

MARCH 2018

WEST MIDLANDS AMBULANCE SERVICE NHS FOUNDATION TRUST FLEXIBLE WORKING USING ANNUALISED ROSTERS FOR SHIFTS AND LEAVE

The organisation

West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust (WMAS) serves a population of 5.6 million people across 5,000 square miles. The trust covers Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Coventry, Birmingham and the Black Country.

The West Midlands is the second most ethnically diverse region in the country after London. It includes the second largest urban area in England (Birmingham, Solihull and the Black Country), yet over 80 per cent of the region the trust covers is rural.

WMAS is the region's emergency ambulance service and responds to around 3,000 calls each day. To manage that level of demand the trust employs approximately 4,900 staff and operates from 15 new fleet preparation hubs across the region and a network of community ambulance stations.

Background

WMAS has committed to providing flexible working opportunities which allow staff to balance their professional and home life commitments, while focusing on patient care needs.

Historically, some staff were unable to commit to the strict traditional work pattern of four days on, four days off (two days and two nights). If staff were unable to find flexibility in their work, they would often have to explore different roles and in some cases alternative career paths.

Other staff found the unsocial hours problematic either due to health, caring or other domestic responsibilities. This led to staff not feeling as though there were options available if they could not work the traditional roster – it was either do it or find a different role or career.

Another impact was on the gender split in the organisation which meant that generally, women were not working in front line roles.

The trust acknowledged that this was not a good way to operate, and began to look at its working practices to ensure staff have access to flexible working opportunities.

How the trust did it

The trust was aware that the historic model of working two day shifts, two night shifts and four days off did not match the work/life balance of all of the workforce. With an increase in staff asking for flexibility around childcare and caring responsibilities, on top of an aging workforce, the trust recognised the requirement for different, less demanding work patterns.

In response to the lack of flexibility, the trust looked at how it could improve options for staff.

Today managers in the trust are familiar with its flexible working policy and actively refer staff to it, along with the options available to them. As part of the trust's health and wellbeing group, flexible working is continually reviewed to ensure the options available to staff meet both their needs and that of the service. Staff side colleagues are also fully briefed on the policy and help support staff to explore various options and alternative ways of working.

Flexible working arrangements in the trust include:

- part-time working
- annualised shifts and hours
- term-time contracts
- job sharing
- flexi-time
- flexible retirement (mentioned in pre-retirement courses and the trust policy)
- compressed hours.

Certain criteria needs to be met before a flexible working request will be considered. For example, employees must have worked in the trust for a continuous 26 weeks and should have not submitted another statutory request within the last 12 months of seeking a new flexible working agreement.

The key change has been the approach and consideration of requests. When a staff member makes a request that will not support the needs of the service, rather than the request being declined managers are able to offer alternative suggestions. This helps to balance the needs of both employees and the organisation. Throughout, a qualified HR professional supports line managers to have these conversations and ensure that flexible working decisions are made in line with legislation.

Annualised rosters

WMAS uses an online system which was introduced in 2010 and provides for shifts to be planned between the employee and the line manager.

79 staff currently work on an annualised rota arrangement that:

- allows staff to book their shifts over the year

- allows managers to plan workforce requirements in advance and reduces the need for short term cover arrangements often paid at overtime rates (the trust doesn't use agency staff)
- lowers sickness absence – the trust is starting to find that staff are less likely to be off sick on shifts they've chosen themselves
- creates a positive culture between teams and improves attitude – individuals are happy to meet the needs of others and the trust when required.

Rostered annual leave rota

Rostered annual leave rotas automatically plan and schedule shifts over the course of a year and beyond with regular planned periods of annual leave built in.

2,325 staff are currently signed up to the rostered annual leave rota. This arrangement:

- allows staff to plan their work/family commitments well in advance
- reduces the manual input of managers planning workforce requirements as the rosters are self sufficient
- lowers sickness absence – staff receive a regular built in period of leave, ie 18 days off every 10-week rota cycle
- improves culture between teams and attitude – staff are happy to meet the needs of others by covering shifts for colleagues when gaps emerge.

Obstacles

The trust identified that rostered annual leave rotas can prove to be inflexible - individuals may require the occasional additional day off work, but given that all their annual leave entitlement has already been factored into the rota this can cause problems. To overcome this issue, staff are now encouraged to work with team members and carry out shift swaps among themselves. This is an automated process within the online rostering system. All staff are also reminded of alternative time off options such as time off in lieu (TOIL), and time off for emergency domestic or dependent responsibilities.

Top tips

- ✓ Promote flexible working opportunities and related policies among managers and staff.
- ✓ Ensure managers are appropriately trained and seek advice from HR when required.
- ✓ Employers should consider being flexible in regards to applications in exchange for working during high demand periods.
- ✓ Consider using alternative time off options such as time in lieu and time off for emergency domestic or dependent responsibilities.

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CASE STUDY

Further information

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