



# Bright Futures

A great place to work

## FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICY

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## FLEXIBLE WORKING POLICY

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Bright Futures Educational Trust is an organisation committed to our vision: **'The best for everyone, the best from everyone'**. Everything that we do is underpinned by our values of community, integrity and passion.



### Community

We work together for a common purpose acknowledging our diversity as strength.



### Integrity

We do the right things for the right reasons.



### Passion

We take responsibility, work hard and have high aspirations.

One of our strategic aims is that **our staff advocate Bright Futures as an excellent and equal opportunities employer**. In addition, 'Equality, diversity and inclusion' is one of our organisation's eight commitments and is a strong thread that weaves through all our employment practices.

We encourage everyone to ask if there is a working arrangement that would enable them to achieve a better life and work balance. The option to ask is available to all staff, during the recruitment process or once employed by us.

### What is the Policy for?

The flexible working policy details the working arrangements that are available to request, along with some real Bright Futures case studies and quotes from staff undertaking these arrangements now. This policy also explains how existing and prospective staff can make a request for a new working arrangement.

### **Who is the Policy for?**

For all current and perspective employees of Bright Futures. We do not apply any other eligibility criteria.

### **Working Arrangements that can be requested**

The policy standards section of this booklet on pages 24 and 25 provide the specific standards that will apply when considering a request for any new working arrangement. These include, for example, the possibility of trial periods/temporary changes.

***Ask and we will try ...!***

## SECTION A - TYPES OF WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Below are the types of working arrangements we would consider, in alphabetical order. Each section explains the arrangement including some particular points to note and also includes some quotes or case studies from existing staff who currently have this arrangement.

### 1. Career breaks/sabbaticals



Leave may be granted where requests have either educational or compassionate grounds. For example, breaks/sabbaticals for long-term care of a close relative, a course of study to enhance an individual's career development, or another personal reason which might otherwise result in the colleague having to resign their employment.

Each case should be considered on its individual merits, with regard to equalities legislation, fairness and consistency, and with consideration to the needs of the academy/team and its pupils/staff or network and the Trust as a whole.

If practicable leave should be requested in blocks of one term or more, or a full academic year and with plenty of notice for the school to be able to advertise and fill the temporary vacancy that arises. For example, teachers should ask for the leave by February if they wish to have the time from the following September. This would be to ensure that the temporary post could be advertised in time for teachers' notice periods to apply. The same principle of plenty of notice applies to the other teachers' notice dates that fall in the academic year.

For associate staff at least two months' notice should be given, wherever practicable, so that a replacement can be sought, if the request is agreed to.

Principals/Heads of School/managers should always seek HR advice if they receive a request.

**Important to note:**

- Any leave will be unpaid
- Staff are encouraged to contact their pension scheme provider to understand any pension and life assurance implications
- The substantive post, or an agreed alternative will be held open for the member of staff to return to; subject to returning by the agreed date
- Leave of absence for more than one academic year will only be considered where a suitable replacement can be identified and the impact on the academy/team/pupils is manageable
- Continuous service with Bright Futures will continue but no entitlement to benefits such as salary, holiday pay or sick pay will arise
- Confirmation letters will be sent, including leave dates, terms and conditions of employment, role upon return, keeping in touch - where this is agreed
- A career break/sabbatical will not be approved for the purpose of alternative work or financial gain e.g., short-term contract with another employer or consultancy work

**What do Bright Futures' staff say about career breaks/sabbaticals?**

***Sue is the Principal at Melland High School. She says:***

“Melland High School has successfully supported requests from teachers to undertake specific sabbaticals. The opportunity to do so has impacted positively on both the individual and the school, as collaborative planning and clearly identified objectives have ensured a mutual benefit for teacher and students; two teachers visiting specialist provision overseas, for example, were able share experiences and visuals remotely with their classes in the UK.

An additional and important advantage of the sabbatical is the resultant retention of a specialist teacher who might otherwise have left the school in order to pursue their interests elsewhere.

In addition, the teacher’s wellbeing can be significantly enhanced by this opportunity, returning to their role refreshed and energised. “

***Charlotte, is the Head of Sixth Form at Melland and she says:***

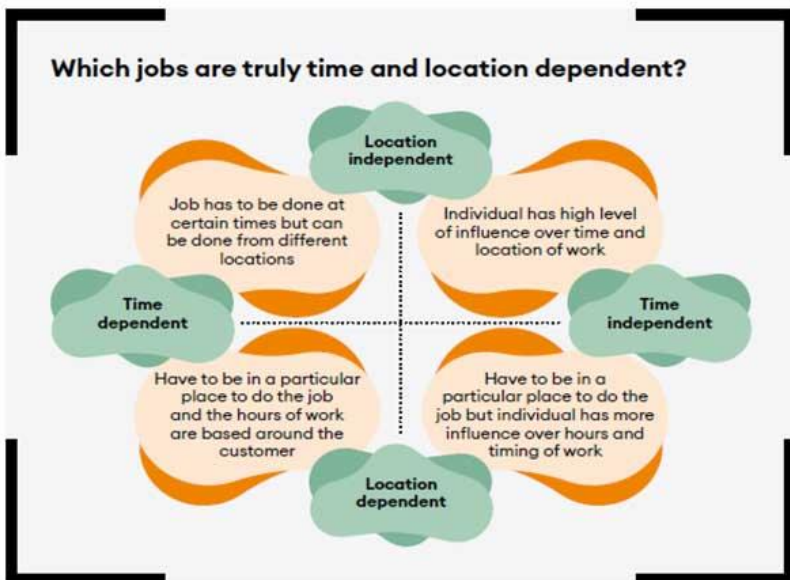
I was able to work flexibly to take two terms away from teaching to embark on a sabbatical which was a mix of travel and teaching as a volunteer at a school in Cambodia. The advantages for me have been huge. I was able to take some time to embark on an experience that I had been dreaming of for a long time but without having to leave the job and school that I love. I was able to spend some time teaching English and living in a small village in Cambodia where I was able to gain an insight into a very different education system and a completely different way of life. The experience no doubt added to my classroom practice today. Being able to work alongside families with such deprivation and obstacles to their education and daily life was a life changing experience and one that I will never ever forget. ....I would not hesitate to recommend this to anybody at Bright Futures. I am so grateful to both Melland and the Trust for giving me the opportunity to fulfil this dream whilst still being able to continue my career and remain in the role that I love.

## 2. Hybrid Working

“Hybrid working is a way of structuring work, communication, hours and physical locations to enable staff to be as productive as possible no matter where, when or who they work with” (Local Government Association)

Whether hybrid working can be considered would depend upon the nature of the job role. It could be considered for temporary ad-hoc arrangements or on a more permanent basis.

The following model from the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), is a useful tool for staff and Principals/Heads of School/central operations managers, to guide whether a role is suitable for hybrid working.





All requests will be properly considered, and options will be explored to try to accommodate the request. For example, can reasonable adjustments be made to technology or communication methods? Are some parts of the role not time or location dependent - can they be done at a different time or location?

**Important to note:**

- Bright Futures will not require any roles to be home based, a permanent place of work will always be available on one of our sites. Working from home will always be an individual choice.
- Where working from home isn't working out for the individual or the manager, following a discussion and consideration, the place of work could revert to the location of the school/team.
- Some roles may not lend themselves to hybrid working, for example roles that work directly with pupils, although there may be temporary ad-hoc arrangements that could work, see the examples overleaf.
- Where flexibility of working times is agreed, there will usually be a period of core time during the normal working day when staff are required to work. This will be to ensure that the person is available during the core hours that their work is needed, or they are contactable for queries, team meetings etc. This would be agreed on an individual basis.
- Where working from home is agreed, this will not be for the whole of the working week. On average, it would be expected that around 40% (2 days out of 5 working days), would be spent

at the school/central operations location. This would be agreed on an individual basis.

- IT equipment and E-safety - if working from home is agreed, Bright Futures will provide a laptop to do this work. Home equipment should only be used where one of our IT technicians has confirmed that the equipment has the right security. Staff are still required to comply with the Bright Futures E-Safety, password and Data Protection policies. Policies are available on school/team shared drives.
- When working from home staff are responsible to ensure the Broadband/Wi-Fi is available at the property and that it has the correct speed to enable efficient working.
- Health, Safety and Wellbeing are a key consideration that managers will discuss with staff as part of the consideration to work at home. Taking regular breaks and working reasonable hours is vital. Staff will also need to have a workspace and a desk/chair that are suitable, as well as IT equipment that meets the safety requirements.

Managers should undertake an online workstation risk assessment with the member of staff and hold a copy of this on their staff file. This should be undertaken before agreeing to any working at home arrangement. The Health and Safety Executive's guidance should be referred to and their checklist used as the risk assessment. This can be found at:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/msd/dse/assessment.htm>

Staff working at home should ensure that they notify their home insurance providers.

- When working at home, during the agreed working hours, staff should not be looking after children at the same time.
- If staff are working at home for some of the week, they may be able to claim tax relief. Details can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/tax-relief-for-employees/working-at-home>
- When working to a hybrid arrangement, staff will be expected to use their electronic calendar to clearly show their work location and the hours they are available for work each day.

### Temporary hybrid-working

#### **What do Bright Futures' staff say about temporary hybrid working?**

##### **Temporary ad-hoc working at home**

***Kal is the Principal at Cedar Mount Academy. He says:***

“During the pandemic, when the school was open to a smaller number of pupils, we trialled some changes to when and where teachers took their PPA time. This worked really well, and we had some great feedback. Now school is fully opened we will continue with this when we can. We timetable reading and research time in each cycle for every teacher, which can be worked at home, if this is the choice of the teacher.”

Other schools such as Acre Hall Primary Academy have also introduced flexibility with PPA time being undertaken at home.

### Regular hybrid-working

In order to comply with government guidelines during the pandemic, staff in our central operations teams and in the Development Network (Teaching School) worked at home for most of their working week. This proved to be successful and may be considered on a more permanent basis if staff request it, using this section on hybrid-working in the policy.

#### **What do Bright Futures' staff say about regular hybrid-working?**

***Below are some quotes from staff in the Development Network and the central finance team:***

**Kate:**

"I'd definitely recommend hybrid working. The flexibility homeworking offers is invaluable and the benefits that it brings, such as increased productivity, calmer/more relaxed mental state are not only advantages to you personally but also to your employer. Combined with time in the office/school environment, hybrid working is the best of both worlds."

**Eleanor:**

"For me, this hybrid model has allowed me to increase my productivity, whilst not increasing my working hours... There will always need to be an element of face-to-face work, however, through the pandemic we have moved our approach to online working effectively.

During lockdown I have to say we truly are a stronger team. Being remote from site made us connect as a team on a more regular basis as we needed to make sure we still had a connection with one another, as a result we have a weekly full team catch up, diaries never seemed to allow for this when we were on site full-time.

... With the team I have established a really good pattern of regular catch ups, whilst this sounds like it should be really 'easy' to action on site, booking a space is not always possible. The pandemic has introduced us and encouraged us to engage with online meeting platforms (which were new to us all). We have made sure we check-in a regular basis much more than we normally would do!"

**Becky:**

"The implementation of the new version of our Finance system has meant that we have been able to work well and efficiently from home. We have had a rota for the team since the restrictions were lifted. And this now means that we all do at least 2 to 3 days back in the office at Gorton Education Village. This flexibility is giving us all, the opportunities each week, to work around family commitments, appointments etc.

Working from home has meant that I don't have to face many hours stuck in traffic on the daily commute! My work life balance is much better now. I can also decide during the week what work I can do from home and what work I will be able to complete in the office. There have been many occasions that I do need to be at home without any distractions to finish a task that needs some real concentration.

I meet with the team each week, and they all feel the same, that the working from home and office mix works very well for a Finance role."

**Claire:**

"The nature and volume of work associated with my role does require high levels of concentration. I have found that during remote working my concentration has improved as a result of less

interruptions/distractions that come with working in a school or sharing office space; I have been substantially more engaged in work which in turn this has resulted in increased levels of productivity.

On a personal level I am certainly less stressed, feel much calmer and overall happier which has not only reflected in my work but has definitely helped to improve relations at home.

Overall, the Teaching School has seen a reduction in staff sickness as remote working has meant less opportunity for illnesses to be spread across the team. We have also encouraged the team to take regular breaks and exercise which also contributes to a healthier and happier team.

I have found remote working a breath of fresh air and a way of working that I am thoroughly enjoying. The benefits far outweigh any negatives, and I would definitely recommend this way of working to colleagues across Bright Futures whose roles are adaptable and do not necessarily need to be based in a school office environment.”

### 3. Job Share



Job sharing is a form of part-time working where usually two members of staff share the duties and responsibilities for one full-time job between them. The way in which the full-time hours are divided will be agreed between the job sharers and their manager to ensure that the school’s requirements are met. A job share is not a division of a role into two part-time jobs where employees work independently of one another, but a role where responsibilities are shared by two individuals. It may be appropriate in some circumstances to overlap working hours to ensure a thorough handover.

**Important to note:**

- In the event of one job-sharer leaving, a full discussion will take place with the other half of the job share. Solutions could include, the role is split into two roles, the leaving employee's hours are offered to the other job-sharer or if all parties want the job share arrangement to continue, a replacement will be sought, internally and/or externally.
- Any change to a job-share arrangement would be confirmed in writing and would be a change to the contract of employment.

**What do Bright Futures' staff say about Job Share?**

***Emma-Louise and Vicki job share a Phase Leader post at Stanley Grove Primary Academy. They say:***

**What have been the advantages for you?**

"As someone new to leadership it has enabled me to take on a new career challenge whilst learning from someone who is more experienced in the role. I have someone to share ideas with and to talk through my thinking process. As a mum it has enabled me to take on more responsibility and progress in my career whilst maintaining a work life balance.

I have been able to still be a big part of school but also spend time with my baby and pick my little girl up from school."

**What have been the advantages for the school?**

"Two different perspectives and two sets of problem-solving ideas - I think this enables better quality decision making. There are two people within the phase who are able to monitor the floor and feedback to SLT. We can share our time more equally between both

year groups rather than the inevitable focus on Year 6. More teaching contact time for each year group.”

Moving to a job share has provided...“ an opportunity for another member of staff to be part of the leadership team.”

**Have you and the school had to overcome any obstacles to make it work? If so, can you tell us a bit more?**

“We have to work smartly and ensure good communication... We view the role as a collaboration it doesn’t matter who is the more visible lead on what day, but that we share a consistency of vision to support our team.”

**Would you recommend this type of flexibility to other Bright Futures colleagues?**

“Absolutely! Yes, I feel so much happier and feel like I have a work life balance for the first time in my career.”

#### 4. Leave for personal reasons



Details of our leave arrangements are in our Special Leave Policy. You can find this Policy on the shared drive in your school/via your HR contact. We have included a mention in this policy to remind staff that it exists. It covers leave for personal matters such as bereavement, looking after dependents in an emergency situation, moving house, medical appointments, public duties such as jury service and many more situations.



## 5. Online meetings/events



The 2020/21 pandemic forced many of us to work very differently and some of these new working arrangements have made us think differently about how we can work. For example, online events via video, where we attend from home and/or avoid travelling, have been effectively utilised for training or to meet colleagues, or for meetings involving third-party agencies.

Working in this way won't be suitable for all types of events but our Principals/Heads of School/Executive team asked for this type of working arrangement to go in this Flexible Working Policy, as it is something that they will consider if it makes working more efficient and helps with life and work balance.

### **Important to note:**

- Limiting the time spent on a video call is important. For example, have a break during the meeting if it runs beyond one hour, or set a meeting for 50 minutes instead of one hour, to encourage a break
- Take regular short breaks away from the screen

## 6. Part-time working



This is a work pattern where the weekly hours are less than the usual full-time working pattern. For example, it might be a later start and earlier finish each day, working mornings or afternoons only, or working fewer days each week.

At Bright Futures we have a large number of roles which are part time however the number of leadership posts working part time is relatively low. This is something that we would like to change, so

please do ask if it is something you would like to be considered.

**Important to note:**

- For teaching posts, the teaching timetable will be the initial consideration; we will ask you to help us identify how we could plug any gaps in teaching provision as part of our consideration process.
- For associate staff posts we will also consider the provision of your work and how it can be done during the time that you are not there; we will ask you to help us consider this and look for solutions.
- Any change to a part-time arrangement would be confirmed to you in writing and would be a change to your contract of employment.

**What do Bright Futures' staff say about part-time working?**

***Clare is the Head of School at Lime Tree Primary Academy. She says:***

“Some teachers have come back from maternity leave requesting part time, we have encouraged staff to do 3 days so that two teachers would work together on an ‘overlap’ day, part in class, so the children see them together. They also do their PPA together; this helps them, the children, and parents. ...The positive impact on consistency, communication and staff well-being and workload is huge.”

***Imogen is an Assistant Head at The Orchards and she works 3 days per week. She says:***

**What have been the advantages for you?**

“I am currently working part time because I have a young child. I interviewed for this position when I was 5 months into my maternity leave and was successful in getting the position. It has meant that I have been able to spend time with my toddler and still go to work

which is something that I love. Working part time has meant reducing my mum guilt a little!”

**What have been the advantages for the school?**

“Because I split the role with another senior leader, I like to think the school has input from two different people with different ideas and perspectives on things and so it benefits the school in that way.”

There haven't been any major obstacles at all, I have felt very supported in this part-time role.”

**Would you recommend this type of flexibility to other Bright Futures colleagues?**

“I would definitely recommend this type of flexible working. If you love your job (and you like to be in control as I do!) it is difficult to not be there for part of the week and I do feel like I miss things but that is then up to me to make sure that I know what has happened when I get into school on the Wednesday. I know that I have the best of both worlds at the moment, and I do appreciate that. I appreciate that the school has acknowledged the importance of my family particularly at this time and that this has never been an issue in me progressing within the leadership team.”

***Ruth is the Executive Principal at South Shore Academy. She says:***

“We include in our job advertisements that we are willing to consider flexible working requests from job applicants and we also promote it in school. As a result, we have been able to recruit an excellent teacher who was only able to work four days a week. In addition, we have retained great staff by being flexible and have recruited associate staff on part time contracts in order that they can undertake further education for the rest of the week.”

## 7. Phased Retirement



As staff plan their eventual retirement, there is the option to request part-time working to gradually reduce the working week and also the option to request a role with less responsibility (and therefore less pay). This can be achieved by an agreement with the Principal/Head/CEO or COO and will result in a contractual change and therefore the pro rata amount of pay and/or the rate of pay for the role with less responsibility.

Alternatively, for pension scheme members there is another option. This still requires the approval of the Principal/Head of School but both pension schemes that Bright Futures offer have a flexible way of drawing the pension, as follows:

For **Teachers Pension Scheme** members, you must be between 55 and 75 to apply and the website describes phased retirement as *“a way for members who are reducing their earnings due to part-time work or a reduction in responsibilities will be able to withdraw part of their pension to substitute their loss of income.”* The link to the relevant section on their website is:

<https://www.teacherspensions.co.uk/members/planning-retirement/types-of-retirement/phased-retirement.aspx>

For the **local government pension scheme** members, it is called flexible retirement. The website describes it as *“You may wish to consider a gradual move into retirement by flexibly retiring. From age 55, if you reduce your hours or move to a less senior position, provided you have met the 2 years vesting period in the scheme and your employer agrees, you can take some or all of the pension benefits you have built up, helping you ease into retirement.”* The link to the relevant section on the website is: [LGPS flexible retirement](#).

**Important to note:**

- An agreement to work part time or take a role with less responsibility must be approved by the Principal/Head of School/CEO/COO before making a request to the pension scheme for phased/flexible retirement.
- Any reduction in hours of work will result in a prorated salary reduction.
- Accepting a role with less responsibility will in most cases reduce the pay band for the role - please ensure you are aware of this before making any application.
- Bright Futures can't provide any pension advice, staff should always consult a professional adviser before making any decisions.

## 8. Reduced or staggered hours



This could be a variation in the days of work and/or start or finish times during any day or an increase or decrease in the number of hours worked during the week.

These types of working pattern changes can help staff attend to personal matters outside of work for example eldercare or childcare. In addition, they can help to provide a more efficient service to school, for example where facilities staff need to cover all of the opening hours of the school premises.

**Important to note:**

- Any reduction in hours of work will result in a pro rata salary reduction.

**What do Bright Futures' staff say about reduced or staggered hours working?**

***Clare is the Head at Lime Tree Primary Academy. She says:***

“We have also granted requests from staff to reduce their time in school either an afternoon or day a week, for a range of different personal reasons A couple of staff leave at 3pm one day a week so they have the opportunity to collect their own children from school. We have always considered the impact on children and the staffing team but balancing that with happy staff equals happy children.”

## 8. Term-time working



This is a pattern of work where the employee works and is paid on a pro-rata basis according to the school holiday pattern, usually 38, 39 or 40 weeks of the academic year. Employees work as normal during term time and during school holidays they do not generally go into work, unless they are contracted to work additional days or attend INSET days. They are still employed during those periods. The salary is paid on an annual basis and divided equally between the twelve months.

This working pattern is very attractive to parents/carers of school age children. Whilst staff employed on a teaching contract work term time plus INSET days, there are some associate staff posts that are contracted to work all year round (AYR) and have to book off their annual leave entitlement. We will always consider requests from these staff to work a term-time arrangement instead.

### **Important to note:**

- Any reduction in hours of work or the number of weeks worked during the year will result in a prorate salary reduction.

## 9. Returning from family leave



Returning from a period of family leave such as maternity or adoption can be really challenging when trying to adapt and manage life at home and at work. There are a number of flexible working arrangements in this policy that may help. Take your time to consider and call your Principal/Head of School/manager to discuss it whilst you are thinking things through.

One common change that staff may request is to reduce their work responsibilities when they return to work. This is a really important decision to take, and we would encourage you to think carefully. You can always request a temporary arrangement in the first instance if you are not sure.

### **What do Bright Futures' staff say about returning from maternity leave?**

***Stephanie is the Principal at Altrincham Grammar School for Girls.***

***She says:***

*"We have had teachers going on maternity leave and asking to resign their teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) as they don't want the additional responsibility at such an important time in their life. We have reached a compromise and been able to temporarily remove the responsibility and payment for a short period of time on their return from maternity leave and reinstate it at a later date. This has been really appreciated by staff, as it helps them maintain the career progression that they have worked hard for. It has also given another teacher a temporary opportunity."*

## SECTION B - POLICY STANDARDS



For each request and consideration of an application, the following standards will be applied:

1. Requests can be made from all staff or potential staff irrespective of any protected characteristic and will receive equal consideration.
2. Any requests made connected to a disability, must be considered as part of the Staff Attendance policy, specifically the section on Disability-related absence and reasonable adjustments.
3. Staff should request the change within good time i.e., at least two working months before they wish it to be implemented, wherever reasonably practicable.
4. For the avoidance of doubt, the legislation surrounding flexible working provides **the right to request** an alternative working arrangement; it does not provide a right to have an arrangement.
5. A thorough consideration will be made for every request and wherever possible the request will be accommodated. However, the departmental/school's needs, and in particular the impact on pupils/customers, will be the overriding consideration.



6. Where the hours in a worked day exceed six hours, an unpaid break of twenty minutes will be required, in order to comply with statutory requirements.
7. If it is unclear whether a new working arrangement would be suitable to the school, the Principal/Head of School/central team manager can offer a trial period i.e., a temporary change. This would be monitored to see if the arrangement was suitable and discussed regularly with the member of staff during the temporary arrangement.

Likewise, if an employee is unsure about a permanent change, a request for a trial period/temporary change can be made.

8. Any change in working arrangements will be confirmed in writing and an explanation of the changes to an employee's terms and conditions will be provided. Any changes to terms and conditions will be permanent, unless otherwise stated. So, for example, if a trial period/temporary period of time has been agreed, the contract change letter will specify this.
9. Should the needs of the school/team/central operations change, consultation will take place with the member of staff, which may result in a change in the arrangement being required. All factors will be considered to try and avoid changing the working arrangement.
10. Equality impact assessments will be undertaken on a regular basis to ensure that no groups or individuals with protected characteristics are unintentionally disadvantaged by the policy or practice.

## SECTION C APPLICATION PROCESS



**Prospective job applicants should ask at interview or email the recruiting manager ahead of interview so that due consideration can be given.**

### **For Existing Staff**

1. Completing an application form is no longer required. Staff should email their Principal/Head of School/central operations team manager **with a copy to [flexibleworking@bfet.uk](mailto:flexibleworking@bfet.uk)**, so that applications can be monitored. The email content should include:
  - Exactly what is being requested.
  - There is only a need to say why it is being requested if it is a request for a career break/sabbatical. However, it would be helpful if staff could say why, particularly if it relates to childcare, religious or cultural reasons, or health, as this will enable the Principal/Head of School/central operations manager to consider the equality, diversity and inclusion aspects.
  - The desired start date.
  - The member of staff's view on the advantages and possible issues of agreeing to the change and ideas for solutions, where applicable. Whilst this view will not be the sole one, it will help the consideration of the request.
2. After having opportunity to consider the request, the Principal/Head of School/central operations team manager will call a meeting with the member of staff. The purpose of the meeting will always be to explore all options to try to accommodate the request.

Staff may be accompanied by a companion to any meeting to discuss the application. The companion can be a work colleague or a Trade Union representative. The companion will be entitled to speak during the meeting and confer privately with the employee but may not answer questions on the employee's behalf.

3. Staff will be informed verbally of the outcome to their request, which will then be followed up in writing within 14 calendar days. Agreement to offer the flexible working will be presented as contract change letters and decisions to decline requests will explain why, along with a right to appeal the decision.
4. If a flexible working application is declined, staff have a right to appeal the decision. Any appeal should be emailed to [flexibleworking@bfet.uk](mailto:flexibleworking@bfet.uk) clearly stating the grounds for the appeal e.g., that the case has not been properly considered and why, or that new information has come to light since the original application. Appeals should be made within 10 working days of receiving the written outcome.
5. Appeals will be heard by a panel of three people who are independent of the case and in the same or more senior position than the original decision maker. These people can include, other Principals/Heads of School, executive team members, governors and trustees. A member of the HR department will be present at all appeal hearings to advise on the process.

**The consideration of an application and any appeal against a decision, should be completed as quickly as possible and within three months at the very latest.**