



Global Policy
Network



Equality at Work

Evidence,
Flexible
Working &
Disability

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Executive Summary

This policy brief distils evidence submitted to the Women and Equalities Committee on flexible working and disability by the Global Policy Network.

This submission draws on organisational practices and lived experience to provide insight into the transformative potential of flexible working and the persistent structural and cultural barriers that limit its impact. It sets out why the expansion of flexible working since the Covid-19 pandemic has not yet translated into a significant reduction in the disability employment gap.

Flexible working has clear potential to improve access to employment for individuals with disabilities. However, evidence from organisational practice suggests that the core barrier is not policy availability, but inconsistent implementation, limited employer capability, and ongoing cultural resistance. Without addressing these factors, flexible working will remain unevenly applied and its benefits unrealised at scale.

Equality at Work: Flexible Working & Disability: Call for Evidence

This submission is provided by Ameneh Ghazal Saatchi, CEO and founder of Global Policy Network (GPN), an independent policy institute dedicated to advancing inclusive and evidence-based policymaking across health, education, and sustainability. It draws on both organisational practice and her lived experience, as a woman with disabilities who has worked predominantly from home for 17 years throughout her career. She now leads a fully remote organisation, with a distributed workforce across multiple locations. This experience provides insight into both the transformative potential of flexible working and the persistent structural and cultural barriers that limit its impact.

Summary of Key Points

- Due to cultural barriers and a lack of guidance, flexible working has been treated as a temporary adjustment instead of a call to restructure work design.
- The benefits of flexible working for people with different disabilities vary and are influenced by how systematically established it is in different sectors.
- Failing to embed flexible working as a default design principle significantly limits the impact and enforceability of The Employment Rights Act 2025.
- Due to the unclear and inconsistently applied duty to provide reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act, flexible working is not consistently recognised as a legitimate form of adjustment.
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission should strengthen the compliance and understanding of flexible working across sectors.
- The Access to Work scheme provides valuable support, but its effectiveness is limited by delays, complexity and limited awareness among employers.

Recommendations:

- The government should adopt a more strategic and systemic approach with flexible working being reframed as a default design principle.
- Clear, practical guidance and training should be provided for organisations to implement flexible working across disability groups and sectors.
- There should be structured and in-depth engagement with individuals with disabilities and employers to identify barriers and co-design solutions.
- The Access to Work scheme needs to reflect modern working patterns and provide more effective support for home-based working.
- Enforcement and accountability should be strengthened with enhanced oversight by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and improved operation of the Access to Work scheme.

1. Why has flexible working not reduced the disability employment gap?

Experience suggests that many employers lack practical guidance on how to design roles in a flexible and inclusive way. This includes challenges in breaking down full-time roles into flexible components, distinguishing between tasks that require physical presence and those that can be delivered remotely, and implementing part-time or modular structures. At the same time, there is strong evidence of the persistence of office-first cultures. In practice, organisational value is often still placed on physical presence, informal interaction, and visibility, rather than outputs. This can disproportionately disadvantage individuals with disabilities, particularly those with neurodivergent or mental health conditions, for whom workplace social expectations may present barriers. More inclusive approaches, such as offering flexible modes of engagement, including virtual, asynchronous, or optional participation, are not yet consistently embedded.

Recent “back to the office” mandates have further constrained progress. In some cases, these appear to be driven by commercial or organisational preferences rather than inclusion objectives and have the effect of reducing accessibility. This reinforces the perception of flexible working as a temporary concession rather than a structural shift in work design.

2. Differences in experience across disabilities and sectors

Flexible working does not benefit all individuals with disabilities equally. While individuals with physical impairments may benefit directly from remote working arrangements, those with neurodivergence or mental health conditions may continue to face cultural and organisational barriers. These challenges can be compounded by intersectional factors including gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background.

There is also clear variation across sectors. Flexible working has long been embedded in industries such as pharmaceuticals and medical devices, where home-based roles, output-driven models, and employer-supported infrastructure are standard practice. In these sectors, productivity is measured through outcomes, and employees are provided with the necessary equipment and support to work remotely.

By contrast, in sectors where such systems are not established, there is often a lack of infrastructure, policy frameworks, and leadership capability. This demonstrates that flexible working is both feasible and scalable, but dependent on organisational readiness and design.

Flexible working should also be recognised as a socioeconomic equity measure. Individuals with disabilities often face additional costs related to transport, equipment, care, health management, energy use, and reduced working capacity. For those on low incomes, these costs can make employment less affordable and sustainable. Flexible and remote working can reduce the hidden costs of work, allow

pay to go further, create space for rest and health management, and support people returning to work after illness, caring responsibilities, disability-related absence, or time outside the labour market.

It should therefore be treated not as a discretionary benefit, but as a core feature of inclusive labour market design.

3. Impacts on progression

Evidence from practice indicates that outcomes are strongly influenced by organisational culture. In environments where flexible working is not valued, employees with disabilities may experience marginalisation and reduced access to career progression. In contrast, where flexible working is embedded, it can support retention, productivity, and advancement.

Global Policy Network's fully remote operating model provides one example of effective implementation. With up to 50 individuals working across locations, the organisation relies on structured communication systems, clearly defined outputs, and inclusive engagement practices. This demonstrates that flexible working, when properly designed, can support both performance and inclusion.

4. Employment Rights Act 2025: provisions and gaps

The Employment Rights Act 2025 introduces positive developments, including a day-one right to request flexible working and a requirement for employers to consider requests in a reasonable manner.

However, the legislation retains a key limitation by framing flexible working as a request rather than as a default design principle. This results in reactive rather than proactive implementation and does not require employers to consider flexibility at the point of role design. In practice, this leads to variability in outcomes, dependent on individual employer interpretation and culture. There is also limited enforcement and a lack of detailed guidance, particularly in relation to disability.

5. Reasonable adjustments and enforcement

Lack of clarity and consistency remain regarding the Equality Act 2010, particularly in the understanding and application of the duty to provide reasonable adjustments. Flexible working is not always recognised as a core component of reasonable adjustments, and employers may adopt narrow interpretations of what is considered reasonable.

Strengthening the role of the Equality and Human Rights Commission through more proactive guidance, awareness-raising, and enforcement would improve compliance and understanding across sectors.

6. Access to Work

In response to the Committee's question on Access to Work, while the scheme provides valuable support, its effectiveness is limited by delays, complexity, and limited awareness among employers.

There is also a need to ensure that the scheme reflects modern working patterns, including remote and hybrid models, and supports home-based working environments more effectively.

7. Key recommendations to Government

To ensure that flexible working delivers meaningful change, Government should adopt a more strategic and systemic approach.

Flexible working should be reframed as a default design principle, with an expectation that employers consider flexibility at the point of role creation rather than in response to individual requests. To support this, Government should introduce targeted financial mechanisms, including tariffs, grants, or tax incentives, to enable employers to redesign roles, invest in infrastructure, and provide home working set-up support for employees with disabilities.

There is also a need to strengthen employer capability. Government should develop clear, practical guidance and provide training to support organisations in implementing flexible working effectively across different disability groups and sectors.

Policy development should be grounded in lived experience. This includes structured, in-depth engagement with individuals with disabilities and employers to identify barriers and co-design solutions.

Finally, enforcement and accountability should be strengthened through enhanced oversight by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and improved operation of the Access to Work scheme.

Conclusion

Flexible working presents a significant opportunity to reduce the disability employment gap. However, without structural, cultural, and practical reform, its impact will remain limited.

A shift towards proactive role design, supported by clear guidance, financial incentives, and strong accountability, is essential. Without decisive action, flexible working will continue to be inconsistently applied, and the disability employment gap is unlikely to narrow at scale.

References:

UK Parliament (2010) Equality Act 2010. London: The Stationery Office.

UK Parliament (2025) Employment Rights Act 2025. London: The Stationery Office.



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