

# LEVEL THE FIELD

Working for a more equitable farming industry

MAY 2024

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A comprehensive guide to

**improving working practices**

*Why meeting staff needs is good for farm business, and how to go about it*

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# The business case for flexible working

Farming is facing multiple employment challenges right now. There are recognised labour shortages in several sectors, including dairy, poultry and horticulture, as well as in ancillary industries such as the veterinary sector and meat processing.

A high proportion of farmworkers in dairy, poultry and horticulture have come from overseas in recent decades, but with the government taking steps to reduce legal immigration, farmers are facing growing problems with recruiting.

The average age of a farmer in the UK is currently 59 and, despite outreach projects, there are concerns that the younger generations simply do not want to work in the sector.

Worsening mental health is another huge issue in the farming sector today – a **recent Farm Safety Foundation survey** found 95% of farmers under 40 believe it is the biggest hidden problem facing the industry. Long hours and a lack of holidays were said to be major contributors to poor mental health.

But there is some good news.

Introducing flexible working patterns on farm and working to become a family-friendly employer can help attract new recruits and protect the mental health of existing staff.

And the commercial benefits, as listed below, are striking too.



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**1. Improved recruitment**

There is a substantial gap between the number of people who want to work flexibly in the UK and the number of roles that are actually advertised as being flexible.

**Research carried out in 2022** by Flex Jobs showed 63% of jobseekers would choose a role that offered flexibility and good work-life balance rather than higher pay. Only 31% said they would choose higher pay over work-life balance.

Younger workers who will make up the future talent pipeline value work-life balance even more highly. **Some 92%** of people born between 1980 and 2000 identifying flexibility as a top priority when job hunting.

**2. Improved staff retention**

**Research has found** employees are heavily invested in keeping a job with flexible working conditions and they have **higher job satisfaction**.

One **study of a company in the US** found staff turnover had reduced by 45% as a result of flexible working options.

For women in particular, but also for men who are parents or have other caring responsibilities, being able to work around family schedules is a key factor in the retention of staff.

Farmers Weekly's **latest research** found 75% of women and 72% of men believe commitments to children are the biggest obstacle to them reaching their career goals. Flexible working arrangements would help to resolve this problem.

An **annual motherhood survey** carried out in 2023 showed flexible working was a 'dealbreaker' for three out of four mothers. Of the respondents, 86% said they would look at the flexible working policy of a company before applying for a role.

**3. Reduction in absenteeism**

According to research from the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), flexible working can reduce absence rates and allow employees to manage disability and long-term health conditions. This is especially important at a time when the average rate of employee absence across the country is rising.

One pilot carried out in the **UK construction industry** found flexible working had been a key contributor in reducing sickness absence by over one-third in two of the participating firms. Mental health problems and stress can also be reduced by flexible working, the CIPD study showed.

**4. Increase in productivity**

Research **carried out by HSBC** has shown that 89% of British workers believe flexible working hours would motivate them to be more productive.

The study also showed employees consider flexible working to be a key motivator of their productivity – even more so than financial incentives at 77%.

Average labour productivity has also **been found to increase** for both large and small businesses that employ flexible working to help employees with work-life balance.



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# What is flexible working?

Flexible working is a broad term and can include:

- Part-time hours
- Job sharing (for example, two employees sharing a full-time position)
- hours (for example, five days' worth of work in four days)
- Working from home (WFH)
- Hybrid working (a mixture of WFH and on-site)
- Flexible working hours (this can be a combination of some of the above, for example adjusting start or finishing times, or allowing WFH on some days)
- Flexitime (when the employee chooses when to start and finish work but works core hours for example, 10am to 4pm)
- Staggered hours (different start, finish and break times to other employees)

Previously, employees who had 26 weeks of continuous service could request flexible working. But from April 2024, employees have been able to request flexible working from day one of employment.

Flexible working is supported by the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (Acas) Code of Practice on handling flexible working requests.

## CASE STUDY: NUNWELL FARM

Francesca Cooper and Hollie Fallick have built a farming business which balances family life with full-time farm work.

Nunwell Farm, near Brading on the Isle of Wight, is a mixed farm comprising cattle, pigs and chickens, all farmed in a regenerative way.

Two and a half years ago, the opportunity came up to go into farming together. 'My husband met a landowner who was looking for someone to do something exciting on his estate, and we pitched our idea to him. We wanted to build a model that fitted around what we wanted from our lives and would fit around our children.'

They took on 48ha of pastureland, with both Francesca and Hollie working full-time.

Between them, they have five children under 10. 'Our day-to-day is all set up around the school runs. We make sure the farm is designed to support the two of us, and that one of us has a day off a week,' says Francesca.

They also try to manage the workload around school holidays. 'The summer holidays can be difficult, but we try and taper down the work, shift around our direct sales and reduce our public-facing work. It's obviously still a juggle but we have tried to design our system so it's not super-intensive,' Francesca explains.

'We check the cattle, feed the pigs, feed the hens and collect the eggs once or twice a day. None of that is majorly time-critical. Everything is free-range, so we don't have to go and muck out barns – we've found that really helps in giving us the flexibility to fit around kids and family.'



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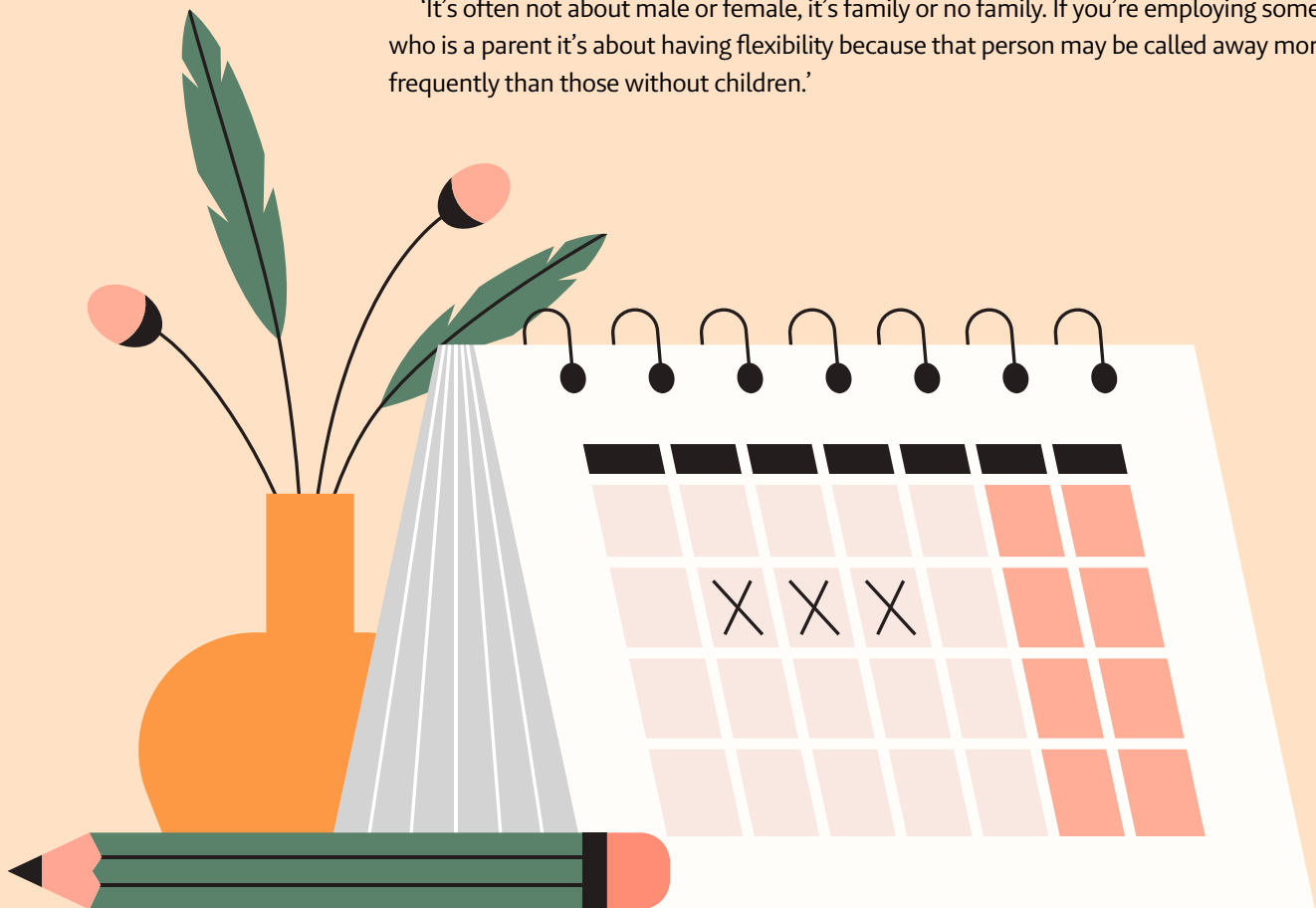
# How to introduce flexible working on farm

The thought of introducing flexible working on farm can seem daunting due to the type of work required, but it need not always be a formal arrangement. For those who are looking to move to this way of working, the following tips may be helpful:

- Consider a pilot scheme or trial periods under the flexible working statutory scheme to see if part-time working or job-sharing would work before making a final decision
- Consult with employees – find out what they would want flexible working to look like before introducing a new policy
- Look at the possibility of introducing different shift patterns to work around childcare or your staff’s other family commitments
- Reflect on whether a team of part-time workers would be better for your business than a smaller number of full-time workers, which can create bottlenecks around holiday or sickness
- Pull together flexible working policies into an employee handbook.
- Regularly review your practices
- Make sure you advertise that a position is flexible when you come to recruit.

‘It may require a change in mindset,’ says Paul Harris, chief executive at staff specialist Real Success. ‘But we need flexible working – I think we need to be much more flexible to fit the labour force.

‘It’s often not about male or female, it’s family or no family. If you’re employing someone who is a parent it’s about having flexibility because that person may be called away more frequently than those without children.’



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CASE STUDY: CLARKE WILLMOTT

Clarke Willmott Solicitors recognised the need for flexible working in its agriculture team and has the ethos of ‘work where you do your best work’. Daniel Jones, head of human resources (HR) suggests starting by having the conversation at a team level and agreeing together how things will work best.

The firm’s agriculture team has a number of part-time workers and is happy to be flexible around school pick-up times, which otherwise could cause issues for parents. ‘We find flexibility is given back to us because people are so grateful they can organise their lives much more easily,’ says Esther Woolford, head of agriculture.

This flexibility has brought benefits in the long term. ‘We find the more flexible we are – within reason – the more flexibility people tend to give back,’ says Esther. ‘It’s really important for retention, and it’s what potential new joiners look for and ask for in interviews.’

The firm has also made sure the office is a nice place to work, with collaborative spaces, quiet places for calls and hot desks. ‘We’ve tried to make our office environment as attractive as possible, to encourage people to come to the office and enjoy their time there,’

Esther says. ‘Even small things like providing fruit for the staff in the office – it’s a low-cost thing to do and is really well received.’

This can be replicated on farm too, by ensuring staff have clean, appealing spaces for breaks and places to go and use their phones or a computer. Clarke Willmott also has volunteering days and organises food vans to visit the office to help build relationships within the team.

When it comes to maternity and paternity leave, the firm has enhanced the basic statutory offering, providing pay for 26 weeks. It has also made sure provisions are equally beneficial for both parents, and requests for shared parental leave are on the rise.

When parents return to work, Clarke Willmott ensures they are fully supported. ‘We do keep-in-touch (KIT) days – 10 days in which parents can come in. They are a great way for people to stay connected,’ says Esther. The team also has a WhatsApp chat, which helps everyone stay up-to-date and in touch.

‘As a firm we are driven by trying to make our workplaces and our jobs as enjoyable as possible. At the end of the day, we all spend an enormous amount of time at work and happy people work well and do their best work.’



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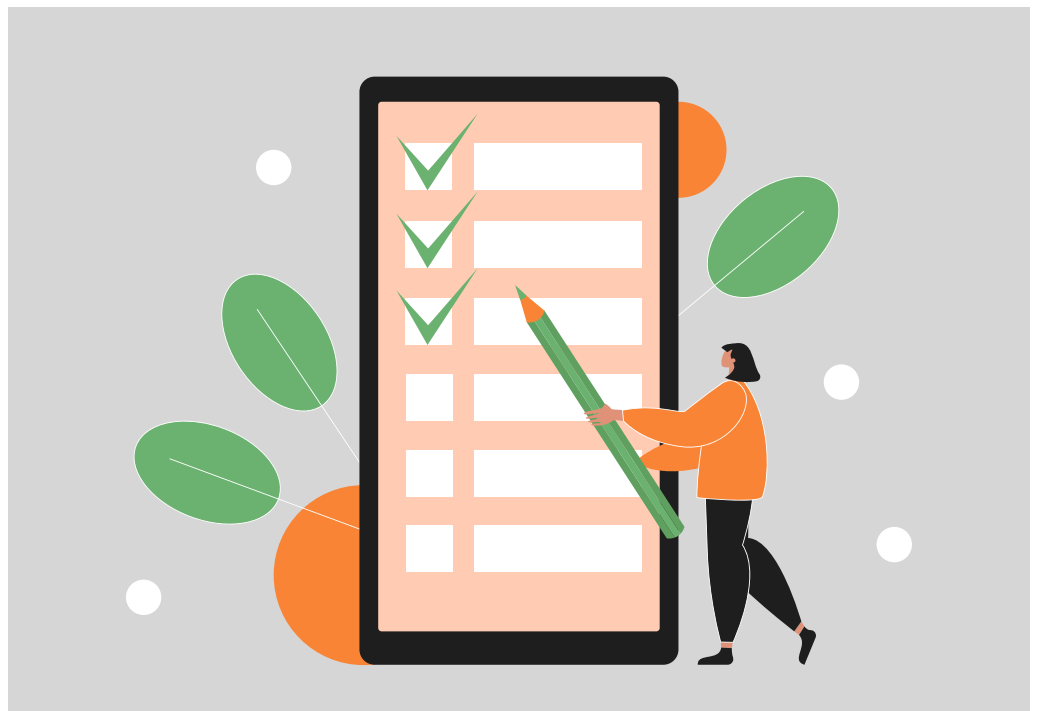
## INTRODUCING FLEXIBLE WORKING ON A FARM

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# Why employee benefits matter

According to research **carried out by Canada Life** in the UK, companies that pay salaries and bonuses above the industry average will always catch the eye of jobseekers. But employee benefits are becoming increasingly significant when deciding to accept or reject a job. Of those **surveyed by the Employee Benefit Research Unit (EBRI)**, 78% said perks were 'extremely important' in helping them to make a choice about where to work.



Employee benefits, when introduced in the right way, can help to attract and retain the best staff. They may also be used as a way to improve overall wellbeing. Arrangements can be formal and administered through an external platform, or more informal, such as an employer paying for fuel or a gym membership.

Employers may also want to consider teaming up with other local farm businesses that have diversifications – can you negotiate a discounted rate for your staff on certain services, for example, or rent a space for a work social event?

### Typical employee benefits include:

- Private health insurance
- Dental and/or vision care
- Payment towards mental health services, such as counselling
- Life insurance
- Disability insurance
- Sabbaticals
- Relocation assistance
- Payment towards education or training
- Shopping or leisure discounts
- Extra day off on a birthday



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CASE STUDY: CAROLINE MILLAR, AGRI-TOURISM

Caroline Millar has been involved in agri-tourism for 20 years. As well as co-chairing the National Strategy Implementation Board for Agritourism, she is passionate about making the industry attractive to people and showcasing best practice for employment across Scotland.



At her family farm near Angus, she runs the Hideaway Experience. ‘We have a five-star tourism business alongside the farm, and we always treat our staff the same as guests,’ she explains.

‘We are currently recruiting, and it has made us think about why people would want to work here, as well as what employees have to offer us. There’s a labour shortage, so we need to make our industry attractive – we need to market our sector the same way we market our businesses. A lot of people say they’re attracted to a small team where they feel valued and are thanked; a lot of it isn’t even to do with money.’

She has introduced flexible working to her team and tries to be as accommodating as possible, particularly for those caring for children or families. ‘We offer sabbatical leave - if someone wants to go to New Zealand for a month, for example, they can,’ she says.

‘We recently took the team to Tuscany for a learning journey; it was a nice way to thank them and show they are valued. It was around £1,500 per person but was brilliant for retention and it’s an experience they will never forget,’ she says.

Even smaller things such as birthdays are never missed. ‘It can be as simple as a birthday cake, or investing in training. For something small, like a staff BBQ, it costs little but has a large impact on the business. It can be a tool for attracting employees and retaining your team – you want to become an attractive employer.’

Celebrating success as a team is also important. ‘We enter a lot of awards as a business, and we always take our team to the awards ceremonies – they feel really valued and we get the benefit of that for the whole year.’

Top tips for those considering introducing employee benefits

- Understand your budget. Think about how much you can allocate towards employee benefits without compromising your business financial stability.
- Survey your employees. Learn what they want by having conversations or conducting surveys to help tailor the package to their needs.
- Start small. Begin with one or two benefits that are feasible for your budget.
- Consider flexible benefits. Offering a range that employees can choose from helps cater to diverse preferences – some may prefer extra holidays while others want subsidised gym membership.
- Communicate effectively. Clearly communicate the new benefits to your employees and answer any questions they may have.
- Keep things under review. You’ll want to ensure the package remains competitive and relevant to your employees over time.





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# Maternity and paternity policies

While employers will, of course, share in the joy that one of their team is welcoming a new baby to the world, they have to handle the implications for the business. These can include organising and paying for necessary cover, reacquainting new mothers with the workplace and accommodating any new parental needs.

This can be daunting for a small business with thin margins, and is the reason why a **2018 survey** found one in three UK bosses would reject a female candidate over fears she might start a family. The same survey showed 37% would advertise roles as available to men only if the law allowed, while 40% said they thought men were more dedicated to their jobs.

But as Farmers Weekly's last **Level the Field guide to female-friendly recruiting** explained, there are many proven commercial benefits to having a diverse team that includes women. The best course of action, then, is not to shy away from the issue of maternity or paternity leave and hope you never have to handle it. Instead, as with all business planning, you'll need to face the issue head on and work out how your business can navigate it best. Employers should:

- Be open and supportive. Think about what it's like to be in the employee's shoes, facing a big life change – both physically and mentally – plus a cut in income and uncertainty about what the future holds.
- Make sure there are plans in place to navigate both maternity and paternity in terms of workload. It may be a difficult time for the business, but it should never come as a surprise.

## Planning for maternity and paternity

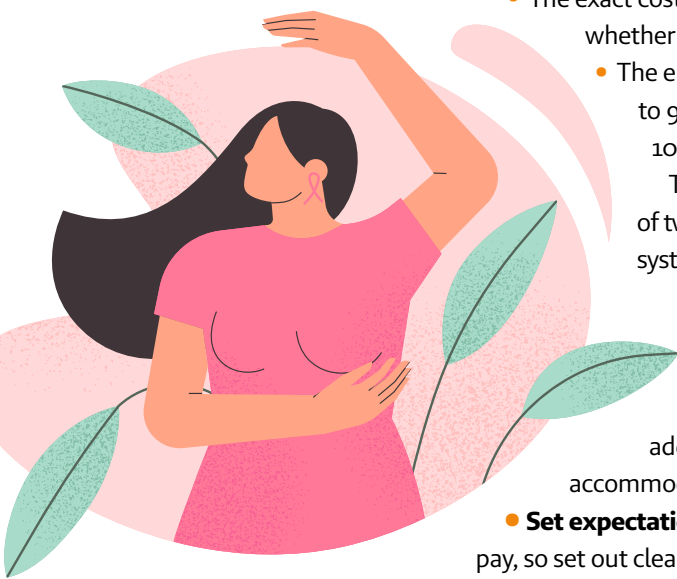
From a financial point of view, paying for maternity and paternity are operational costs of running a business – the same as sick pay or other overheads, explains Tillie Williams, consultant at Kite Consulting.

- The exact cost to the business depends on what is written in the employee contract, and whether you offer enhanced or statutory maternity or paternity pay.
- The employer is responsible for paying the employee, but can usually claim up to 92% of employees' statutory maternity or paternity pay back - or up to 103% if your business qualifies for Small Employers' Relief

The real challenge, however, is at a practical farm level. With paternity leave of two weeks, the workload can be covered by relief workers or slack in the system, but maternity is a longer period.

### Top tips for managing maternity and paternity leave

- **Know your legal obligations:** Familiarise yourself with the law on maternity and paternity and consider if you can offer any additional support. An employee on maternity leave will still be entitled to accommodation and most other benefits.
- **Set expectations early:** There is a big difference between receiving full pay or statutory pay, so set out clearly what you intend to offer to employees in contracts.
- **Be proactive:** Have conversations with staff to allow for better visibility over planning. This will allow you to make necessary arrangements for their absence.
- **Cross-train employees:** Cross-training ensures there will always be someone to carry out all necessary tasks when one staff member is on leave. This is important for sickness and holiday



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as well as maternity or paternity.

- **Consider hiring temporary staff:** Make sure to budget for this and to give time to carry out a recruitment process.
- **Provide support:** This should be offered both during leave and upon return and could include information on parental support groups and facilitating a smooth transition back to work.
- **Remember paternity leave:** Encourage employees to take paternity leave and consider paying for it.
- **Keep things under review:** Monitor your maternity and paternity leave policies to ensure they remain up-to-date with legal requirements and your employees' needs.
- **Communicate with the outside world:** Include information about your maternity/paternity policies in recruitment adverts and at interview stage.

**Enhanced maternity and paternity benefits**

For those farm businesses in a financial position to do so, going beyond the legal requirements for maternity and paternity is a great way to demonstrate your values as an employer.

This can be done by offering enhanced maternity or adoption pay, rather than just the statutory amount. Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP)/ Adoption Maternity Pay (AMP) is currently 90% of earnings before tax for the first six weeks, and then £184.03/week or 90% of earnings for the next 33 weeks – whichever is lower.

Enhanced paternity leave and pay can also be offered on top of the two statutory weeks at £184.03/week or 90% of earnings.

Fully paid parental leave could also be offered, as well as childcare or childcare allowance schemes, or healthcare for employees with the ability to add family members.

**CASE STUDY: CATHERINE KIRKLAND, ARLA**

At Arla, HR specialist Catherine Kirkland has worked to prioritise employee wellbeing with enhancements to the maternity policy and workplace wellbeing initiatives.

In 2023, Catherine put together a focus group of parents to review Arla's parental policies, with maternity a priority. She also undertook some benchmarking of similar businesses in the marketplace and found they were lagging behind.

Arla had already increased its maternity policy to 16 weeks of full pay in 2001, but Catherine felt strongly that this wasn't enough. In 2023, it was increased to 26 weeks' full pay – a significant increase.

'We really wanted to support women in their careers and make sure they weren't suffering with a maternity pay gap,' she says. 'This sent a message to show we really valued parents, and our inclusion strategy is around creating a work environment where everyone feels valued.'

Catherine also worked with women returning to work, who felt like being on maternity leave disadvantaged their careers, with pressure to hit the ground running when back at work. Recognising that women had experienced a big change in their lives, and a shift in priorities, potentially making it harder to come back to work, she introduced parental coaching.

Three sessions from a company called The Maternity Coach are available for all parents who have been off work for six months or more. The sessions look at whatever parents are



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**CASE STUDY CONTINUED: CATHERINE KIRKLAND, ARLA**

going through at the time, such as returning to work, communication with the workplace when on leave, and how to deal with sleepless nights.

Catherine believes this is a positive step forward for the business. She has also worked to create guides for managers who have employees going on parental leave to make sure it is a supportive, positive experience. Catherine wanted to make sure the benefits were fair for all, so the offer extends to adoptive parents and covers shared parental leave. The business is currently reviewing its paternity policy, which she hopes to enhance, too.

The feedback has been positive. ‘As a mother who has recently returned from maternity leave, it’s great to see the improvements Arla has made to the maternity policy,’ says one employee. ‘It shows how Arla is supporting women during a crucial period of welcoming and caring for a new child, it alleviates some of the financial pressure to return to work too soon, and reflects Arla’s dedication to supporting women in the workplace.’

Flexible working is also encouraged, with guidance available for managers and colleagues. ‘We have a number of people working three or four days a week who have childcare or caring responsibilities,’ says Catherine. ‘If people were stressed about picking up their children from school, they wouldn’t be doing their best work.’

There are also wellbeing spaces at every Arla site, which include elements such as gardens, rooms with comfy chairs and blood pressure monitors.

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**GIVE FEEDBACK ON THE CAMPAIGN**

**EXPERT INPUT PROVIDED BY:**

- **Hugh Pocock**, director at agricultural recruitment specialists Cultura Connect
- **Katherine Jameson**, associate at Tees Law, which provides legal services and financial advice
- **Tillie Williams**, consultant at Kite Consulting
- **Paul Harris**, chief executive at Real Success

