



Leading with Trust

How we can build balance in the property and construction industry





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How can we build balance in the property and construction industry?

“It is about flexibility, transparency and teamwork for all”

This story applies to everyone, across teams, across organisations and represents what needs to become a clear cultural and societal shift. It is not just about childcare and it is not just a 'women's issue', this is everyone's issue.

In 2024, Women in Property ran the Building Balance survey, which sought to identify the impact on the industry, of the affordability and availability of childcare, and extending to wider flexibility and work-life balance in the property and construction industry. The findings were shocking although not surprising, given the lived experience of so many people working in this industry.

Something has to change

The survey 'headlines':

65% have considered whether they can return to work, due to the cost and/or lack of availability of childcare

50% of respondents have considered leaving the industry due to work-life imbalance

68% have had to adjust their working hours to suit the childcare available

42% said they often have to work more than their contracted hours

Consulting with industry

In 2025 Women in Property has hosted two industry events, one in Bristol and one during UKREiF in Leeds, involving panel discussions and round table focus sessions with industry experts and business leaders. In July 2025 we presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Women and Work and have responded to a call for evidence for its Parental Leave and Pay Review. In addition, our branches across the UK are running their own events with WiP members and guests to discuss this critical subject further. Together we have explored the survey findings, considered their repercussions and prioritised the changes that we need to make on an individual, organisational and at Government level.

Many priorities were noted but, in particular, there was unanimous agreement that the 'childcare' issue is not just about women and neither is it just a childcare issue. **It is about flexibility, transparency and teamwork for all. Most of all this is about building trust and leading with trust.**

Skilled professionals – predominantly but not exclusively women – are leaving the industry because the current 'norm' is not working for them. Yet we have the double whammy of an ongoing skills shortage, and the inevitable increase in demand for these skills, alongside the housing targets and growth announcements made by the Government, and a Gender Pay Gap which will not close if this situation continues.



Leading with Trust – talking points

“Junior staff in particular need trust and ownership, not surveillance”

Part time, job share and flexibility

The experience of many of our consultees suggested that part-time employees outperformed full-time workers for the hours they work. One of the most startling results from our 2024 survey indicated that 50% of respondents have considered leaving the industry due to work-life imbalance. The top suggestion from respondents to improve this situation is receiving greater support from the employer to create working teams that allow for flexible/part-time working.

But flexible working policies need to be based on expectation rather than mandate, and must be embedded in culture, not treated as a favour. Everyone has different circumstances - cultural, societal, family, health recovery, self-care, eldercare etc - meaning that everyone needs some level of flexibility, which will vary at different stages of life, and career.

There is a degree of self-responsibility and self-discipline from the individual, but this should be as part of a system that rewards it, recognition of output not hours, rather than being judged on presenteeism,

or questioning performance and commitment.

Junior staff in particular need trust and ownership, not surveillance, with accountability through clear responsibilities and outcome-led support.

Creating a safe and inclusive workplace and with it, an empathetic workforce, will positively create empowering and trusting working relationships that can enable these open and honest conversations.

However, a red flag is the impact flexible working can have on junior employees if senior colleagues are not often in the office. They miss out on the learned experience people gain through 'osmosis', through mixing regularly with colleagues, informal chats in the office, listening to the way calls are handled, and so on.

This can be overcome by teams coordinating office time and making this as purposeful and meaningful as possible – so having face-to-face meetings, team updates etc, not simply coming into the office to sit at desks and spend the day on Teams calls. **The key is finding a “rhythm” to people’s working patterns.**



With Love Studio' for Buttress Architects



Leading with Trust – talking points

“Inclusion means being heard,
not just being in the room”

Policies and Presenteeism: “Leave loudly”

Although progress is being made, lack of flexibility is one of the key reasons we're not seeing greater diversity at senior level and in the C suite.

Middle managers used to manage workload but now they also manage our lived experience of work. There is a clear need for middle-management training in people management and emotional intelligence, to help understand this issue. They need to support, live and breathe flexibility policies because it seems that, while there are a lot of good intentions, these are not fully filtering down into the workplace.

How many people know what their company's flexibility policy is, and how many are using it? Some have great policies and work flexibly; others, particularly SMEs have little sight of flexible working.

There has long been a real issue with presenteeism, which is how many people have previously 'measured' performance, and arguably still do. Presenteeism is how many people have previously 'measured' performance, and arguably still do. Managers need to use metrics to measure success other than how long their colleagues are in the office. Flexibility isn't just remote working, it's outcome-based working.

Set realistic, milestone-based KPIs and trust people to deliver, rather than measuring hours. Inclusion means being heard, not just being in the room.

We need to see more senior managers working flexibly, and visibility is key. Consider the example of Robbert Rietbroek, then CEO of Pepsico Australia and New Zealand, who declared bosses should take a 'leave loudly' approach, effectively broadcasting their childcare responsibilities, and so championing flexible working policies.





Economics and Society:

“Diversifying is no longer an option;
it is a necessity”

Aside from wellbeing, reforming workplace practice makes pure economic sense, boosting productivity and economic growth, neither of which will be achieved if we don't have the best workforce in place. This is more than survival retention; we must have viable routes for progression. Diverse organisations perform better, as indicated in McKinsey & Company's decade-long 'Diversity Matters' research, most recent of which was run in 2023. This found that companies in the top quartile for board-gender diversity are 27% more likely to outperform financially than those in the bottom quartile.

Career paths need to go out as well as up, as not everyone wants to, or will be, C-suite or CEO. Much relies on educating, not just our colleagues but clients and suppliers too, so let's think hard about when we hold meetings, when we send emails, when and where we network.

Diarise people's parental leave and give others the opportunity to grow in their absence. Be transparent about time out, wellbeing and volunteering – we all have a life – and we are also all likely to need care, and to be carers, irrespective of gender, race or ethnicity. Caring cuts across all dimensions of society – education, health, social, development and finance. Caring must be the lens through which all change is made.

Diversifying is no longer an option; it is a necessity. It starts with recruitment, leads into retention and impacts on progression for women. It crosses sectors and cultural and ethnic backgrounds, particularly where we see few or no career role models.

We as an industry design and build, or retrofit, for our diverse communities, it is vital our industry represents those communities.





The challenges:

Recruitment

We should focus on finding the right person for the goals and output of a role, rather than seeking the person that can work the prescribed hours. Most jobs are currently designed in a very specific way, which means that flexibility has to be shoe-horned in. Zurich Insurance designs-in flexibility and then creates the job around the applicant, avoiding the 'begging bowl' approach to flexible working.

Recruitment starts with honesty and trust, starting as we mean to go on. We must remove the unconscious bias and have confident, honest conversations building trust between management and people. Flexibility must be there from the start and normalised.

Childcare investment

The Building Balance survey revealed that 98% of respondents with children require paid childcare services. This suggests that 2% do not use childcare services, instead juggling childcare and working, themselves.

From the survey, the average salary, monthly take-home after tax, was at that time between £2,001 and £3,000. The average cost of childcare per month **for one child** is between £909 and £1,144.

This equates to between 36.6% and 45.8% of a person's take-home salary, which means that returning to work simply is not viable.

In UK from September 2025, parents can access 30 funded hours of free childcare, but this is only in term times. Other countries invest in childcare, for example in Sweden no more than 3% of income is spent on childcare, allowing more women in work, children do better, and wellbeing is greater.

Returning and retention

The parental leave system is antiquated – women can take up to 12 months, men two weeks paternity leave, placing women firmly in the childcare role and reinforcing all the common, outdated preconceptions that permeate society.

This also creates a disconnect for anyone on maternity or extended leave. Contact and keeping in touch are critical. **Ultimately, the parental leave system must be gender-neutral.** Support and understanding for someone returning from leave is needed. Knowing that they are valued and wanted back goes a long way to feeling included. Many organisations have successfully implemented return-to-work and buddying schemes.





Retention is critical, people need to see success, work flexibly, see role models of all genders and ethnicities...people who look like them. Additionally without retention of women, in particular from mid-career upwards, the UK's gender pay gap will never be closed.

Expectations and assumptions:

Too often assumptions are made about who is working when. If a report is still on time and the quality output delivered, does it matter when and how someone works? Should this matter? This applies unnecessary pressure and doesn't accommodate colleagues' work-life arrangements.

The next generation is more open, and clearer about what they want...and what they want varies. A better work-life balance, fresh air, mindfulness, professional development. **If we do not find ways to adapt to the next generation's dynamics, how will we attract new talent?** Whilst changes are being made in the industry, the current and incoming directors understand the balance and the challenges of caring for one's own family, the importance of a work-life balance, health and wellbeing. It could be the next generation that will truly drive this. Until then, this is a

mindset change for those that insist on working how they always have.

Suggested CARE Framework:

Based on our consultation with industry contributors, we urge businesses to adopt the below CARE Framework, as suggested by Fatima Mejbil of FAUM Architecture.

C

Culture: Create psychologically safe, inclusive environments. Tackle microaggressions and proximity bias.

A

Autonomy: Shift to output-based working and empower teams at all levels to manage their time and methods.

R

Representation: Promote progression and visibility for underrepresented groups and introverts.

E

Equity: Support diverse needs with proactive, adaptable policies—not just equality of offer, but fairness of access.



“Encourage leadership by example, this is what we do, this is what we want our workplace to look like”

Across the events Women in Property hosted, the following were voiced as priorities for change:

- Create a safe workspace with an inclusive culture
 - Make policies accessible and avoid 'proximity bias'
 - Micro aggressions – remove the 'part time' banter, don't look at your watch when a colleague arrives or departs, don't comment on working hours
 - Encourage leadership by example, this is what we do, this is what we want our workplace to look like
 - Normalise team behaviour – including the most senior in the organisation, have an open calendar, who's doing nursery drop off, who's going for a run, who's caring for a family member
 - Fear of change for businesses – build a business case to illustrate that change is good for the business financially
 - Listen and understand - having balance is unique to each individual
 - Implement middle management training, coaching and support to enable reasonable adjustments for all
 - Incremental changes – don't do everything all at once, do little things well
 - Lobby Government – the social infrastructure and policy decisions
 - Let's abandon Parental leave and make it Carers Leave - this is something for everyone
- ...and **“Three Little Things”** – take three of these actions back to work with you, share and implement them.





What next?



So far, our discussions have explored lived experience of work-life balance or rather, imbalance. The scope of our research did not extend to the physical environment in which we work, however this was raised at the APPG. This could be fundamental in bringing about the cultural and societal shift needed, by breaking down the physical barriers to achieve balance in our industry and retain and attract talented people. Measures taken in the physical workplace – be that on site, or in an office environment – will give emphasis to what it means to have an inclusive culture. It is commonplace for female facilities to be an afterthought with, for example, women having to ask for a key to use the female toilets, only to find it full of loo roll and cleaning products. This is demeaning and shows little respect for female colleagues.

What is clear is that site offices and some consultancy offices lack the physical provision to enable an inclusive workplace. The RIBA Inclusive Design Overlay covers how to create accessible, equitable and inclusive built environments but many workplaces fall short of this. The industry needs to promote these, to break down the barriers to work and create spaces where people can be their best selves.

As a 'starter for ten'

Make it compulsory to **provide free access to toilets and changing facilities** for female staff on construction sites.

Let's ensure **PPE is appropriate, fits properly and makes us all feel like we belong**. All credit to the Chartered Institute of Building which spearheaded a campaign, in collaboration with the BSI, resulting in the launch of standard BS30417, in September 2025.

Similarly, both on site and in offices, **ensure there are quiet spaces for all**...this will benefit those wishing

to pray, those with a neurodiversity seeking solitude, women needing to express and those colleagues who simply need to decompress. Small changes will make a world of difference.

Sadly, sexual harassment still takes place and should be reported, but this can be daunting. Make it a swift, straightforward process, through the **use of QR codes**, readily displayed in the workplace. This will enable those who are experiencing abuse to log their experience quickly and easily. Thank you to Barbara Ruffett of Assystem, who created this initiative on a construction project that she was involved in.

Can public sector frameworks lead the way?

To get onto a Framework there should be minimum criteria for an inclusive workspace, KPI and reporting. Contractor Frameworks will have KPIs – these could be used to encourage adoption of the points above and be incorporated into the "Construction Gold Standard."

To do this we need the support of government to mandate requirements in legislation. It is acknowledged this is difficult to implement through to SME and smaller sites, but rather than using this as an excuse, it should be a responsibility of Tier 1 Contractors to trial, improve and lead by example, taking their supply chain along the journey.

This is the ask

We urge the UK construction and property industry to 'listen to' the data and change how we work. To be more supportive of different circumstances, and understand the challenges and limitations parents, carers and teams face while working. For the UK to be world leaders in construction and property, it has to be more equitable, diverse and inclusive, if it is to be at the forefront of innovation and achieve its full potential.



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Building Balance Survey

To view the complete Building Balance Survey findings and report click [here](#).