



Department
for Education

Flexible Working Ambassador Schools and MATs (FWAMS) Qualitative Research

April 2026

CooperGibson Research



Government
Social Research

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Executive Summary

The Flexible Working Ambassador MATs and Schools (FWAMS) programme aimed to drive the development of a culture of flexible working within the sector. It comprised bespoke peer support for school leaders delivered by Ambassador multi-academy trusts (MATs) and schools (hereafter referred to as Ambassadors), alongside online resources and training. Support provided by Ambassadors ranged from advice in relation to a specific question or issue, to longer-term support via in-depth meetings or workshops, for example in relation to creating and implementing policy or strategy. The programme ran from 2023 – 2026¹ and 10 Ambassadors supported 248 schools.

This qualitative research aimed to capture process evaluation learning focused on programme delivery, engagement and outcomes. In total, 48 in-depth online interviews were conducted in November and December 2025 with programme delivery partners (3), Ambassadors (9), schools and MATs (21) supported by the programme, and schools and MATs that did not engage with the programme (7).

Programme engagement

Interview findings highlight the need for better support for flexible working. Before joining the programme, schools and MATs commonly faced barriers, most notably leaders' hesitation and uncertainty about offering flexible working options. Few had accessed other forms of support regarding flexible working.

Schools and MATs engaged in the programme to obtain support in developing flexible working policy or processes and/or to tackle barriers and change culture around flexible working. Those participating felt the programme had come at the right time, as they were seeking to review their flexible working processes.

Ambassadors found using existing connections and promoting the programme at events were effective strategies for engagement. However, they found it challenging to recruit schools and MATs to the programme, indicating that greater support with outreach and recruitment would be helpful.

Findings suggest the most common reason for schools and MATs not engaging with the programme was that flexible working was not a priority for them at the time, while others were unaware of the programme, suggesting a need for greater publicity. Some schools and MATs that did join the programme only engaged with a limited amount of support as they did not feel ready to move forward with flexible working.

There were concerns that the programme may not be reaching the schools and MATs most in need of flexible working support, such as those experiencing wider challenges

¹ The programme was originally planned to run 2023 – 2025 but was extended by 1 year to 2026. Interviews were conducted with schools and MATs supported throughout the programme including the additional year.

(such as a poor Ofsted rating or a high percentage of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds) or with a less positive flexible working culture. More generally, Ambassadors were concerned that the overall impact of the programme would be limited due to the relatively small number of schools and MATs supported, suggesting a need for increased programme capacity and engagement.

Peer support

Support provided by Ambassadors varied widely, with some delivering support on a one-to-one basis, and others delivering support via a cohort model (also providing individual support where needed), with further variation within these models. The cohort model was considered an efficient approach, with schools and MATs benefitting from the opportunity to share ideas and good practice with a supportive and diverse community. This model may therefore benefit from further exploration.

Most Ambassadors received the support they needed to undertake their role, however some found meetings were overly focused on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and recruitment targets, suggesting a need for a more supportive approach. They valued being part of an Ambassador network, which enabled them to discuss challenges and what was working well in supporting schools, with face-to-face rather than online meetings being particularly helpful.

Ambassadors supported schools and MATs with varied flexible working issues, most commonly, addressing school leader concerns and culture change, development of flexible working policy or processes, promotion of flexible working to existing staff and in recruitment, timetabling, and facilitating specific forms of flexible working. Almost all schools and MATs found the amount and duration of support they received suited their needs, but said they would value follow-up or review at or following the end of the programme to discuss progress.

The peer support approach was considered effective in enabling schools to make changes to flexible working. Schools and MATs valued receiving bespoke support from a peer, as this demonstrated how flexible working could work in a school environment, and enabled realistic and practical discussions about implementing flexible working. Having relevant experience gave Ambassadors credibility, enabling them to influence school leaders and governors.

Findings indicate that consideration should be given to matching Ambassadors to schools and MATs in similar contexts. Although some interviewees felt this did not matter as they received bespoke support that suited their needs, others (e.g. those working in different phases) found some flexible working solutions used by the Ambassador were not as applicable to their setting, while those located far apart were unable to benefit from face-to-face visits. Schools and MATs well-matched to Ambassadors (e.g. similar in terms of

school type or size) found this helpful in enabling discussions tailored to their specific needs.

Interviewees felt the peer support approach could be applied effectively to other areas, for example to address workforce and retention issues in the education sector. Factors to consider in wider rollout include matching the context of schools and MATs with that of peer supporters, and promotion of the support on offer, with specific consideration given as to how to engage those most in need.

Programme delivery

Ambassadors and supported schools and MATs had a good understanding of the aims of the programme and felt they had been achieved.

As part of the programme, a range of resources were produced to support schools to implement flexible working. The resources were available online to all schools (not just those engaged in the programme). Use of the resources was limited amongst those interviewed; however, where interviewed schools and MATs had accessed them, they were helpful in communicating flexible working principles and practice to senior leaders, and in providing model policies or template documents that schools could use as a starting point. Having information relating to flexible working in schools gathered in one place was particularly valued.

Interviewees perceived that the programme was generally well-resourced in terms of staff time and budget, although it was recognised that some Ambassadors delivered support above the level they were funded for. The two elements of the programme (peer support and online resources) worked well together, and enabled schools to engage at different levels.

Ambassadors found completing the programme progress tracker burdensome and the focus on KPIs stressful, as school and MAT engagement was not directly in their control, indicating a need to review progress tracking processes. There were difficulties obtaining baseline or survey data from supported schools and MATs, suggesting a need for improvement in data gathering to enable changes made as a result of the programme to be better demonstrated.

Short-term outcomes

The programme's theory of change anticipated short-term outcomes such as wider adoption of flexible working practices, an increased number of supported schools with flexible working policies, and an increase in the number of flexible working requests received and approved. Culture change or normalisation of flexible working was a key change reported by supported schools and MATs following the programme. Other reported changes included:

- a more consistent or formalised approach to flexible working
- promotion / proactive offering of flexible working to existing staff and in recruitment
- increased staff awareness and uptake
- creation or improvement of a flexible working policy or strategy
- more types of flexible working being offered
- changes to the way requests for flexible working were approached

Barriers to change included hesitant leaders, financial constraints, timetabling issues and a lack of capacity to focus on flexible working due to wider challenges.

Often, the programme acted as a catalyst, motivating and supporting change. Although some supported schools and MATs may have made changes without the programme, they said these would have been to a lesser extent.

While schools and MATs felt the changes they had made were sustainable and would be maintained and developed in the long term, others felt financial constraints may reduce capacity for flexible working.

Potential longer-term impacts

The programme's theory of change anticipated long-term impacts such as improved staff retention, reduced absence rates and increased diversity of teaching staff, though it was too early for these impacts to be measured during the research. Interviewees noted the difficulty of attributing changes in recruitment and retention to flexible working or to the programme, given wider influences and the lack of baseline data. Even so, supported schools and MATs believed that improved flexible working would strengthen recruitment and retention by accommodating staff needs and supporting wellbeing, and some had already seen increased applications for vacancies and examples of staff choosing to stay as a result of changes to flexible working in their school. Interviewees also felt that flexible working could help increase staff diversity and expected recruitment and retention benefits to continue as their approaches evolved.

Considerations for the future

Building on learning from the FWAMS programme, future support relating to flexible working could consider the following:

- including an element of peer support, bringing together those working in similar contexts, and further exploring the cohort model as a delivery approach, with flexibility in delivery to meet bespoke need

- continuing and building post-programme peer support and learning networks, with opportunities to review progress and share ideas
- exploring opportunities to retain access to and improve the visibility of online resources; making resources open access², and ensuring they are kept up-to-date and in editable formats
- extending the bank of resources already available with more diverse case studies, and resources for schools and MATs partway through their flexible working journey
- promoting the support offer through existing networks and events, working more closely with local authorities and highlighting success stories
- actively seeking engagement with schools likely to be under-represented, harder to reach or most in need

A continued FWAMS programme or similar programme could consider:

- extending programme capacity, geographic coverage, and Ambassador diversity
- taking a more collaborative and supportive approach to tracking progress towards the programme's objectives, monitoring the quality of support delivered by Ambassadors, sharing experiences of Ambassadors, and managing issues as they arise
- minimising administrative burden on Ambassadors
- building on the community of Ambassadors and providing Ambassadors greater opportunity to meet face-to-face
- reviewing the Ambassador funding model to ensure it accurately reflects time spent and level of support offered to schools and MATs; for example, re-considering the classification of participant and ad hoc schools, as this was not applied consistently and did not reflect time spent by Ambassadors on recruiting schools to support
- ensuring systems are in place to enable robust, consistent data collection from schools and MATs, including baseline and outcome data for continual improvement
- exploring how recruitment efforts could be more targeted and responsive

² For the initial two years of the programme, all resources could only be accessed via login. The login requirement was removed at the end of April 2025 for all resources apart from webinars, for which the login requirement was retained to enable data collection on attendees.

1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) has set out the ambition to expand and embed flexible working in schools³ ⁴. A key part of delivering this was the Flexible Working Ambassador MATs and Schools (FWAMS) programme, launched in 2023.⁵ ⁶ The FWAMS programme comprised online resources and training (delivered by a national provider, Capita, with support from Flexible Teacher Talent (FTT) as subject matter experts), and bespoke peer support for school leaders delivered by Ambassador multi-academy trusts (MATs) and schools (hereafter referred to as Ambassadors). The programme aimed to drive the development of a culture of flexible working within the sector, with the long-term aims of improving staff retention, diversity and absence rates within participant schools.

There were 10 Ambassadors across regions, with 4 focusing on supporting schools and MATs with specific characteristics: special educational needs and disability (SEND), alternative provision and pupil referral units, and schools or MATs with high proportions of pupils on pupil premium. Schools and MATs were invited to apply to become Ambassadors in early 2023; applications were assessed against set scoring criteria with a minimum pass threshold. Application eligibility criteria varied by school type, but all schools and MATs had to be a state school / state-maintained, and to have been judged by Ofsted as Good or Outstanding for Overall Effectiveness and Leadership and Management in their most recent inspection.

Ambassadors offered school leaders ad hoc or more substantial support. 'Ad hoc' schools and MATs were those that had a short one-off engagement with the Ambassador, for example asking for advice relating to a specific question. 'Participant' schools and MATs were those receiving more substantial support, with at least one in-depth meeting or workshop with the Ambassador⁷. Support provided included help with practical issues such as timetabling, as well as longer-term support, for example with implementing a flexible working policy or strategy. It was originally intended that support would be delivered by Ambassadors to schools and MATs on a one-to-one basis, however a cohort model was also trialled by some Ambassadors, where they delivered support to schools and MATs as a group, alongside an offer of ad hoc individual support.

The FWAMS programme focused on flexible working for school teachers and leaders, with flexible working defined as any arrangements that allowed staff to vary the amount, timing, or location of their work. This included arrangements such as part-time working; job share; phased retirement; staggered, compressed or annualised hours; personal leave during term-time; time off in lieu; and remote working.

³ [More teachers to benefit from flexible working - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ [Catherine McKinnell: We support flexible working for teachers | Tes](#)

⁵ A previous Flexible Ambassador Schools (FWAS) programme ran from March 2021 – December 2022.

⁶ The programme was originally planned to run 2023 – 2025 but was extended by 1 year to 2026.

⁷ Both 'ad hoc' and 'participant' schools and MATs are referred to throughout this report as 'supported schools and MATs'.

As part of the evaluation of the FWAMS programme, the DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research (CGR) to undertake qualitative research to capture process evaluation learning focused on programme delivery, engagement and outcomes, and to update the programme Theory of Change (see [Appendix 1: Updated Theory of Change](#)).

1.1 Research aims

The research aimed to explore:

- reasons for schools engaging, not engaging or partially engaging in the programme
- the support schools were seeking through programme engagement
- how FWAMS have supported schools
- experiences of supported schools and FWAMS
- what has worked well and could be improved in the delivery of the programme
- benefits of the peer support approach and any barriers to its effectiveness
- effectiveness of online resources, how they were used and what could be improved
- stakeholders' views of the aims and delivery of the programme
- perceptions of short-term outcomes and potential longer-term impacts of programme support

1.2 Methodology and sample profile

In total, 48 in-depth interviews of around one hour in duration were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, in November and December 2025 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of potential interview participants approached and number of interviews conducted, by participant group

Participant group	Number approached	Number of interviews
Programme delivery partners ⁸	3	3
Ambassadors ⁹	10	9
Participant schools and MATs	90	21
Ad hoc schools and MATs	47	8
Non-engaged schools and MATs	13	7
Total	163	48

⁸ The organisations involved in delivery of the programme – does not include the Ambassador schools/MATs

⁹ One of the 10 programme Ambassadors was unable to take part in an interview.

All programme delivery partners, Ambassadors, and schools and MATs that had received support from an Ambassador via the programme were invited via email to take part in an interview. As awareness of the programme is low in the sector, making it harder to identify and recruit suitable schools and MATs with no engagement in the programme, those that had expressed an initial interest in taking part but had not taken up support were invited to participate. This allowed perceptions of the programme and reasons for non-engagement to be explored; a limitation of this approach is that schools and MATs that had not engaged with the programme at all were not included.

Of the 36 schools and MATs interviewed that participated in the programme or were identified as non-engaged, almost two-thirds were MATs, most were multi-phase or secondary, and half were located in London or the South East (see Table 2).

Interviews were conducted with participants in roles including Chief Executive Officer, Headteacher / Deputy Headteacher, Human Resources (HR) Lead / Manager and Business Manager. The characteristics of interviewed schools and MATs were broadly similar to those of the wider sampling frame in terms of school phase and region. In terms of school type, multi-academy trusts were slightly over-represented in the interviews (making up two-thirds of interviewees and just under half of those in the wider sampling frame) and LA maintained and free schools slightly under-represented (making up just under a tenth of interviewees and just over a fifth of those in the wider sampling frame).

Table 2: Interview participant breakdown by school type, school phase and region (participant, ad hoc and non-engaged schools / MATs)

	Number of interviews
School type	
Multi-academy trust	22
Trust academy ¹⁰	9
Single-academy trust	2
LA maintained / Free school	3
Total	36
School phase	
Primary	5
Secondary	10
Multi-phase ¹¹	15
Special / Alternative provision	6
Total	36
Region	
North	10
Midlands	4
South	22
Total	36

All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant and auto-transcribed verbatim, with initial transcripts checked and edited for accuracy. Transcripts were thematically analysed to draw out key themes related to the aims of the research.

Towards the end of the data collection period, no significant new themes were being identified from interview data, indicating that data saturation was reached. However, it should be noted that due to the relatively small, qualitative sample, findings are illustrative and not necessarily representative of all programme participants. For example, as participation in the research was voluntary, those positive about flexible working may be over-represented amongst those agreeing to take part in an interview.

¹⁰ An academy that is part of a wider trust.

¹¹ All-through schools, or MATs with a combination of primary and secondary / all-through schools.

2. Programme engagement

This section sets out findings relating to how and why schools and MATs engaged with the programme, and discusses programme reach. It covers reasons for programme engagement (including flexible working issues schools and MATs wanted to address), how schools became aware of the programme, Ambassadors' experiences of recruiting schools, and barriers to programme participation, including reasons for limited engagement of supported schools and MATs.

2.1 Reasons for programme engagement

Ambassadors offering support via the programme wanted to participate because their school or MAT had positive flexible working practices they were keen to share, or because they wanted to promote flexible working in the education sector, helping others to tackle barriers.

It's a fabulous profession... Schools have got to take back that narrative... There has to be a different model from a top-down, bureaucratic, structured approach; where people's professionalism is respected... and we can create time for staff to grow, to develop, to spend time with their family, within a congested timetable. But it's hard and it's complex. –
Ambassador

Key reasons for schools and MATs accessing support were:

- for support with changing culture around flexible working - schools and MATs wanted help to engage, and gain the support of, school leaders and governors, for example, through demonstrating the value and feasibility of flexible working
- to access support to create or implement a flexible working policy and/or clear processes - some recognised that although they were open to flexible working requests, their approach tended to be ad hoc and inconsistent, including a lack of parity between schools within MATs
- to address specific barriers to flexible working, including timetabling issues (chiefly in secondary schools), concerns about a lack of continuity in pupil-facing roles, and concerns of inequity due to being unable to offer the same flexible working opportunities to all
- for case studies and ideas on how flexible working can work in practice
- to help improve staff conditions and wellbeing, including addressing recruitment and retention issues

Schools and MATs supported on an ad hoc basis were more likely to have sought case studies and ideas, or support to tackle a specific flexible working issue.

Schools and MATs earlier in their flexible working journey were keen to access case studies of flexible working, to see credible examples of what could work in a school environment, including barriers to overcome and practical steps for implementation. Those with well-developed flexible working practices sought new ideas to give them a competitive advantage in recruiting staff.

I think it was just being able to see people doing it successfully... does it sound a little too good to be true? Is it something that could work?... It was being able to have those real-life examples and... to talk to people that had lived and breathed the experience and hearing how they set it up and how it's going. – *Participant School*

There was a sense amongst those participating that the programme had come at the right time, for example when they were seeking to review flexible working or staff wellbeing more widely, as they started receiving more flexible working requests, or were considering how to implement statutory changes. Some engaged with the programme after being inspired by the Ambassador presenting at an event.

[My colleague] had seen [Ambassador] speak at a conference. And so she said, oh, she was amazing. Let's get in contact to see if she can help. – *Participant MAT*

The challenges in offering flexible working identified by schools and MATs and the support they sought to access via the programme align with the current situation as described in the programme Theory of Change - that there is unmet demand and perceived challenges in offering flexible working in schools.

2.2 Programme awareness and recruitment

Most schools and MATs became aware of the programme either because they already had a relationship with an Ambassador, had heard them speak at an event, or through their own research following online searches for flexible working support. Relatively few reported hearing about the programme via communications from the DfE or delivery partner, Capita.

Most Ambassadors found it challenging and time-consuming to recruit schools and MATs.

We're told we have to go off and find our own schools, and schools are simply not engaging... I'd say 90% of my time on the project is... me trying to get a school to... engage with the programme, versus 10% of actually... talking to them and meeting with them. – *Ambassador*

Ambassadors suggested it would have been useful to have had more recruitment support from the programme delivery partner, although some said they had been helpful in providing leads. One programme delivery partner acknowledged it had originally been

anticipated that greater numbers of schools and MATs would self-refer for support by contacting the programme directly, but relatively few had engaged via this route. Research by the DfE shows that 3% of leaders and 1% of teachers were aware of the FWAMS programme in November 2024¹². Local authorities were described as difficult to engage and unsupportive regarding promotion of the programme.

Consistent with findings from schools and MATs, Ambassadors reported that utilising personal connections and promoting the programme at events had worked particularly well, while trying to engage schools via email or social media had been less successful. Several Ambassadors suggested existing networks could be more effectively utilised by programme delivery partners in promoting the programme, such as Behaviour Hubs or Stronger Practice Hubs.

[They] do need to tap into some of these other hubs because they have such large networks... I think that's a missed opportunity. – *Ambassador*

2.3 Barriers to programme participation

The most common barrier to programme participation was that flexible working was not a priority, for example where schools and MATs were experiencing issues such as restructures or financial pressures.

I think that with changes in Ofsted, the new curriculum, financial pressures, flexible working is down there on the list of things for school leaders to consider... Just the getting schools to kind of be on board with the programme, or want support in the first place... that's been the biggest barrier. – *Ambassador*

Some that had not engaged in the programme were unaware it existed, while others felt they did not need any support with flexible working.

For schools and MATs only taking up a limited amount of support from the programme, this tended to be because they considered they did not need further support, for example where they already had a positive flexible working culture, or where they just wanted specific information or advice and were then happy to put plans or processes in place themselves. Others did not feel ready to move forward with making changes to the flexible working offered in their school/MAT. The assumption in the Theory of Change is that supported schools have the capacity and appetite to support more flexible working. Interview findings indicate this is not the case for all schools engaging in the programme, potentially limiting its effectiveness.

Most leaders of schools and MATs that did not engage with the programme said they would find the programme helpful, and that they would particularly welcome case studies

¹² [School and college voice: November 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

showing practical examples of how flexible working could be managed in a school environment.

In the future, as we grow, it would be useful to see some creative solutions to flexible working. Some case studies... Things like information on what schools have tried, what was successful and how to make it work in our context with our workforce. – *Non-engaged school*

Others suggested information on flexible working compliance and HR issues would be useful.

There was no consensus on what may encourage schools and MATs to engage with the programme, but individual suggestions included providing data to demonstrate the benefits of flexible working (for example, in terms of recruitment and retention), financial incentives to participate, and greater promotion of the support that could be offered.

2.4 Programme reach

Ambassadors raised concerns that the programme may not be reaching schools and MATs with a less positive culture regarding flexible working, who may be most in need of support to introduce and embed it, limiting the extent of change in the sector. Programme delivery partners suggested schools experiencing wider issues (such as a poor Ofsted rating or a high percentage of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds) may be less likely to prioritise flexible working, despite the fact that this could help with staff retention and recruitment.

Schools that are not interested in flexible working are not the schools that are approaching FWAMS schools to work with them. So, I don't think that we are fundamentally changing attitudes. I think we are helping... but I think that what we are doing in the main is helping people who are already on that journey to figure out the best way. – *Ambassador*

Ambassadors and programme delivery partners identified that MATs were more likely to engage with the programme than individual schools. They proposed this was due to several factors, including standalone schools having less capacity to engage due to a smaller leadership team, or perceptions that flexible working would not work for them due to budgetary or staffing constraints. One Ambassador also suggested that the programme prioritised engaging larger organisations to maximise reach.

Some Ambassadors suggested that the overall impact of the programme on the sector as a whole would be limited due to the relatively small number of schools and MATs engaged in peer support.

2.5 Improving programme reach

There was a general feeling amongst interviewees that the programme could be better promoted, for example through higher-profile and continuous marketing, including in local and mainstream media. As mentioned in [section 2.2 \(Programme awareness and recruitment\)](#), interviewees suggested that greater use could be made of existing groups to publicise the programme, such as HR networks, Confederation of Schools Trusts, Headteacher Associations and local schools forums. Interviewees recognised there were difficulties in engaging with local authorities, but felt further work was important so they could assist in raising awareness. Several schools and MATs proposed there should be greater clarity over the type of support available via the programme, alongside promotion of the benefits of flexible working.

Interviewees suggested greater geographical coverage in terms of Ambassadors would be helpful, enabling more schools and MATs to be supported and facilitating face-to-face contact.

3. Approaches to offering support

This section explores how Ambassadors delivered support as part of the programme, discussing the different models of support and factors affecting how support was provided.

3.1 Support delivery models

There were two overarching models of support delivered by Ambassadors as part of the programme. It was originally intended that support would be delivered via an individual model, where Ambassadors delivered support to schools and MATs on a one-to-one basis. A cohort model was also trialled by some Ambassadors as part of the programme, where Ambassadors delivered support to schools and MATs as a group, also offering ad hoc individual support. Within these models, support provided varied considerably.

The individual support model was bespoke, directed by the needs of a school or MAT. Levels of support varied from a single online or telephone conversation, to a one-day face-to-face session with email or telephone follow-up, to several face-to-face sessions with the Ambassador also becoming an active part of working groups at the school or MAT.

A typical cohort model offered a series of workshops attended by a group of schools and MATs, where flexible working issues and common barriers were discussed. Cohort groups varied in size, and support delivered varied in terms of the number of workshops provided and whether they were delivered online or face-to-face. Separate networks and groups were then developed by some cohorts, to discuss specific issues such as HR and timetabling. Ambassadors also engaged with individual schools and MATs within the cohort, presenting to key stakeholders and providing bespoke support. This varied in terms of the number of individual sessions and whether support was provided via video call, email, or in-person visits either from or to the Ambassador school or MAT.

The cohort model means that we've offered workshops together. We have done ad hoc stuff as well. We've also gone and met senior leaders, trustees, whoever the trust wanted us to meet if needed. – *Ambassador*

Some Ambassadors additionally set up post-programme peer support networks, involving a mix of training and sharing of good practice, with meetings where schools and MATs could discuss their progress and issues as they arose.

3.2 Factors affecting the model of support provided

Ambassadors delivering support via a cohort model identified this was an efficient approach, enabling them to reach a greater number of schools within the resources of the programme.

We would do exactly as we would with the extended support idea, but we just do it as a group... So, they were able to network, but we were able to support more schools at one time, which we found really useful for the limited money that we were getting to run the programme, it seemed like a good and productive way for us to do that as well. – *Ambassador*

However, in some cases, Ambassadors were unable to engage a sufficient number of schools and MATs within a reasonable timeframe to be able to deliver a cohort model.

The level of support provided by Ambassadors was constrained by the needs of the supported school or MAT, with some feeling they did not need any support beyond an initial conversation (see [section 2.3 - Barriers to programme participation](#)).

We discovered very early on that schools didn't necessarily feel that they needed an initial meeting, all the resources, a follow up meeting... It's like just show us how it works. Show us what you've done. Point us in the direction of that little small school where they made it work and we'll come back to you. – *Ambassador*

4. Effectiveness of the peer support model

This section explores the delivery of the peer support model, from the perspective of Ambassadors and supported schools and MATs. It outlines Ambassadors' perceptions, schools' and MATs' level of engagement with peer support, flexible working issues addressed through the model, and discusses the matching of schools and MATs to Ambassadors. Suggested improvements to the peer support approach are presented, together with discussion of its potential wider applicability.

4.1 Ambassador perceptions and preparedness

Most Ambassadors were positive about the support they received to undertake their role, describing programme delivery partners as responsive and helpful and the programme as well-coordinated. However, some felt the monthly individual meetings with programme delivery partners were overly focused on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and recruitment targets rather than being supportive and discussing the quality of support delivered.

It feels as though the spreadsheet has driven the conversation, rather than the quality of the work... We've not talked about... how are you supporting that school? What challenges does that school face? It's, have you updated your tracker? Have you got the dates in? – *Ambassador*

Several Ambassadors mentioned they had found programme delivery partner staff changes difficult as it meant a lack of continuity in support and key contacts.

Having a community of Ambassadors was appreciated, as it gave the opportunity for discussion about challenges and aspects of peer support that were working well. Face-to-face meetings were seen as more helpful than those held online. Ambassadors suggested more opportunities to link with peers would be valued, to share practice and possibly plan a more coherent approach as a collective, developing consistent messaging on flexible working issues.

Some Ambassadors suggested it would be useful to have access to evaluation data from supported schools and MATs gathered via DfE surveys, to see the impact of the support they provided (both qualitative and quantitative).

4.2 Engagement of supported schools and MATs

Ambassadors felt supported schools and MATs generally engaged well with the support provided, taking action to improve their flexible working practices. A minority did not appear motivated to engage or were less engaged due to capacity issues. Consistent with this, some supported schools and MATs reported they were unable to take up all the support offered via the programme, as it was difficult to fit in around other priorities.

Ambassadors identified that staffing changes within schools and MATs had in a small number of cases led to a loss of momentum or programme involvement being discontinued. They also found some schools and MATs were not ready to make changes, with one noting the importance of engaging with the right person and difficulties where leaders were reluctant to offer flexible working.

Talking with the right people and the influencers... sometimes heads have been on board and they've been really positive, but the CEOs haven't, or you've not spoken with the person who wanted to make the decision. So that has been hard where you've had a really willing head, but then the barrier has been the trust. – *Ambassador*

4.3 Addressing flexible working issues

A key issue addressed through peer support was changing the culture around flexible working in schools and MATs. Ambassadors spoke to leadership teams, discussing the benefits of flexible working, talking through potential barriers and answering questions. This was helpful in motivating leaders to think more creatively and in getting buy-in from the wider leadership team (see Exemplar 1 – Culture change).

I brought [the Ambassador] to the exec team... It changed our thinking and encouraged us to think much more creatively than we had previously. And possibly... it solidified our changing attitude. – *Participant MAT*

Exemplar 1: Culture change

Through discussions in the initial meeting with their Ambassador, the leadership team at one participant school realised that although they were offering some flexible working, their language and actions around it did not match their values. As a result, they decided to review how they approached flexible working as a whole.

The Ambassador gave them several ideas to think about, one being that they could be reason-blind when handling flexible working requests. They made this change to give staff the message that no reason for requesting flexible working was more important than another, which meant there was no hierarchy of requests. They also identified the flexible working options that were available within each role and communicated this to staff, creating a more structured, transparent process.

To implement their new approach and ensure adoption and parity across the wider trust, the team with the Ambassador, delivered internal training to all trust schools.

The Ambassador provided support throughout the process, speaking to trustees at the trust conference and presenting to headteachers. This helped gain support for the change, as they could confidently talk about their experiences and address concerns.

Ambassadors also supported schools and MATs to create or further develop their flexible working policy or improve their flexible working offer more generally, for example helping with:

- working out the flexibilities that could be offered to different groups of staff
- applying flexible working as a solution to recruitment or retention issues
- implementing flexible working processes, including handling requests
- promoting flexible working to existing staff and on recruitment advertisements
- timetabling
- facilitating specific forms of flexible working, including job shares, planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) from home, and compressed hours

As mentioned in [section 2.1 \(Reasons for programme engagement\)](#), a key concern of schools and MATs related to equity of flexible working opportunities. Ambassadors helped those they supported to take a strategic, transparent approach, and promoted the understanding that although outcomes of flexible working requests may not be the same across staff groups, fair and consistent processes could still be implemented.

[The Ambassador helped the senior leadership team] to understand particularly around this idea of fairness of process as opposed to fairness of outcome. And I think she was really, really good at kind of explaining that and talking everybody through that. It was really valuable to be able to talk through those implications with her. – *Participant School*

The practical support offered by Ambassadors was broadly consistent with the planned activities set out in the Theory of Change, including helping schools and MATs to create a flexible working policy, supporting with staff recruitment, raising awareness of different types of flexible working, raising staff confidence, and support with embedding a flexible working culture. However, one element of support in the Theory of Change - supporting schools and MATs in communications with parents - was not mentioned by any interviewees (although they were not specifically asked about this).

4.4 Perceptions of supported schools and MATs

In line with the Theory of Change, interviewees felt that the advice given by Ambassadors was effective. Schools and MATs highly valued receiving support from a fellow school or trust and identified a number of benefits of the peer support approach. For example, it:

- demonstrated how flexible working could work in practice
- helped influence school leaders and governors due to the credibility of Ambassadors who were experienced in implementing flexible working in a school environment

- enabled discussion of the benefits and issues of flexible working with real-life examples
- gave leaders the belief that flexible working could work in their own school or MAT
- gave leaders external motivation to challenge current practice and try new ideas
- provided bespoke support, allowing schools and MATs to work through issues with someone who had taken the time to understand their specific context

What I really liked about this was the ability to go a lot deeper with discussion and rather than simply saying, here's some case studies you could take away... we dissected them. We talked about, well how did that work? Because we couldn't see that working in our context... It took it to a different and much more meaningful level. – *Participant MAT*

Almost all supported schools and MATs felt Ambassadors were flexible in their approach and available to contact whenever they had any questions or issues to discuss. Ambassadors were described as approachable, knowledgeable and supportive. Several described their Ambassador as 'inspirational'.

We found [our Ambassador] incredibly inspirational and very clear and very pragmatic. And she's clearly put some fantastic things in place in her own organisation, and she made you feel like anything was possible almost... such a positive mindset and really made us understand the importance of doing this. – *Participant MAT*

Almost all schools and MATs found the amount and duration of support they received from their Ambassador suited their needs. However, one participant school had a single meeting with their Ambassador and had asked for additional support which they had not received.

4.5 What worked well and challenges of the cohort model

A key benefit of the cohort model reported by schools and MATs involved was the opportunity to share ideas and good practice, and discuss how to overcome common barriers to flexible working. Engaging with schools working across diverse contexts gave participants the opportunity to hear about a wide range of approaches they could apply or tailor to their own situation. Cohort participants appreciated being part of a supportive network of peers with whom they could discuss ideas and potential solutions to flexible working challenges. Several mentioned benefitting from the combination of being part of a peer network while also receiving individual support from their Ambassador.

[The cohort meetings] really, really helped our HR Business Partner... she grew a network of like-minded colleagues... that she could call up and ask whatever. And they shared materials between them and that's carried on afterwards. So that's fabulous. – *Participant school*

It developed this really great sort of action learning type group who were just so generous with each other... hands-on help, never mind just support. An example of that is the timetablers all getting together and offering practical help... wonderful peer support and professional generosity. I don't know whether we would have seen as much of that if we hadn't done the cohort model. – *Ambassador*

A minority of schools and MATs felt they did not fit in well with their cohort group. For example, they identified that members who already knew one another grouped together, that ideas shared would not work in their specific context, or that they had little in common with leaders from schools and MATs further ahead in implementing flexible working.

4.6 Matching of schools to Ambassadors

Opinions were divided as to whether schools and MATs were well-matched to Ambassadors in terms of context. Those that felt they were well-matched explained they were similar in terms of school type or size, which had been helpful in terms of receiving tailored advice. For example, one mentioned that having an Ambassador with a faith school background enabled useful discussions around supporting leave for religious observance.

Where schools and MATs felt they were not well-matched to their Ambassador, this tended to be in terms of location or phase. Some schools and MATs supported by an Ambassador located some distance away felt they did not benefit fully from the programme as they were not able to visit the Ambassador. Interviewees also pointed out that flexible working solutions that work well in a secondary school may not be as applicable to a primary school, and vice versa, primarily due to differences in timetabling.

[The Ambassador] had some amazing things that she'd put in place in her [secondary] school, but she's kind of achieved that through timetabling. And we just can't do that [in primary]. – *Participant MAT*

There were also split opinions as to whether matching Ambassadors to schools and MATs of a similar context mattered. Consistent with the above, those who felt matching context was important tended to emphasise the benefits of schools and Ambassadors being similar in terms of location and phase. Special schools faced specific challenges and felt they benefitted from support from an Ambassador experienced in this context.

We can't be as flexible as a mainstream setting... our children really struggle with change and need familiar faces. So, staff tend to work with the same children over long periods of time in a very systematic and regular way... it was very useful that [our Ambassador] understood that instinctively. – *Participant MAT*

Those who felt context did not matter identified that their Ambassador was flexible and bespoke in their approach to providing support, taking time to understand their individual situation and offering appropriate advice. Schools and MATs also pointed out that flexible working principles and issues were common across school types, and that experiences from other contexts could provide ideas they could adapt to suit their own situation. For example, those supported via a cohort approach appreciated being able to share ideas with schools and MATs from varied contexts.

It was a real mixture of people that were taking part. So, there was primary, secondary, independent, academies, local authority schools. So, it was helpful that it wasn't just... one [size] fits all, because often being the sort of school that we are, we find ourselves in a bit of a unique scenario. So having others to talk to was quite good. – *Participant school*

4.7 Improvements to the peer support approach

Supported schools and MATs suggested it would be helpful to have a follow-up or review visit by the Ambassador at or following the end of the programme, to discuss progress and any emerging issues, and to plan next steps. Those that had been part of a cohort said they would value a post-programme peer learning network, enabling them to continue to work together and share progress and learning (post-programme networks have already been set up by some Ambassadors). It was also suggested that ongoing updates on relevant policy changes or new examples of good practice would be useful. More specifically, several schools and MATs said they would like more support on timetabling issues, including more information about the practicalities of implementing a nine-day fortnight.

4.8 Wider applicability of the peer support approach

Almost all interviewees thought the peer support approach could be successfully applied to other areas, such as addressing workforce and retention issues within the education sector. They felt peer support was an effective and meaningful way to share knowledge and experience, and tackle common challenges. However, one Ambassador suggested that trying to engage school leaders to discuss workforce and retention issues would be similarly challenging to engaging them with flexible working, as they tend to focus on priority areas of practice relating to school effectiveness such as behaviour and attendance.

In terms of factors to consider if the peer support approach were to be rolled out more widely, interviewees suggested:

- matching Ambassadors with schools and MATs working in similar contexts and located closely enough to be able to meet face-to-face
- recruiting knowledgeable and passionate Ambassadors
- promoting the support offer widely, making the benefits clear, to motivate schools and MATs to engage, possibly with financial support to release staff to be involved
- specifically considering how to engage those in most need of support, who may be less likely to participate

5. Programme delivery

This section discusses programme resourcing, the extent to which programme aims were understood and achieved, how well the peer support and resources elements worked together, alternative sources of flexible working support, challenges experienced, and suggested improvements to programme delivery.

5.1 Programme resourcing

Interviewees generally felt the programme was well-resourced, however it was recognised by a minority of Ambassadors and a programme delivery partner that some Ambassadors had delivered support to a level above that funded by the programme, due to the limited budget available. The time demands on some Ambassadors were high, and they had varied capacity to provide support.

Webinars... could be a whole morning, but then there'll be days of prep that goes along with that. Then there's the many [requests]... talk to the Tes, talk to this union for me, go and present at this place for me... I've then got to go out and find all of the schools, which takes ages in itself... It's a huge number of days and the money that we get and the support that we get... is quite limited really for what we're expected to do. –
Ambassador

5.2 Reflecting on programme aims

Ambassadors and supported schools and MATs perceived the aims of the programme as being primarily i) to improve recruitment and retention, through improving staff conditions and wellbeing via flexible working, and ii) to increase awareness, understanding and use of flexible working within the education sector. Several also mentioned helping schools and MATs overcome barriers to flexible working, or bringing the education sector more in line with working conditions offered in other sectors. A minority of interviewees (ambassadors and supported schools and MATs) said that programme aims were not clear or focused enough.

Interviewees felt the programme was meeting its aims, providing worthwhile support and increasing opportunities for flexible working within the sector. Their understanding of programme aims aligns with the aims set out in the Theory of Change: to raise awareness about the benefits of flexible working, support schools and MATs to champion change within the sector, and upskill and equip leaders with the knowledge and tools to address challenges.

5.3 Awareness and use of resources

Although website data indicates the resources were well-used by schools and MATs in general, use was limited amongst those interviewed. While some had engaged with webinars and downloaded resources, others had not accessed the resources at all or had only limited engagement such as downloading documents. This may be because schools and MATs recruited to the research were those that had received support from an Ambassador, rather than those that may have accessed the online resources only. In line with this, interview findings suggested that limited resource use was primarily because schools and MATs felt they had received all the information they needed from their Ambassador. However, some were unaware the resources were available, indicating a need for wider promotion.

Ambassadors reported signposting those they supported to the online resources. However, schools and MATs suggested better marketing of the resources would be helpful, for example via regular communications from programme delivery partners or greater visibility online (one supported school reported that they did not appear in online searches).

The programme Theory of Change includes a change mechanism related to effective communications signposting schools to resources and support. Interview findings suggest this may be an aspect that could be improved to enhance the impact of the programme.

Schools and MATs that did engage with the online training and resources reported using them to take action rather than for information only. For example, one leader started allowing PPA from home after hearing about the idea in a webinar. Others used the resources to help communicate flexible working principles and practice to their senior leadership team, for example in highlighting the benefits of flexible working or signposting staff members to appropriate resources for their role, such as information about timetabling.

[In the online] training this week... I asked... when you're a multi-sited trust and you've got lots of different headteachers and... personalities and... agendas, how do you reach them all? [The trainer] talked about the three different strands of: the legal requirements, the strategic direction, but then morally, what's the right thing to do? And she said, in a group of people, one of those three strands will hit each of them. And that was helpful, to kind of think about... how do I need to pitch it? - *Ad hoc MAT*

Case studies were identified by schools and MATs as being particularly valuable in showing that flexible working could be implemented in the school setting, providing ideas and encouragement for leaders to try new approaches.

Schools and MATs found model policies and other templates a helpful starting point in developing their own documents, and resources on timetabling useful to show what

flexible timetabling could look like in practice. For example, one used the flexible job design template to identify and share with staff the types of flexible working available to each role across their trust (see Exemplar 2 – Flexible job design). The ability to complete toolkits such as the self-evaluation tool, action plan and flexible job design was also valued and had supported schools and MATs to make changes.

5.4 Perceptions of resources

Schools and MATs felt it was useful to have relevant information relating to flexible working collected in one place, providing a good introduction as well as a helpful resource to signpost school leaders to. Having flexible working resources focused specifically on a school context was valued. Webinars being available to watch on demand made them more accessible to leaders who might otherwise have missed them.

Programme delivery partners felt the flexibility built into programme delivery was helpful in enabling them to be responsive to the needs and interests of schools and MATs, producing and delivering timely resources such as information on flexible working and the menopause.

The only issue reported by interviewees regarding the resources was that they were not straightforward to access, although none reported this had prevented access. Access was via login rather than being openly available, and event links could not be sent to others or added to electronic calendars¹³.

5.5 Potential improvements to resources

Several schools and MATs suggested more diverse case studies should be included, for example with a greater focus on standalone schools, primary schools and staff situations other than women returning from maternity leave (such as staff caring for older relatives). Several participant MATs proposed resources for those already partway through their flexible working journey would be helpful, including progressive content to complement the more generic introductory resources. Further suggestions made by individual interviewees included:

- ensuring resources are kept updated, more inviting and attractive
- ensuring documents such as presentation slides and templates are available in editable formats so schools can easily adapt them for their own use
- scheduling more live training sessions making more options available so more staff have the opportunity to ask questions or obtain specific advice

¹³ For the initial two years of the programme, all resources could only be accessed via login. The login requirement was removed at the end of April 2025 for all resources apart from webinars, for which the login requirement was retained to enable data collection on attendees.

- using more sophisticated online forms for tools such as the self-evaluation

No particular gaps in topics covered were identified.

5.6 Combination of programme elements

Ambassadors felt the combination of online resources and peer support worked well, enabling flow between the two elements. For example, they were able to signpost those they were supporting to specific resources for further information, and also provide schools and MATs with individual support where they had follow-up questions after attending a webinar. Ambassadors suggested the varied forms of support enabled schools and MATs to engage with the programme at the level they had capacity for.

That multi-layered approach means that whoever and wherever they're coming from, there is a way of finding support that works for that school. So, it could be the busy school leader just wants to watch a webinar at 10 o'clock at night... [whereas] someone who's got a little bit more time and thought to devote to it... wants to meet with the Ambassador and discuss [an] action plan. So, I think it's absolutely great that there are those different ways of gaining that support. – *Ambassador*

5.7 Aligning with other sources of flexible working support

Few schools and MATs had received flexible working support from any other source. Of those that had received support, several had external HR advisors that supported with legal and contractual aspects, and several mentioned informal learning from other schools with differing flexible working practices. A small number had received more formal support, for example via the [Timewise Flex Positive programme](#), the [Maternity Teacher Paternity Teacher \(MTPT\) Project](#), or [Whole Education](#).

5.8 Challenges and suggested improvements to programme delivery

A key issue with programme delivery raised by Ambassadors related to programme bureaucracy and KPIs. For example:

- some Ambassadors found completing the tracker burdensome
- some found the focus on KPIs stressful, given that school and MAT engagement was not always under their control
- as the tracker collected quantitative rather than qualitative information, one Ambassador felt it was overly focused on accountability rather than being a supportive or facilitative document; for example, not including a qualitative

discussion about how Ambassadors provided support and any challenges encountered meant progress meetings did not feel supportive or developmental

- the paperwork required to receive funds was felt to be overly burdensome, with repetition of information across forms

Several interviewees suggested greater sharing of programme data would be useful. For example, one Ambassador identified that being able to access feedback from the schools and MATs they supported would help in planning support, while a participant MAT said they would value a document capturing collective learning from the programme. Ambassadors found it difficult to obtain the data required from supported schools and MATs in some cases, as school leaders were too busy to complete surveys or provide baseline data, or were reluctant to complete a formal action plan. Consistent with this, programme delivery partners mentioned difficulties obtaining baseline data from schools and MATs. They suggested systems to ensure robust, consistent data collection would help in assessing programme impact and demonstrating the benefits of flexible working to the sector. They also proposed that working with comprehensive data could enable a more targeted and responsive recruitment approach, with rapid identification of gaps in coverage (in terms of region and school characteristics).

The process of classifying supported schools and MATs as participant or ad hoc was seen as problematic. Ambassadors felt the definition was unclear, and pointed out they had little control over whether schools and MATs chose to take up more than ad hoc support, which affected the funding they received. They also highlighted that where they had worked individually with several schools within a trust, this was only counted as one participant despite the additional work involved.

Changes of government were identified as an external barrier to programme delivery, restricting communications and publicity.

6. Short-term outcomes of the programme

This section explores the short-term outcomes of the programme, setting out the starting points of supported schools and MATs, outlining changes made and the extent to which the programme contributed to these, discussing barriers to change, and whether changes will be maintained in the long term.

6.1 Starting points of supported schools and MATs

A typical situation of supported schools and MATs prior to engaging in the programme was that they were open to flexible working, but had not implemented a consistent or formal approach. For example, some staff had flexible working arrangements, and flexible working requests were considered on an ad hoc, case-by-case basis, but there was no overall strategy or consistent approach across the school or trust. Some had a flexible working policy, while others had no policy in place or wanted to make improvements to their existing policy. For example, they felt it was generic and written to meet statutory requirements rather than being reflective of the approach they were taking or wanted to take.

Some schools and MATs acknowledged that they did not have a positive flexible working culture, for example because headteachers were hesitant to develop flexible working. Several interviewees identified that awareness and uptake of flexible working was low, with staff not realising it was an option or that there was a flexible working policy in place.

6.2 Actions taken and changes made

This sub-section outlines the changes made by supported schools and MATs following the programme, including changes relating to the visibility of flexible working, culture change, flexible hiring, flexible working policy or strategy, and types of flexible working offered. It should be noted that not all schools and MATs supported by the programme made all these changes, but these are actions that were commonly taken.

Of schools and MATs that had not made changes at the time of the interview, several identified plans for future action, including starting to offer PPA from home, and implementing a new or improved flexible working policy.

Some schools and MATs said the changes they had made were sustainable and would be maintained and developed further in the long term. However, others felt that increasing financial constraints may reduce their capacity to offer flexible working in the future, due to the additional on-costs or reduced staff numbers.

As budgets become ever more constrained, the ability to flex and add capacity and support people becomes much harder... There's just so few staff, we're running such a skeleton ship in most of our schools... I think we're almost at that tipping point where we're starting to go backwards now. – *Ad hoc MAT*

6.2.1 Visibility and culture change

Culture change or normalisation of flexible working was the most common change reported by supported schools and MATs following involvement in the programme. For example, leaders had become more open to discussing flexible working and trying creative solutions, and visibility of flexible working had increased. Actions taken included the active promotion of the benefits and acceptability of flexible working across all staff groups (including the senior leadership team) and presentations to or workshops with leaders and governors to gain support and address perceived barriers.

One change mechanism set out in the Theory of Change was leaders being more confident about approaches to flexible working and promoting a positive culture of flexible working in their schools, including offering more flexible working practices and approving more requests. Similarly, a long-term outcome set out in the Theory of Change was culture change in the sector so flexible working becomes normalised. Interview findings suggest these have been achieved or are being worked towards in some of the supported schools and MATs that participated in the research. A minority were unable to make changes due to issues such as redundancies or restructuring; the most common barrier mentioned to changing culture around flexible working was the reluctance of headteachers.

Schools and MATs identified that awareness of flexible working had increased across the organisation, with some reporting an increase in flexible working requests. Those involved in the programme had promoted or proactively offered flexible working to staff. Some had put together an information resource detailing flexible working possibilities and explaining how to make a flexible working request, while others had publicised flexible working via the staff newsletter or video updates, including promoting case studies of staff taking up different forms of flexible working.

Schools and MATs had changed the way they approached flexible working requests, taking a more solution-focused, positive approach, working out how they could accommodate staff needs. Several schools and MATs felt they were now better at managing any difference between staff requests and the needs of the school. This included considering flexible working when timetabling, thinking of strategies to enable a compromise when requests were difficult to meet, and giving increased priority to staff needs in recognition that retaining high-quality teachers ultimately benefits pupils.

Heads are now not going to immediately say, no, that won't work for us. There is that willingness to consider, how could we make it work? That's been the big cultural shift... It's just shifted the starting point for the conversation. – *Participant MAT*

Several schools had adopted a 'reason blind' approach, where they did not ask staff to give a reason for flexible working requests, to ensure equity, so that for example certain groups such as parents, were not unfairly prioritised.

6.2.2 Flexible hiring

Schools and MATs had changed their recruitment approach, starting to reference in job advertisements that they were open to discussing flexible working. Several reported this had led to an increase in applicants, including for roles traditionally difficult to recruit to.

The secondary school we are working with, they had struggled to recruit to science and maths for a year and a half with their previous advert model, where they... didn't say... [they were] open to a conversation around flexible working. As soon as they made that change, they were inundated... And they did fill both those posts with flexible working requests... One... said that if they hadn't written on their advert they were open to flexible working, she wouldn't have applied because she thought it was full time or nothing. – *Ambassador*

One participant MAT had created a flexible working pool, initially for teaching assistants, but that they were planning to expand to include teachers. Teaching assistants applying to the pool could select the hours they were able to work, which encouraged a large number of applications from highly skilled staff.

These changes support the long-term outcome in the Theory of Change for an increase in the number of teacher vacancies being advertised with flexible working options.

6.2.3 Flexible working policy or strategy

A number of supported schools and MATs created a flexible working policy or strategy, with others making improvements to their existing policy, for example increasing flexibility in terms of staff requests, or clearly setting out the types of flexible working offered. This supports the short-term outcome in the Theory of Change for an increased number of supported schools to have flexible working policies.

We were shared the flexible working policy of the Ambassador school, so we could then tweak that. And I think that was then really easy to write... By that point, when I presented it to governors, I had enough knowledge and enough understanding of what it was that we wanted to achieve so that I could really confidently talk about it and say, this is our policy, and this is how we're going to implement this policy. – *Participant School*

Schools and MATs reported taking a more consistent, formalised approach to flexible working, for example clearly setting out the types of flexible working available to each staff group, or implementing a timeline for flexible working requests to allow any necessary timetabling changes to be made in time for the new school year. Several MATs reported introducing a consistent, equitable approach across schools within the trust. One had introduced a flexible job design approach, using a template from the online flexible working resources (see Exemplar 2 - Flexible job design).

Schools understanding the importance of taking a strategic whole-school approach and having a framework for implementation was set out as a change mechanism in the Theory of Change. Interviews suggest this was achieved or was being worked towards in some supported schools and MATs.

Exemplar 2: Flexible job design

One participant MAT realised they did not widely publicise flexible working and were keen to ensure that staff across the trust were aware of the possibilities open to them.

They created a spreadsheet that listed every job role across the trust in the first column and possible flexible working options across the top, including working from home, hybrid working, compressed hours, flexi time, annualised hours, job share, part-time and phased retirement. The flexible working types were ticked to show staff in each role which they could apply for, together with notes identifying factors that may impact on the likelihood of a request being agreed.

The spreadsheet also included 'non-negotiables' - events staff were obliged to attend regardless of their working pattern, such as parent consultations, staff meetings and training.

Decisions about the flexible working options that could be offered to each job role were made by a working party of senior staff. This was a useful process as it enabled headteachers to challenge their own thinking about flexible working and what could be achieved.

The spreadsheet was launched to staff across the trust as part of a wider presentation about flexible working, with a video from the CEO. Since the launch, staff awareness of flexible working has increased, and more flexible working requests are now received.

6.2.4 Types of flexible working

Most interviewed schools and MATs said they had increased the types of flexible working offered (see Exemplar 3 - Increasing options for flexible working).

Exemplar 3: Increasing options for flexible working

One participant MAT realised that offering varied types of flexible working would be easier to manage than offering part-time only, which could result in a large proportion of staff wanting to work a four-day week. They put together a 'flexible menu' for all staff from director to support staff level, including: compressed hours; late starts and early finishes; extended days with an additional week of leave during term time; time off in lieu; and PPA from home.

The most common change was offering PPA from home, or greater remote working generally. Flexible working opportunities had been broadened to include options for

compressed hours, job share, late starts and early finishes, or term-time leave days. One participant school had introduced job shares for two leadership roles, an idea inspired by their Ambassador (see Exemplar 4 - Job shares for leadership roles).

Increased awareness and use of flexible working options in supported schools was included as a change mechanism in the Theory of Change, with teachers and leaders in supported schools adopting more flexible working practices included as a short-term outcome, and an increased range of flexible working on offer in schools included as a long-term outcome. Interviews with leaders suggest these were achieved or were being worked towards in some schools and MATs.

Exemplar 4: Job shares for leadership roles

One participant school introduced job shares for two roles, which they found to be a useful tool in retaining experienced staff and developing future leaders:

Job share 1: At middle leader level, two staff members were keen to progress in their career but wanted to work part-time, so a job share was created to facilitate this.

Job share 2: A senior school leader was given the opportunity for a part-time role at trust leadership level. Creating a job share enabled them to also stay in their existing role on a part-time basis. This meant the school retained an experienced member of staff for longer, benefitting from their new executive expertise, and also gave the opportunity for another staff member to progress to the senior leadership team.

6.3 Barriers to change

This sub-section discusses the barriers experienced by schools and MATs in making changes to flexible working as part of the programme, including apprehension of leaders (the barrier to change most commonly mentioned by schools and MATs).

6.3.1 Concerns of leaders

A key barrier to change identified by interviewees was the perceived hesitancy or reluctance of leaders (typically headteachers) to adopt flexible working, for example because they thought it would be unfeasible or difficult to implement or would be detrimental to pupils with no benefit for the school.

Certainly there were pockets where leaders were perhaps not agreeing to something that they probably could have done, just because it was easier to say no, rather than thinking about the advantages of saying yes. – *Ad hoc MAT*

Leaders were concerned that flexible working was not always compatible with school business needs, which had prevented some from permitting different working patterns. For example, there were concerns about continuity and consistency for pupils, particularly regarding teaching staff and those with pastoral responsibilities. Leaders of special schools and alternative provision had particular concerns about being able to maintain continuity for pupils who benefitted from consistent support from specific members of staff, also pointing to training requirements of certain roles or ratios that needed to be maintained.

From a communication perspective, it was raised that part-time staff could miss key messages from staff meetings or be unable to attend CPD. A minority of leaders also perceived that increased flexible working could result in full-time staff having to take on extra work.

Some leaders were concerned that increasing flexible working could become unsustainable. There was a perception that once flexible working was offered, they could have multiple requests they were unable to accommodate. Some had overcome this through making flexible working agreements for a fixed-term period so that arrangements were open to regular review. There were also concerns about equity, for example that it was inequitable to only offer some forms of flexible working (such as remote working) to particular staff groups.

There was a small amount of evidence of the possible unintended outcome set out in the Theory of Change, that having engaged with the programme, leaders may decide flexible working is too difficult to implement and so even less flexible working is available in schools. Although no instances were found of flexible working provision being reduced, one Ambassador suggested that after becoming more aware of the complexities and work involved, for example around culture change and underlying structures, some supported schools and MATs decided they were unable to make changes.

I think a lot of people saw it as a fix... we need to do flexible working. We need to do it now. Give me five things to do... We positioned it in the way that... this takes time. It's complex. It's cultural... The initial engagement for schools was about developing their understanding... we'd say this is what it's about. And they'd go, ooh, we're not ready for that then. –
Ambassador

In support of this, some supported schools and MATs reported they were not ready to make changes to flexible working, chiefly due to the complexity of timetabling and ensuring staff cover.

6.3.2 Other barriers

Schools and MATs who were making changes as a result of engaging with FWAMS also identified the following issues as barriers to increasing their flexible working offer:

- financial constraints or concerns – this was specifically in relation to job shares, which were associated with the additional costs of paying two staff concurrently during handover periods. Finances were a particular issue in smaller schools, where there was less scope in the budget to accommodate increased costs
- timetabling – secondaries found the complexity of the timetable meant there were numerous factors to consider when making any change, while primaries and smaller schools had limited scope to accommodate changes. Smaller schools also needed to have a minimum number of staff on site
- capacity – some schools and MATs did not have the capacity to focus on flexible working as they were experiencing other issues, such as financial difficulties or redundancies, working towards school improvement objectives or going through a restructure

The above are common barriers to the implementation of flexible working, also reported in similar research (CooperGibson Research, 2020¹⁴; IFF Research, 2023¹⁵).

6.4 Influence of the programme on actions taken

Schools and MATs tended to report that the programme acted as a catalyst, motivating them to make changes to their flexible working practice. They identified that having a source of external motivation helped to make flexible working a priority, and that the peer support and online resources made the process of change easier.

Engaging with the programme was definitely the catalyst for those changes and... changing mindsets around flexible working... I think maybe eventually we would have got there... But it's probably driven it quicker for us. – *Participant MAT*

A number of schools and MATs felt they would have made changes without the support of the programme, but to a lesser degree. For example, the programme had raised the profile of flexible working, opened up conversations, provided new ideas and helped to change culture, including the way leaders viewed flexible working.

We've looked at a lot of aspects of our workforce planning and our flexible working policy itself... We were looking to do that anyway. But I think the programme influenced it... It influenced our thinking and motivated us to do it and gave us the courage possibly to be a little bit more radical with stuff because we saw that was happening in other places. – *Participant MAT*

¹⁴ [Exploring flexible working practice in schools - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁵ [Flexible working in schools: Exploring the costs and benefits – GOV.UK](#)

7. Potential longer-term impacts

This section sets out the potential longer-term impact of the programme on staff retention, recruitment, diversity and absence.

The research did not aim to quantify and attribute longer-term impacts to the programme due to the relatively small size of the programme, the qualitative nature of the interview research, and the fact that impacts may not occur within the timeframe of the research and programme evaluation.

7.1 Identifying impact of flexible working and the FWAMS programme

Interviewees suggested it was difficult to quantify or attribute outcomes to increased flexible working. For example, data may show an improvement in retention, recruitment and absence rates, but this could be due to wider factors such as other initiatives within the school or trust, changes post-COVID-19, or staff choosing to leave or join the school for unrelated reasons. It was acknowledged that being able to attribute any changes made to the programme would also be difficult.

Ambassadors identified that some schools and MATs had not collected baseline data or did not have data available on the number of flexible working requests made and approved, making changes difficult to track.

Additionally, interviewees acknowledged that as changes to flexible working were recent, any impact on retention and recruitment may take several years to become apparent.

One long-term outcome set out in the Theory of Change was fewer complaints or tribunals relating to flexible working. This was not a change mentioned by any interviewee in relation to the programme, although one suggested tribunals may increase due to an increase in flexible working requests.

7.2 Impact on staff retention, recruitment, diversity and absence

Schools and MATs anticipated that improving their flexible working practices would increase staff retention, through accommodating staff needs and enhancing wellbeing and work-life balance. They cited individual examples of staff who had been planning to leave but had stayed due to being offered flexible working arrangements. Several schools and MATs felt staff satisfaction and wellbeing had improved due to their flexible working offer, seeing this reflected in staff survey results.

Recruitment was an area where several schools and MATs had already seen improvement, receiving large numbers of high-quality applications for jobs advertised as

flexible, or filling roles previously difficult to recruit to with a well-qualified applicant wishing to work flexibly. It was felt that offering flexible working would help increase staff diversity, through enabling a wider pool of people to apply. Schools and MATs felt these improvements would continue as they developed their recruitment approach.

They're through the roof, our applications for our staff pool positions, because of the flexibility, and we're actually struggling to keep up with the amount of applications we have in. - *Participant MAT*

A small number of supported schools and MATs reported seeing a reduction in staff absence rates. Although they acknowledged this was difficult to attribute directly to flexible working, some gave examples where offering flexibility had enabled individual staff to remain in work.

Interview findings provide some support for the programme impacts set out in the Theory of Change (improved retention of staff, increased diversity of teaching staff and a reduction in staff absence rates / improvement in wellbeing), although as stated in [section 7.1 \(Identifying impact of flexible working and the FWAMS programme\)](#), these impacts are difficult to quantify and attribute directly to flexible working changes and to the programme itself.

8. Conclusions and future considerations

Interview findings highlighted a need for flexible working support, such as the FWAMS programme. However, recruiting schools to the programme was challenging, primarily due to flexible working not being a priority for some schools and MATs, including those that may benefit most from support. Those that did engage found the combination of peer support and online resources effective; this also allowed schools and MATs to engage at different levels. The peer support approach was highly valued by those participating, providing practical support focused on how flexible working could be implemented in a school environment. Delivering peer support via a cohort model enabled Ambassadors to support more schools and MATs at one time, also providing the opportunity for participants to share ideas and good practice with a supportive and diverse community. Schools also valued bespoke, one-to-one advice and guidance.

Overall, findings indicate that the FWAMS programme helped to drive the development of a culture of flexible working amongst supported schools and MATs. Although it was acknowledged that it would be difficult to quantify longer-term impacts on staff recruitment and retention, those engaged felt that improving their flexible working practices would likely effect change in these areas in the future.

Building on learning from the FWAMS programme, future support relating to flexible working could consider the following:

- including an element of peer support, bringing together those working in similar contexts, and further exploring the cohort model as a delivery approach, with flexibility in delivery to meet bespoke need
- continuing and building post-programme peer support and learning networks, with opportunities to review progress and share ideas
- exploring opportunities to retain access to and improve the visibility of online resources; making resources open access, and ensuring they are kept up-to-date and in editable formats
- extending the bank of resources already available with more diverse case studies, and resources for schools and MATs partway through their flexible working journey
- promoting the support offer through existing networks and events, working more closely with local authorities and highlighting success stories
- actively seeking engagement with schools likely to be under-represented, harder to reach or most in need

A continued FWAMS programme or similar programme could consider:

- extending programme capacity, geographic coverage, and Ambassador diversity

- taking a more collaborative and supportive approach to tracking progress of Ambassadors, monitoring the quality of support, sharing experiences of Ambassadors, and managing issues as they arise
- minimising administrative burden on Ambassadors
- building on the community of Ambassadors and providing Ambassadors greater opportunity to meet face-to-face
- reviewing the Ambassador funding model to ensure it accurately reflects time spent and level of support offered to schools and MATs; for example, re-considering the classification of participant and ad hoc schools, as this was not applied consistently and did not reflect time spent by Ambassadors on recruiting schools to support
- ensuring systems are in place to enable robust, consistent data collection from schools and MATs, including baseline and outcome data for continual improvement
- exploring how recruitment efforts could be more targeted and responsive

Appendix 1: Updated Theory of Change

Flexible Working Ambassador Schools and MATs Programme (FWAMS) Programme 2023-2026

Situation	<i>What is the context or reason for this change?</i> There is unmet demand for flexible working and perceived challenges in offering it in schools.	Aims	<i>What will 'success' look like?</i> Raise awareness, understanding and use of flexible working, support schools and MATs to champion change within schools, and equip leaders with the knowledge and tools to address challenges.	
Inputs and activities	Outputs	Change mechanism	Outcomes	Impacts
<p>Inputs <i>What financial outlay, staffing and other resources will be required?</i></p> <p>Budget of £1.5m plus DfE staffing</p> <p>Activities <i>What will be delivered, such as training or guidance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DfE procures contractor to promote flexible working and support schools • DfE runs grant competition to select FWAMS • DfE / delivery partner develop flexible working resources for schools (including workshops and webinars) and make them available online • Delivery partner provides support and manages queries from schools • 12¹⁶ FWAMS engage with schools and offer practical support including help to create or further develop flexible working policies, develop and implement flexible working processes, introduce flexible hiring, expand their flexible working offer, raise staff confidence and awareness, and embed a flexible working culture 	<p><i>What tangible results, products, lessons, inspections or improvements will be / have been produced?</i></p> <p>Results reported by Capita as at March 2026¹⁷ are given in brackets below</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools and MATS have received support from FWAMS (248 schools and MATS have been supported in some way) • Flexible working resources have been created online for the sector (over 120 free resources available online) • Webinars have been delivered, (65 webinars with 3,484 views) • Capita have attended sector events nationally to promote flexible working (68 events attended) 	<p><i>What actions will be needed to achieve the change(s)? Are you removing frictions, changing behaviour etc.?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective comms signposting schools to the resources and support • Supported schools accessing online resources and using these to promote change in their schools • Ambassadors working with leaders to help promote a positive flexible working culture, and to increase understanding of the benefits of flexible working, and how it can be implemented in a school context, including overcoming barriers • Schools understand the importance of taking a strategic whole-school approach and have a framework for implementation 	<p>Short term <i>What will be the benefits and wider outcomes, both leading and lagging?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and leaders in supported schools adopt more flexible working practices • Teachers and leaders in supported schools are more aware of flexible working options • Leaders in supported schools have improved understanding and are more confident about approaches to flexible working • An increased number of supported schools have improved or introduced flexible working policies • An increased number of flexible working requests are received and approved • An increase in numbers of teacher vacancies being advertised with flexible working options • Schools and MATs take a strategic whole-school / whole-trust approach to flexible working <p>Long term</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increased range of flexible working on offer and used in schools • Improved staff conditions, satisfaction and wellbeing 	<p><i>What are the impacts and how do they fit with departmental and governmental priorities?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved retention of staff at the supported schools • An increased number of high quality applications, leading to fewer unfilled posts • Increased diversity of teaching staff • Reduced staff absence rates • Culture change in sector so flexible working becomes normalised

¹⁶ There were originally 12 FWAMS but 2 withdrew during the programme.

¹⁷ The programme finished at the end of March 2026.

<p>Evidence assessment</p>	<p><i>What is the strength of the existing evidence base for this change?</i></p> <p>There is a growing evidence base indicating benefits of flexible working for wellbeing in a range of sectors including education (Clarke & Holdsworth, 2017; CIPD, 2025; CooperGibson Research, 2020; Harland, Bradley & Worth, 2023).</p> <p>Evidence on the relationship between flexible working and retention is more limited and suggests a complex relationship. Some school leaders report that it helps keep teachers in the profession (CooperGibson Research, 2020). In 2024, 47% of teachers and leaders considering leaving cited a lack of flexible working opportunities as a factor (Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTL), 2025). NFER’s regression analysis explored retention in more detail using WLTL survey data and found that those with flexible working arrangements were more likely to leave (Worth, Del Pozo Segura & Kuhn, 2026). However, the report also noted that the wider literature suggests that having the opportunity to work flexibly is associated with higher retention and improved wellbeing (Harland, Bradley and Worth, 2023). The report concludes that the relationship is unlikely to be causal and that other underlying differences between those who work flexibly and those who do not are likely to explain the finding. This relationship can be explored in more detail using WLTL survey data as more waves become available.</p> <p>There is evidence that schools struggle to implement flexible working, experiencing a range of barriers including practical challenges, a lack of understanding of different types of flexible working and how it could work in a school context, concerns of leaders, and lack of a positive culture around flexible working (CooperGibson Research, 2020; IFF Research, 2023).</p>
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<p>Assumptions</p>	<p><i>What is being assumed as part of the plan?</i></p> <p>That supported schools have the capacity and appetite to support more flexible working.</p> <p>That the advice/support is effective and can be used by a diverse range of schools.</p>	<p>Possible unintended consequences</p>	<p><i>Are there any other outcomes that might result from this project?</i></p> <p>Having engaged with the programme, leaders may decide that flexible working is too difficult to implement.</p> <p>Increase in complaints/tribunals relating to flexible working as more requests are made (and potentially declined).</p>
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Reference: RR1623

ISBN: 978-1-83870-784-2

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