

A Critical Evaluation of Flexible Working Procedures in Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service: The Leadership Perspective



Gwasanaeth Tân ac Achub
Canolbarth a Gorllewin Cymru
Mid and West Wales
Fire and Rescue Service

Introduction

Changes in society are reaching a point where they can no longer be ignored by institutions running on outdated conventions and practices (Pedulla and Thebaud, 2015).

The Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020-2021, accelerated understanding of the possibilities of flexible working, as well as highlighting how the same thing can have vastly different impacts with varying intensities for different people.

Provision of flexible working options is known to impact men and women differently, and gender imbalance is an unavoidable characteristic of the staff distribution within MAWWFRS, that the Service has a wish, and a legal obligation, to change.

This evaluation explores what this means for flexible working practices within MAWWFRS at the close of 2025.

Methodology

- Exploratory applied research, with a pragmatist approach - research methods suited to the circumstances.
- Online questionnaire, limited to designated participants, completed anonymously.
- Quantitative data to understand broad trends.
- Qualitative data for contextualisation and to obtain information without researcher led constraints.



Literature Review

Organisational culture has an extremely significant influence on the response of individuals to flexible working options (Cook et al. 2020, Budd and Mumford, 2006). That usage tends to fit gendered patterns where men feel less able to reduce their time at work (Lott, 2018; Cook, 2020), and women still balance more of the domestic responsibility (Lott, 2018). This means that increased flexibility can simply give people more scope to lean-in to stereotypical behaviour patterns, not necessarily by choice but by outdated structural limitations (such as minimal paternity leave, for example) (Pedulla and Thebaud, 2015). This has the effect of reinforcing inequality.

In MAWWFRS the effect is amplified by the power and status available to operational staff, mostly men, to whom flexible working is not applicable, through their exclusion from flexi-time and by the barriers to Flexible Working. The contribution of those whose time commitment can be adapted (mostly women) is devalued by the organisational structure, where their power and opportunity is limited. The penalty in MAWWFRS for a man who might wish to deviate from the full-time expectation (known as flexibility stigma) (Williams *et al.*, 2013), is unknown, because flexibility is not sustained in the male workforce.

This inequality is evident in the gender imbalance in favour of men even within the female dominated Green Book cohort.



This is not to suggest intentional discrimination, but that by default the structure and culture rewards commitment to the organisation expressed through uncompromised availability, which is a historically masculine trait. This is also a situation that is sustained within other institutions and society more widely - it is not just a MAWWFRS problem (Pedulla and Thebaud, 2015, p. 118).

Understanding of this is important due to the Service's commitment to have a representative workforce (MAWWFRS, no date, P.10).

Agile working, MAWWFRS' newest flexible working procedure, developed in the wake of the pandemic, breaks the association of flexible working with status, because it is more applicable to both staff groups, dependent on the function of their role. In some cases it offers an advantage for operational staff, if non-response work can be better conducted from an alternative location that they can also provide emergency response from. This is particularly key given the geography of the organisation.

As with other forms of flexible working, agile working is another option to open up opportunities for potential employees and for organisations (Timewise, 2023).

Findings - Highlights

- 53% response rate
- On average, leaders feel that:
- Flexible working should support staff wellbeing, with associated benefits for attraction and retention
 - Statutory compliance is a low priority - showing a wish to do better than the statutory minimum.
 - Thinking about flexible working should be routine at recruitment, but operational requirements may be prohibitive for those staff. Leaders do not share an understanding of why that is.
 - Employee Wellbeing is perceived to be at the cost of organisational effectiveness
 - Not many leaders feel that flexible working procedures contribute effectively to organisational goals - there is room for improvement.

Perceived Impacts of Changes to Flexi-time (rated over 8 categories including wellbeing)



Perceived Impacts of Agile Working



Conclusions

The wish to meet people's needs is visible among leaders, and to realise organisational gains from that. However, measurement of whether procedures are working as intended is not systematic.

Academic research suggests that, in conjunction with the gender imbalance in the Grey and Green Book workforces, our flexible working procedures may be undermining organisational goals, reinforcing inequality.

The evidence base for leaders perceptions is not clear, some focus on gaining clarity on the impacts of all flexible working practices would help promote a shared understanding, and direct proactive progress towards organisational goals.