

Analysing the flexible working procedure within South Wales Police and the perceived impact on the workforces’ wellbeing



Introduction

Flexible working is a practice in which organisations have seen an increased pressure to ensure they offer their workforce. Flexible working regulations have changed from the 6th April 2024, changes include allowing workers to make flexible working requests as a day one right. These changes are set out in the Flexible Working (Amendment) Regulations 2023 (Legislation.gov.uk 2023). Since the Covid-19 pandemic organisations have seen a 40% increase in flexible working requests (CIPD 2023a). South Wales Police (SWP) is a public sector organisation, it has roughly 6,500 employees consisting of police officers and police staff (SWP 2024a).

The aim of the research paper was to analyse the flexible working procedure within SWP and the perceived impact on the workforces’ wellbeing, consisting of primary and secondary research. Objectives included analysing literature regarding flexible working practices, reviewing secondary data within SWP, research via a questionnaire and recommendations for improvement to the flexible working process.



Literature review

Flexible working – growth of hybrid/ home working

CIPD (2022) data showed minimal changes in uptake of flexible working arrangements, apart from hybrid/ homeworking this has seen a substantial increase linked to the covid-19 pandemic and organisations responses to this. The SWP delivery plan 2021-2025 highlights supplying staff with the right resources to deliver an effective service (SWP 2021). A ‘Smart Working’ policy has been implemented to support staff by identifying suitable working arrangements. Since May 2022 there has been an increase in flexible posts and decrease in fixed posts (fixed work location). This data shows the shift to a more agile workforce (SWP 2024b).

Work life balance and impact on wellbeing

Suff (2024) highlighted the benefits of supporting workforce wellbeing and link to flexible working. Further work by Rohwer, E. et al. (2022) highlighted this within a policing context. However, Duxbury, Bardoeel and Halinski (2021) and Demou, Hale, and Hunt (2020) indicated the barriers that police officers face trying to establish a work life balance.

Flexible working perceptions and gender disparity

There appears to be a negative perception applied to those individuals who work from home (SHRM 2021 & Brecheisen). The literature highlights how important it is for SWP to ensure flexible working is a process which is embraced. Chung (2020) outlined male versus female uptake of flexible working and how organisations can utilise flexible working to improve performance.

Methodology

Research Philosophy

Pragmatism was the philosophical approach applied during this research project. Pragmatism focuses on a mixed method approach to research (Hammond & Wellington, 2021).

Research Methodology

Mixed method approach was applied for research, both qualitative and quantitative data was obtained. Within the questionnaire both open and closed questions were used to identify the demographic and views on the flexible working practice within SWP.

Research participants

358 individuals were identified which consisted of both police officers and police staff. These individuals submitted a flexible working request or had their current flexible working arrangement reviewed over a 12-month period (July 2023 – July 2024).

Reliability, validity and research limitations

Possible biases were highlighted due individuals previous experience having a possible impact on individuals. Non-response bias and the impact on the response rate was highlighted (Scheaf, et al 2023)



Research findings

41% response rate for questionnaire.

Demographic & employee type

77% of responses were from female members of staff, supporting the work of Chun (2020). Slightly higher return rate from police staff versus officers, this could be linked to the difficulties officers face in finding suitable arrangements. Length of service varied, showing engagement at all points of individuals’ service.

Rank and grade

Highest response rate for officers and staff came from lower ranks and grades. Minimal response from senior level positions. This could be linked to the stigma attached to working flexibly Brecheisen (2023). Further research could explore if this also applies when in a senior position.

Flexible working process and information available

32.5% of individuals highlighted concerns around the information on the force intranet. SWP need to consider the support online and further enhance this. CIPD (2023b) highlighted promotion of flexible working as a key driver for supporting wellbeing.

Further improvements to the process

Key findings highlight the need for a review of the form, process and updates to individuals who are going through the flexible working process, 45 individuals responded confirming the form was time consuming and 44 found it bureaucratic.

Perception of flexible working

Findings highlighted negative perceptions. Indicating SWP workforce feel there is a negative stigma attached to flexible working. Of 148 responses, 98 felt that their wellbeing had been impacted by the process, 56% felt it was positive. 30% felt it was negative and 14% marked other effects.

Conclusion

Both primary and secondary research indicate that flexible working is an emotive subject which organisations need to address properly.

Wellbeing and work life balance are key areas and considerations for individuals when they apply for flexible working. SWP has committed to supporting flexible working, but further consideration needs to be given to a possible relaunch in communication to re-in force this support.

Questionnaire data shows the process, forms and literature on the force intranet need to be refined. Further qualitative data could support by reviewing the process individuals are following when applying for flexible working. Currently there are a few options which are being utilised.

