



# Working Families Employers Benchmark 2021



# Introduction

The last eighteen months have been challenging and extraordinary for employers of all sizes, across sectors.<sup>1</sup>

These unprecedented circumstances have created a strong focus on flexible working and wellbeing in workplaces across the UK and sparked local and national debates on the future of work. But for Working Families' employer members, flexible working and family-friendly policies are areas of ongoing commitment and development. This report aims to provide an overview of how some of the UK's leading public, private and third sector organisations are working to support their teams.

**Working Families' employer members are invited to take part in the Working Families Employers Benchmark, providing each organization with an annual assessment of their flexible and family-friendly working policy and practice<sup>1</sup>.** For organisations looking to progress, it provides an invaluable platform to learn, evaluate, and develop tailored membership plans. On average, the top ten best performing entrants have been members for ten years - highlighting the positive effect of sustained support from the Charity on employers' inclusivity for parents and carers.

The Benchmark is a tool that allows employers to assess their performance against other organisations taking active

steps to attract and retain parents and carers: providing an evidence base of what works and identifying areas for further improvement. This year, we have undertaken new analyses to allow our members to benchmark themselves in key areas against firms in the same sector.

The Benchmark is modified each year to reflect the latest policy and practice, ensuring that participants are focusing on current and emerging issues. Its agility is particularly valuable this year to capture the impact of the pandemic on working cultures and practices. It provides a unique glimpse into a wide variety of organisations, observing the effect of external pressures on the working patterns of employees in the short-term, and on the strategic and operational plans to support parents and carers into the future.

This summary report outlines key findings from the 2021 Benchmark, providing insight into a diverse group of employers committed to family-friendly working. The report offers practical recommendations to develop inclusion and further improve the lives of working parents and carers, as well as other employees who would benefit from a flexible working culture.

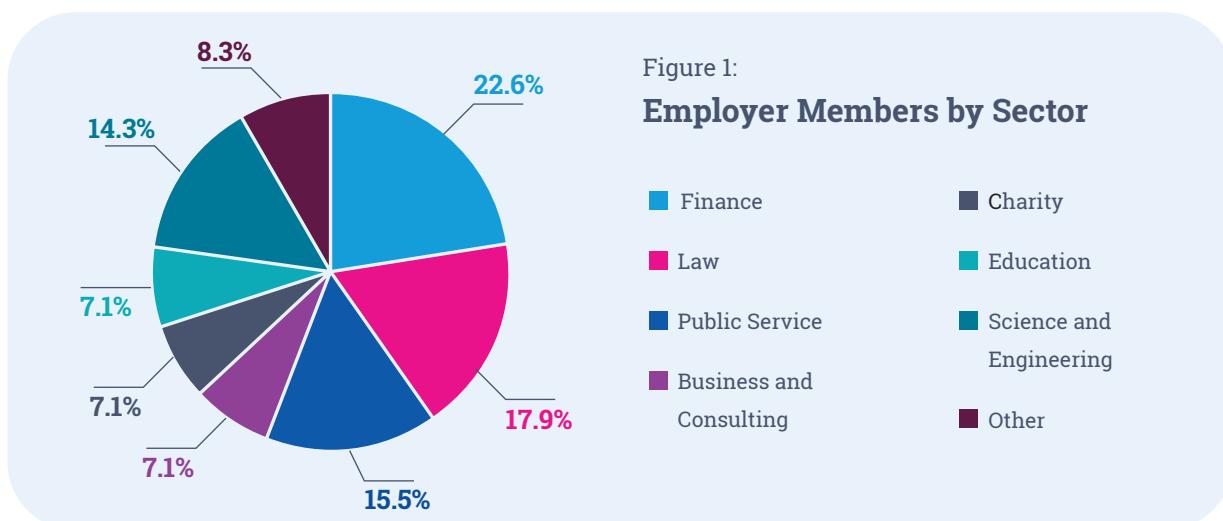


Figure 1:  
**Employer Members by Sector**

<sup>1</sup>'Flexible working' describes a wide range of working arrangements, including where, when, and how people work (e.g. home based, reduced hours, flexible hours) and it is the term favoured by Working Families. Other terms are widely used by our employer members to convey this, such as 'agile' or 'dynamic' working.

# Culture and attitude towards flexibility

Organisations that have a strong culture of flexibility excel in delivering family-friendly policies. Understanding workplace culture is therefore an important starting point for employers creating inclusive environments for parents and carers.

The overwhelming majority of organisations (96%) in our Benchmark have strategic plans to support family-friendly working across a range of key areas (IT, employee relations, financial planning, marketing, property, employee health and wellbeing). For instance, over half of employers include it in strategies relating to health and wellbeing, IT, and employer relations. Notable differences are observed by sector (see Figure 2): while more than half of the organisations in the finance, law, and public sectors are pursuing strategies in at least 5 areas, only a quarter of them are doing so in the education sector.

Many of the challenges organisations are facing today are familiar ones, reported in previous benchmark surveys, such as the lack of resources and line management knowledge/skill. But, in 2021, the post-COVID economic climate emerged as a significant barrier to creating flexible workplaces. And, this year, for the first time, we have observed the effect of organisation size on the experience of barriers to flexible working. Larger organisations are notably more affected by management's lack of skills and support than relatively small organisations.

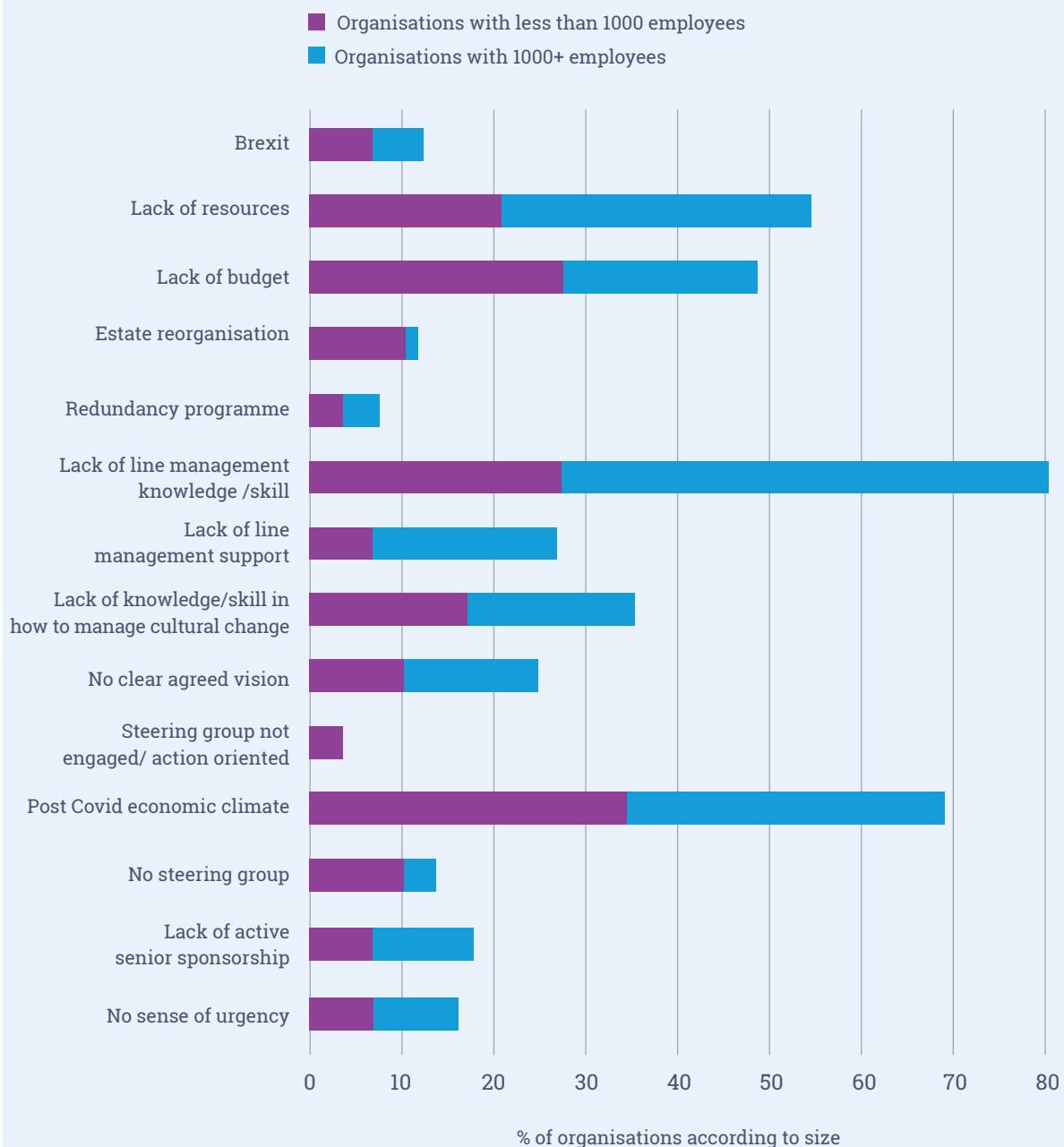
Figure 2: Number of items formally recognised in strategic plans by sector



Many employers are using an array of tools to understand what is going on across the organisation in the context of flexible working, including staff surveys, the use of technology, and line manager feedback. Yet, despite strong evidence to show organisations taking a strategic and wide-ranging approach to create flexible working environments, it remains a concern that line managers - the people who ensure that policies are understood by

employees and are implemented - continue to lack the knowledge and skills to deliver for parents and carers. Our Benchmark shows the importance of high quality and on-going training for key personnel to ensure that flexible working cultures are created through consistent practices and authentic behaviours, opening flexible working arrangements to all, regardless of role and pay grade.

**Figure 3: Challenges & barriers to creating a flexible workplace, by sector & size**



# Impact of COVID on flexible working

The COVID pandemic transformed working practices in 2020, rapidly accelerating innovations in flexible working across the UK, particularly relating to home-based working. Government regulations drove change, and this can be seen in Figure 4. Employers adapted and the number of employees working flexibly increased significantly.

**There was a stark increase in the number of organisations who reported more than 75% of their employees working flexibly from before COVID hit to the period March-September 2020. Crucially, organisations in the survey have not returned to pre-COVID flexibility levels:** over 60% of employers reported they still had more than 75% of their employees working flexibly when they completed the survey in 2021.

Employers report on the positive implications of the pandemic for family-friendly working. For instance, following the increase in employees working flexibly, line

managers are becoming more output-oriented, recognising that hours worked is not a reliable measure of productivity. The importance of flexible arrangements, particularly for parents and carers, has been exposed across organisations. Consequently, employers are stepping up and negotiating new ways of working that both suit staff needs and meet operational demands. The Benchmark shows that our employers are moving forward from the pandemic with a redoubled commitment to flexible working after seeing its benefits to parents' and carers' wellbeing, but also to organisational productivity and efficiency.

**Figure 4: The change in the proportion of benchmark employers where over three quarters of staff worked flexibly before and after the emergence of COVID**



# Embedding flexibility across the organisation

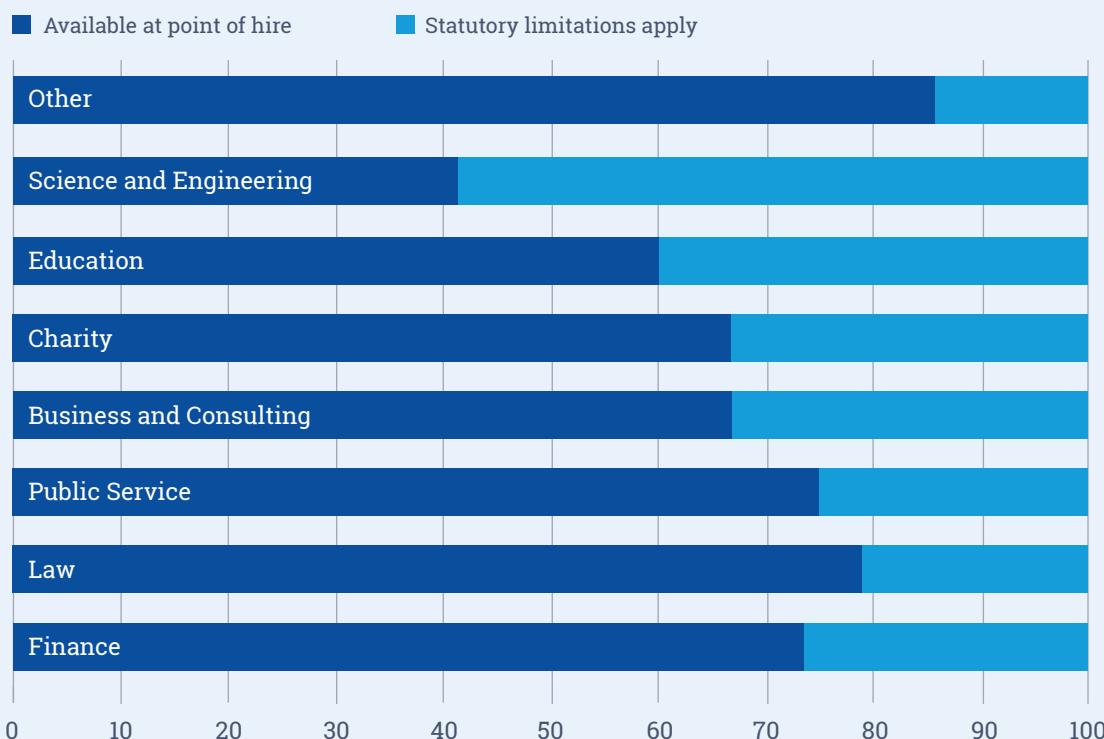
The Benchmark assesses the cultural and strategic activity undertaken by employers to foster family-friendly working, but also builds a picture of the realisation of specific policies.

Almost all employers (99%) provide measures to ensure their employees work in a way that promotes their physical and mental wellbeing and prevents burnout. 80% report that they train their managers in the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to develop and lead teams that deliver the flexibility required to support work-life balance and wellbeing - although it is only mandatory in 30% of firms, and there is variation by sector. In the business sector, most employers provided mandatory training for line managers, whereas in both the financial and charity sectors no mandatory training was provided. Given the weight of evidence indicating the importance of the role of line managers in implementing family-friendly policies,

this is clearly a key area for attention, particularly for those organisations (20%) that are not currently offering training.

Most employers (70%) offer flexibility at the point of hire without statutory limitations and conditions. But there are notable differences across sectors (see Figure 5): over 70% of organisations offer flexibility at the point of hire in the finance, law, and public sectors in contrast to less than 50% of organisations in the engineering sector. And the size of the employer has an effect too: larger firms ( $>1000$ ) are more likely than smaller firms ( $<1000$ ) to offer flexibility at the point of hire. Tellingly, this subject was the least likely to be covered in management training sessions.

Figure 5: Flexibility at the point of hire by sector



# Gender equality and progression

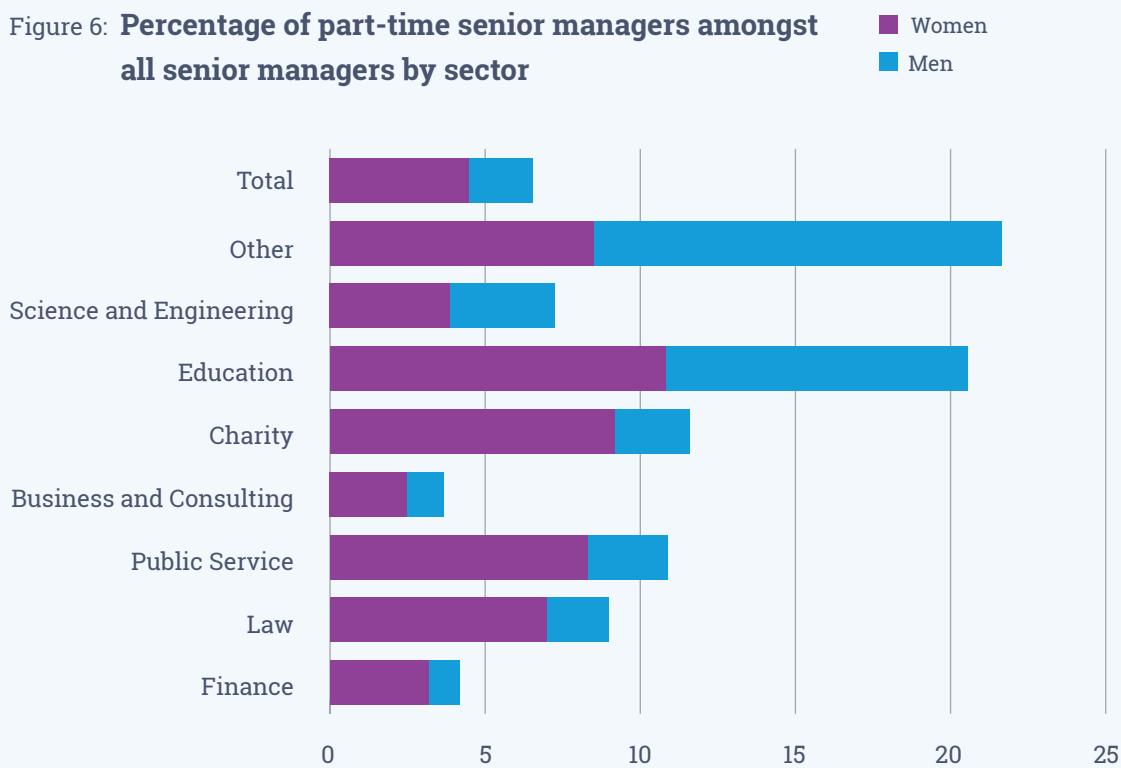
In 2021 the Benchmark continues to show barriers to progression opportunities for part-time employees and this disproportionately affects women and contributes to gender inequality.

Notably, one of the highest performing sectors in terms of offering flexibility at the point of hire (finance) is amongst the sectors performing least well in terms of modelling flexible working at senior level and ensuring that it does not hinder career success. The low proportion of part-time workers at senior level suggests that there are significant barriers that need to be overcome. On average, across all sectors, less than 7% of senior managers work part-time and the majority of these are women (5%).

The education sector has the highest proportion of senior managers working part-time (21%) and the most even

gender distribution of part-time employees. In contrast, organisations in the business and finance sectors have the lowest share of part-time managers and the greatest gender gap. Whilst women in managerial positions working part-time represent a high proportion of the total of part-time senior managers (70% for all organisations), they only comprise a small proportion of all women senior managers (15%) and an even smaller section of all senior managers (5%). Working towards higher progression rates for part-time employees is crucial for greater gender diversity and equality.

Figure 6: Percentage of part-time senior managers amongst all senior managers by sector



# Recommendations for employers

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Our Benchmark findings should be considered in the context of wider social and business transformations, particularly following COVID: such as changing expectations of employees and heightened attention to fairness. Our 2021 Benchmark emphasises the importance of the individual line manager in supporting employees with parental or caring responsibilities, and the continued need to embed flexible working throughout organisational policies and processes.

As employers make the transition to longer-term models of hybrid working, it is important that the full breadth of flexible working is considered. This would ensure that flexible working does not become synonymous with remote or home working.

- ✓ **Renewed hybrid working policies and guidance provide employers with an opportunity to highlight existing flexible working strategies. This will also ensure that line managers are aware of the most appropriate flexible working approaches with which to support the needs of parents and carers within their teams.**

COVID working has increased individual approaches to flexible working, rather than relying on organisational policies. Whilst this is welcomed as it suggests that line managers are becoming more agile and responsive to the diverse needs of employees, it should not replace formal policies and monitoring processes.

- ✓ **It is important to assess flexible working arrangements in the context of wider equality, diversity, and inclusion activity to ensure that they are accessible to all and do not impede career progression.**
- ✓ **Attention needs to be given to the quality of training and support received by line managers and ensure it is on-going to reflect the dynamic nature of this policy area.**
- ✓ **Employers should do more to ensure that all posts are designed as flexible and advertised as such.**



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