was due back. She said:

"The process was horrendous, I had to submit several requests and they were all turned down within days. I was stunned. I

was caring for my baby and having huge levels of anxiety simply trying to get some flexibility at work. I was scared I'd lose my job. It dragged on so much I couldn't sort out childcare. The process left me traumatised."

Nadia, a local government worker with a disability who is a single mum of two, was told she couldn't work flexibly despite having medical notes from her doctor. Instead, she was referred her occupational health team. She said:

"I had a very supportive manager during the pandemic and we all worked well during that time. But as the situation eased, my new manager suddenly wanted everybody in the office all the time. Daily attendance then worsened my condition and I had to go off sick for a few months to recover. Being able to work from home on the days I'm struggling would make a huge difference, and also make it easier to look after my children."

Helen, a specialist nurse and single mum of three, was turned down repeatedly when she requested flexible working. She said:

"I had to go down a pay band to get some flexibility, which put me and my family in financial difficulty. I was told if they allowed me to work flexibly they'd have to do the same for others. But others aren't in my situation. I'm a survivor of domestic violence and have no family support. The process was awful and I was made to feel like a massive inconvenience. Now I don't want to be a nurse any more and am looking for a new job in retail. I've had to take time off because of the stress and anxiety I experienced. It shouldn't be like this as I do love my job."