



Executive Summary

Women in Property's Building Balance – The Stark Reality is...

...that the construction and property industry will never close the Gender Pay Gap or achieve its full potential if it continues as it is.

The Building Balance survey set out to find out what the reality was of the cost and availability of childcare and work-life balance in the construction and property industry. While there are limitations on the influence we can have on the childcare industry, the focus was on the improvement the industry can make for everyone to enjoy a greater work-life and family balance.

The survey results have been astonishing but, when you compare them to the reality of what we are all experiencing, we are not actually that surprised.

The industry has a skills shortage and it is continuing to lose talented people. A study by the Institute for Employment Studies, sponsored by Atkins, on Career Deflection, Exploring Diversity, Progression and Retention in Engineering, identified that the number of women leaving engineering in the decade to 2020 was double that of men, 70% compared to 35% of men. CIBSE Journal in June 2024 identified that more women are leaving engineering aged between 35 and 44 compared to men, who tend to leave when they are 60.

These statistics support the survey findings that **50% of people surveyed had considered leaving the industry due to work-life balance.** Categorically, there is a problem! Equally, **40% of respondents often work more than their contracted hours. 66% of respondents work through their lunch and collectively over 50% of people start work early or work in the evening.** Is this demonstrating

flexibility or is it industry pressure to work more, “go the extra mile” or “do their extra 10%”? Does the industry have to look at how it resources projects? And with 50% of respondents considering leaving the industry, how can the Gender Pay Gap ever reduce?

- This was a national survey, with 699 responses.
- 86% were female, the largest contributing region was the South West with 32%,
- 22% were from London and the South East,
- 12% from Scotland, 13% from the North West,
- Other individual regions made up between 1% and 6% of responses.
- 92% of respondents were White British or White non-British so the industry has a long way to go to truly achieve a diverse workforce.
- 56% of respondents were from consultancy-based roles and less than 4% were from contracting or subcontracting roles.

Diversity in the workforce is what the industry should be striving for. For an industry that designs and builds communities it surely needs to represent those communities and right now it does not. Equity, diversity and inclusion increase creativity and innovation, this is what our industry strives towards, yet with the current workforce and culture we will never achieve our full potential.

McKinsey’s data demonstrates that diverse workforces and diverse executive boards make financial business sense and even more so in a changing business landscape. McKinsey’s Fourth Report, Diversity Matters Even More, reports that **executive teams with both gender and ethnic diversity are likely to outperform their peers by 9% and have above-average profitability.** To create diversity in the industry we need to look at recruitment and how to retain people in the industry.

If people are leaving the industry and women are leaving in their 30s and 40s, what is happening?

As people progress through their career, they decide to start a family or have other commitments that take priority. People take a career break, maternity or paternity leave. When they return, they juggle being the best they can at work, with being the best parent they can, a position that is very difficult to achieve without burning out. This is reflected in the number of respondents working more than their contracted hours. And if we are being honest, spare hours are a rarity when you have a family. Time is filled with drop-off and pick-up, making packed lunches, making sure they are eating enough vegetables, drinking enough water and taxiing to swimming lessons, gym club and play dates.

It seems there is a synergy between women leaving the industry in their 30s and 40s, and returning to work after having had children, trying to juggle work and childcare in an unforgiving industry. People, particularly women, are perhaps wondering why they are doing this? It also aligns with the timing of peri-menopausal symptoms - the survey did not cover this subject but could be one for further research. One respondent commented on wanting a family but was concerned about managing the stress of the job with a young family.

The other question, and a primary focus of the survey, is that people are having to consider whether they can return to work due to the cost and availability of childcare.

- **98% of respondents with children require paid childcare services.** This suggests that 2% do not use childcare services, instead juggling childcare and working, themselves. You can see why this needs to be an option.
- From the survey, the average salary, monthly take-home after tax, is between £2,001 and £3,000. The **average cost of childcare per month for one child** is between £908.77 and £1,144.30, **this equates to between 36.6% and 45.8%** of a person's take-home salary.
- **Let us repeat, this is for one child!**

That as a percentage of take-home salary is staggering and, for a single parent, cannot be viable without additional support. If someone has twins or two young children in childcare, that becomes between 73.2% and 91.6% of a parent's salary, meaning that although, generally speaking, the cost of childcare for a single child is less than the average take-home salary, parents are struggling.

The survey revealed that **65% of respondents have had to consider whether they or their partner could return to work due to the cost and availability of childcare**, and **40% reported the cost of childcare being a main factor**. The statistics are speaking; people are having to make a decision about returning to work and managing a stressful job, and raising a family, while working more hours than they are paid for. Would you do it? For some people it is the desire to return to work, an investment in their career to keep their technical knowledge up to date in readiness for returning to work when the children finally reach school age. However, working professionally within school hours and school holidays is another challenge in itself, and should be a focus for another study. The survey identified that **68% of respondents had to adjust their working hours to suit the childcare that was available**.

While we as a construction and property industry have little influence over the cost and availability of childcare, this study has highlighted the struggle parents face particularly when factoring in the cost-of-living crisis. As an industry, we can be aware of this and focus on improvements that everyone will benefit from, not just those with a young family.

Here are the key survey findings:

- 50% of the respondents have considered leaving the industry due to work-life balance.
- Greater support from employers to create working teams to allow for flexible / part-time working was the option that would make the biggest difference to general wellbeing
- Greater flexibility to suit the childcare that is available and wellbeing/selfcare days, separate to annual leave allowance, were the next options that make a difference to wellbeing.
- 42% of respondents said that they often have to work more than their contracted hours
- 68% of respondents have had to adjust their working hours to suit the childcare available.

The improvements that would really help people are focussed on greater flexibility and support for part-time working. The survey identified that 21% of women work 30 hours or less and, of all respondents, 18% work 30 hours or less.

Flexibility is about a trusting relationship between an employer and employee

A lot is talked about flexibility but what does it mean? The report picks up on this but, in short, it is about a trusting relationship between an employer and employee. Trust that the employee will deliver the required output to fit quality working around their other commitments.

How many people feel that they have fought for the flexibility that they have in their current role? To be able to work around childcare arrangements, school assemblies, dental appointments and days when a child is sick. When speaking to people, the majority feel that they cannot move jobs for fear that a new company may not have the same flexibility. This leads us to question **how many people are unmotivated, unengaged and unproductive?**

A growing number of companies have Equity, Diversity and Inclusion policies. The industry needs to put them into practice at all levels. Policies need to be actively implemented. The Bristol Women in Business Charter, Annual Impact Report Event in April 2024 identified that flexibility was more of a reality when senior people were actively working flexibly, working from home, leaving early to pick up children etc.

Flexibility needs to be more than words in a policy, it needs to be actioned by everyone. Simply saying “we work flexibly” but sending emails late at night and spending long hours in the office, does not actively create the impression of “flexible working.” Senior managers are behavioural role models, setting the expectations of others.

The industry needs to think about how it can be more inclusive. It isn't complicated. Set meetings and Online calls at times that avoid early mornings or evenings, the classic drop-off, pick up, bedtime and caring times.

Flexibility needs to be promoted. There is a stigma that it is emasculine for a man to ask for flexible working. As @mother_pukka put it, **there is nothing more masculine than a man looking after his children, raising the next generation so they see equality in parental roles** and this should be actively promoted.

Flexibility and working from home were proven during the pandemic. Covid provided the opportunity, particularly for women with a family, to work flexibly.

There is a responsibility to mentor and coach the next generation of directors and CEOs and that does require in person contact. There needs to be a fair balance around the expectations of office time and working from home.

In response, could a four-day week be a step in the right direction? It was a common comment in the final question of the survey. The 4 Day Week Pilot results were published in 2023, finding that 71% of companies reported less burnout, lower levels of anxiety and fatigue and positive physical and mental health benefits. It provides an extra day at the weekend and one less day requiring childcare. 92% of the companies that took part in the pilot continued a four-day working week.

In an industry that is traditionally male dominated, unconscious bias has had a major influence. Historically, a man's unconscious bias would influence a job description, appealing to other men and essentially finding a replica of himself. We know that this does not encourage a diverse workforce in fact limits creativity, with everyone having a similar viewpoint.

The whole recruitment process needs to look at inclusive wording and promote flexible working, focusing on finding the best person for the role not the one that can fit the hours in the office all week. The focus should be on support and success not isolation and failure, on output and not hours. It needs to explore and support different ways of working, fighting the fear of change and not reverting back to "how we used to do things". The statistics are telling us that what we have always done is not working. There is a skills shortage and people are leaving the industry.

In preparation for a panel discussion (in the new year 2025), the panellists, including Joeli Brealey from Pregnant then Screwed, collectively discussed the key findings from the Building Balance survey. Below are the main actions they believe the industry needs to take forward to improve equity, diversity and inclusion and these will be the starting point of the discussions in the industry leader's event in the new year.

Organisational led changes:

- Create and embed flexible working cultures
- Put Policies into practice
- Track data to inform decisions
- Review recruitment process to foster equity, diversity and inclusivity
- List ALL family care leave benefits in job adverts
- Offer parental leave days, wellbeing days
- Provide job share opportunities
- Provide reasonable adjustments for all
- Fight the fear of cultural change
- Cater for flexible childcare responsibilities, arrangements and term time schedules

Ultimately, we urge the UK construction and property industry to 'listen to' the data and start to change how we work. To be more supportive of different circumstances, understand the challenges and limitations parents and carers face while working.

For the UK to be world leaders in construction and property it has to change to be more equitable, diverse and inclusive, to be at the forefront of innovation. If not, it will never reduce the Gender Pay Gap or achieve its full potential.

“...we urge the UK construction and property industry to ‘listen to’ the data and start to change how we work...”

The Building Balance Survey and Report was designed and authored by Helen James for Women in Property. Helen, formerly of Gleeds, is an Associate at JLL and a committee member of Women in Property, South West branch.

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