

# The power of culture

A leader's guide to creating change in the utilities workplace



WUN



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Introduction



Following on from the findings of our 2024 report, *Unconscious Bias in the Utilities Sector: What is the Reality?*, where we uncovered some stark truths about how women are feeling and their experiences within the sector, we wanted to take a deeper look. Specifically, we set out to explore the role of leadership and workplace culture in shaping those experiences.

Our aim? To better understand the realities our members are navigating every day – and to equip organisations with insights that can drive meaningful change.

We were delighted to receive **over 300 responses** to our survey, and we are incredibly grateful to everyone who contributed so openly and honestly. We're equally thankful to our long-standing partners at The Marketing Pod for their continued collaboration. As a female-founded, award-winning agency, The Marketing Pod share our passion for building fairer, more inclusive workplaces, and their support in creating this report has been invaluable.

As I hoped when writing the foreword to last year's report, there is a brighter story to share this year. Encouragingly, the majority of respondents told us their organisations support work-life balance and take culture and wellbeing seriously. This is a positive step forward - and a clear sign that **change is happening**.

But there is still much work to do. Half of the women who responded told us they had witnessed or experienced behaviour they felt was inappropriate. That is not something we can ignore.

82% of respondents were experienced specialists or held middle to senior leadership roles. It raises important questions about whether women at earlier career stages are seeing or feeling the sector in a different way - and that's something WUN is committed to exploring further.

We'd also like to take this opportunity to thank our partners and supporters who helped us extend the reach of the survey by sharing it with their employees and networks. The insights and lived experiences captured here are crucial in helping WUN advocate for the changes women want and need in our industries.

I'm especially proud that this year's report includes a set of practical takeaways - clear actions for organisations and individuals to help build a stronger, more inclusive workplace culture. WUN will continue to share and build on these insights in the months ahead, working alongside our members, partners, and allies to create a utilities sector where women can join, stay, and thrive.

Jo Butlin  
WUN Founder and Director



The majority of respondents told us their organisations support work-life balance and take culture and wellbeing seriously. This is a positive step forward - and a clear sign that change is happening.



## Executive summary



In our 2024 report, *Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?*, we discovered that **1 in 3 women are considering leaving the utilities industry**. This was understood to be largely due to a workplace culture problem that prevents women from having a voice in their organisations.

This year, we wanted to examine workplace culture in utilities more closely. In partnership with The Marketing Pod, WUN commissioned a 20 question survey that ran during February and March 2025, specifically designed to build a deeper understanding of the current state of leadership and culture in the utilities sector.

In particular, we set out to identify the main barriers that are preventing women, and the utilities organisations they work for, from reaching their true potential. The findings have also enabled us to suggest positive steps that can be taken towards building a better working environment where everyone can thrive.

### What did our survey tell us about workplace culture?

Our research reveals a complex picture of workplace culture. While there are significant and reassuring signs of progress, **positive experiences are far from universal**.

The good news is that a strong majority (71%) of respondents agree their organisation's culture **supports work-life balance**, with an impressive number (94%) citing benefits or initiatives aimed at improving this.

Over two-thirds (69%) also believe their organisation's leaders take workplace culture and wellbeing seriously - an encouraging start, although the remaining 31% are ambivalent or disagree.

A little over half (53%) of respondents told us they always feel free to be their **authentic selves at work** - but nearly a third (28%) feel they can only do so with a close circle of colleagues. And while over a third (39%) always feel encouraged to reach their full potential, more than half (56%) only sometimes or occasionally feel this way. Disappointingly, 5% never do.

**Arguably far more concerning is the fact that this inconsistency of experience extends to equal opportunities - and to inappropriate behaviour in the workplace.**

**62%** of respondents told us they agree with the statement, 'There are equal opportunities for career advancement and development for women in our organisation.' Unfortunately, this leaves **over a third** who either feel ambivalent or disagree with that statement.

What's more, **half of all respondents** told us that they had witnessed or experienced behaviour in the workplace that was dismissed as banter but which they felt was inappropriate.

The disparities in our data lead us to draw two initial conclusions:

- **A very real gap exists between organisational policies and everyday realities for many women.**
- **Workplace culture must be more deeply and consistently embedded if we are to enact meaningful change.**

Our survey uncovered the possibility that some leaders and organisations may be accidentally complicit in 'wellbeing washing'.

Despite genuine intentions and thoughtful policies, initiatives designed to build a better workplace culture are not always translating into lived experiences.

**How can we change this?**





The importance of strong leadership

A healthy and inclusive workplace culture inevitably begins with good leadership. But while some leaders are already doing a great job of instilling this within their teams, our survey revealed that how respondents felt about their workplace, and whether they could take advantage of workplace benefits such as flexible working, was too often down to the 'luck of the draw'.

Their comments suggest that flexibility is too often at the manager's discretion and that official company policies can sometimes be trumped by the expect-

tations of those leading the business. What also came through was that **leaders need to go further than setting policies; they need to provide a positive role model and embody the values of their organisation.** Unless they do this, workplace culture initiatives are in danger of becoming merely 'lip service'.

**Today's leaders must be not only knowledgeable, but also supportive, approachable and ethical. Organisations that invest in helping leaders at all levels to develop these skills will be certain to see the benefits.**

The culture question:  
Why do women care and why should you?

It's clear that neglecting workplace culture has far-reaching consequences. This was evidenced by the fact that 31% of women were considering leaving the utilities sector, according to our 2024 report on unconscious bias. Prioritising a positive culture should be viewed as a critical action for businesses, as it also impacts talent acquisition, productivity levels, and employee satisfaction.

Our survey reveals that remote or hybrid working is now a top job priority for women in utilities (25%), just edging out salary (24%). Beyond this, a positive culture, training and career progression are critical factors in the career decisions which women within the utilities industry make.

**Culture is more important than money for women who work in the utilities industry. Employers wanting to attract and retain talented women should prioritise providing remote and hybrid working policies.**

What needs to change?

Our survey confirms that remote and hybrid working are highly valued by women. But while these offer the potential for greater equality, challenges around setting boundaries between work and family life persist, emphasising the need for true equality at both work and home.

Notably, most respondents have access to some flexible working arrangements (95%), or hybrid options (87%). But a significant number (34%) of those with these arrangements state they feel guilty about working flexibly, or find it difficult to use.

Part-time working also presents challenges, with less than half (48%) believing part-time workers have the same rights as full-time colleagues. This is concerning, given that the most recent government figures state 36% of women work part-time, compared to 14% of men.

**To truly support women and foster an inclusive work environment, utilities organisations must move beyond simply offering flexible policies. They need to actively cultivate a culture that normalises and encourages their use without guilt.**

**How can we create change?**  
In Section 7, we provide some best practice tips for leaders, organisations and individuals. These are based on the experiences of our network, the past work we have done with our members, and on the findings of this report.



Who answered our survey?

We received **300** responses. **94% (281)** of those who responded to the survey described themselves as female. We also had 18 respondents who told us they are male and one who described themselves as non-binary. For the purposes of this report, 'respondents' will refer to all groups and 'women' will refer to those who told us they would describe themselves as female.

We received responses from across the utilities industry, from both full and part-time workers, and from all levels of seniority; although experienced specialists and those in middle or senior management roles made up **82%** of respondents.

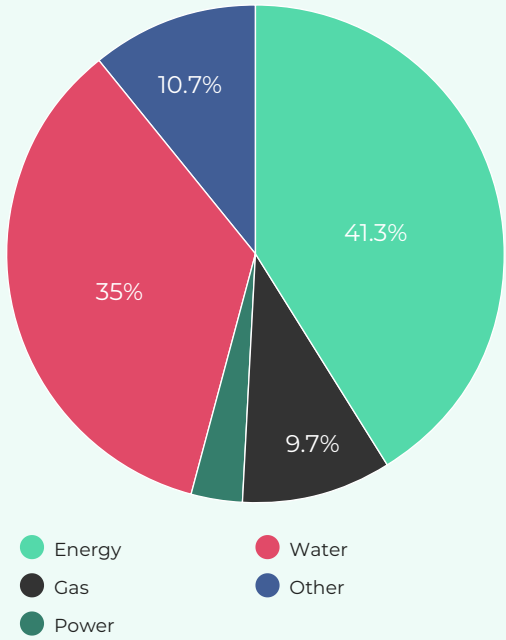
**56%** of respondents told us either that they have children (51%) or are a carer with responsibilities for a family member or friend (5%).

**93%** of respondents to our survey describe themselves as White, with the next largest group being Asian (including Asian British) at only 3%. While we would have hoped for a more balanced group of respondents, this is unfortunately reflective of the industry as a whole, which lags behind others when it comes to diversity.

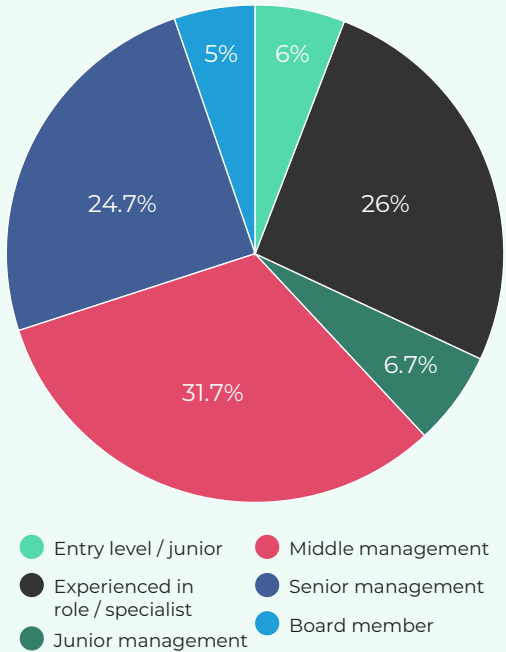


Diversity is recognised as **critical** to creating a net zero future, yet recent figures from Energy & Utility Skills tell us that only 7% of the sector's employees are from Black, Asian or minority ethnic groups compared to 13% nationally.<sup>1</sup>

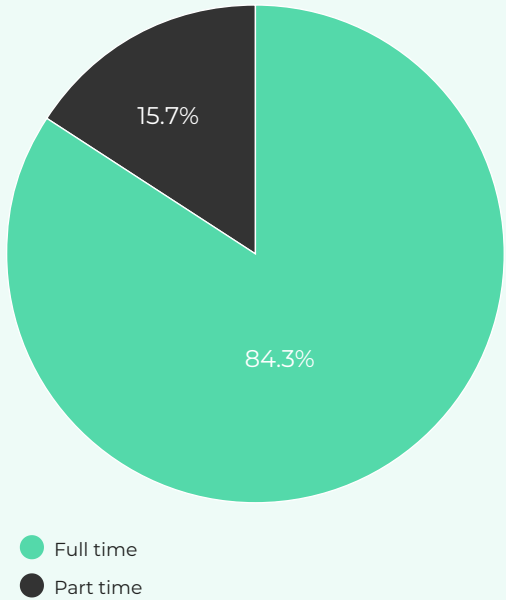
Type of utility



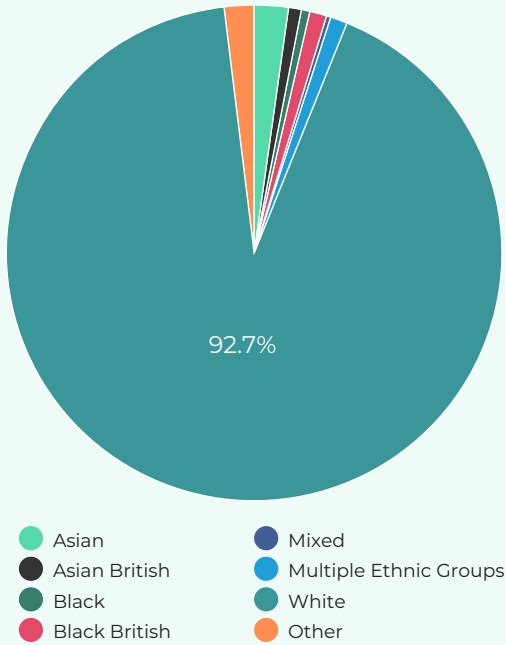
Which best describes your seniority?



Working Full/Part Time



Ethnicity



<sup>1</sup> Diversity in Utilities – a Look at Inclusivity in the Industry



Section 1

Life in the utilities industry. What do we know about workplace culture today?

Research tells us that women remain underrepresented in the utilities workforce, particularly in senior positions. The sector continues to lag behind when compared to the national average, and gender representation has stagnated.

The 2024 Annual State of the Nation Report from POWERful Women in collaboration with BAIN & Company tells us that in the top 80 UK energy companies, only 29% of board members are women. Only four of those companies have a female CEO.

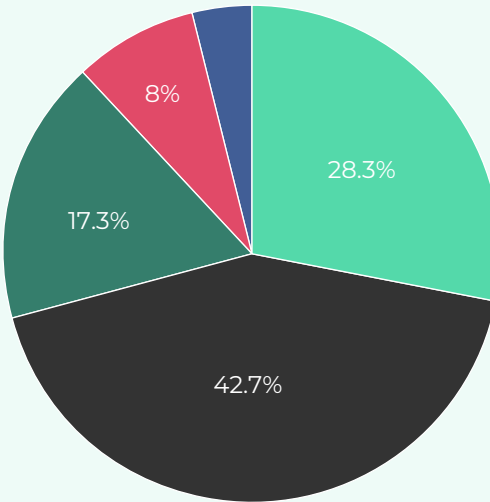
**But representation is only one half of the story.** As highlighted by the State of the Nation report, it's essential that while we push for progress in this area, we also address the difference between representation and real inclusion.

**Diversity alone isn't enough. Organisations need to create truly inclusive workplaces where all employees feel valued in their roles and are empowered to contribute innovative ideas.** WUN believes that workplace culture is a critical consideration to achieving both.

First, some good news

The results of our survey provided plenty of positive insights. It's wonderful to be able to report that 71% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'The culture at my organisation genuinely supports me to achieve a work-life balance'.

The culture at my organisation genuinely supports me to achieve a work-life balance



Agree very strongly    Disagree quite strongly  
Agree quite strongly    Disagree very strongly  
Neither agree or disagree

This consideration of culture is also evidenced in action. An impressive 94% of respondents told us that their organisations offer some form of benefits or initiatives to support a better work-life balance.

The examples provided were wellbeing sessions, mental health support, childcare support, women's health support, private healthcare, volunteering opportunities and sabbaticals.

*'We get all of the above! We also receive one additional day of holiday per year as a wellbeing day.'*

*'Flexibility is one of the reasons I am more likely to stay in my role.'*

*'We have a great women's network which champions women's health and flexibility.'*

What do we mean by 'workplace culture'?



When we write about workplace culture, we are referring to the shared values, documented practices, and promoted behaviours that characterise an organisation. These will serve to define how team members interact within the workplace environment.

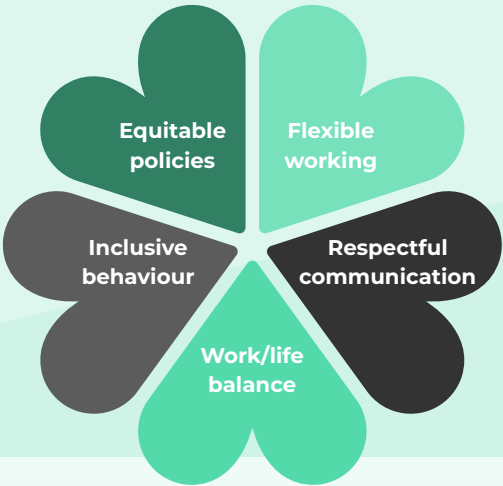
**A healthy workplace culture is one where diversity is nurtured and where every person feels safe and supported, is valued and empowered, and has a voice.**

Many different things affect the health of workplace culture; from equal pay and training opportunities, to respectful communication and anti-harassment policies.

For the purposes of our research, we focused specifically on different working

patterns and wellbeing-related benefits, while also attempting to draw out how women feel more generally about the culture within their workplace, and which workplace practices and benefits they believe are most important.

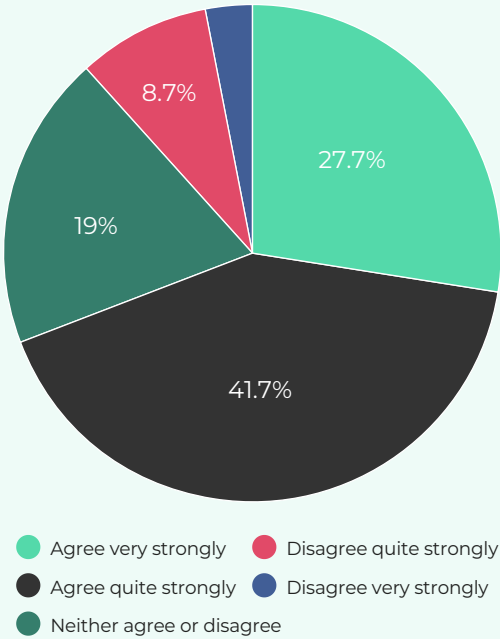
We have also paid particular attention to inappropriate behaviours in the workplace, how comfortable women feel reporting the behaviour, and how utilities organisations are responding.



Embedding positive values within an organisation invariably begins with good leadership, so it was also great to learn that there are leaders in our industry already making it a priority. **69%** of respondents told us that they agree with the statement 'The leaders at my organisation take workplace culture and wellbeing seriously.'

*'The buck stops with me if culture is not where it should be. Fostering and role modelling the right behaviours is central to the way leaders can enhance the culture day to day. However, sometimes it takes more deliberate moves and we have also put effort into comms, organisational design, and people and processes to make a cultural shift.'*

The leaders at my organisation take workplace culture and wellbeing seriously



Good culture isn't a universal experience

Unfortunately, positive experiences within the utilities sector are far from universal.

When we asked our respondents to tell us which three words best describe the workplace culture at their organisation, **61%** chose the word 'supportive'. In fact, the top five words used were: **supportive, inclusive, respectful, empowering, and kind.**

Conversely, the words **bureaucratic, disconnected, and change-resistant** were each used more than **50 times**, with smaller numbers of respondents telling us that their workplaces are **unappreciative** (26), **toxic** (15), and **hostile** (5).

This disparity is also reflected in the data. Where **69%** told us leaders are taking workplace culture seriously, the remaining **31%** said they felt ambivalent or disagree that this is the case in their organisation.

We can dig a little deeper by looking at some of the comments our respondents make about this.

Which words did respondents use to describe their workplace culture?







Lip service vs reality

While organisations may put the right policies in place, providing the right foundations for a healthy workplace culture, the lived realities of their teams often tells a different story.

*‘My company speaks often about the desire to have a good work-life balance, but never seems to achieve it.’*

*‘Supportive but the workload isn’t managed well.’*

*‘It all just depends how busy we are!’*

*‘Sometimes it feels like lip service rather than true action. Wellbeing seems to focus on the nice-to-haves e.g. a talk here or go for a walk there, rather than realising people are stretched to capacity and freeing up their time would make the biggest benefit to wellbeing.’*

*‘I think there is some good intention though the reality is that the organisation is slow to change and quite bureaucratic.’*

*‘My organisation is very ‘manage your own workload’. Help is given if requested but I find everyone is overloaded, which eats into many people’s life balance.’*

The urgent need for consistent leadership

Many leaders are already doing well at promoting a healthy workplace culture. But unless policies and practices are consistently applied - and all leaders within an organisation embody the values they profess to take seriously - wellbeing will continue to suffer.

*‘There is some push for a healthy work culture, but it is valued in different ways by senior team members.’*

*‘They take it very seriously, but don’t recognise the impact of their own behaviour and are very ‘do as I say, not do as I do!’*

*‘They pay lip service to the Health and Safety at Work (HSW) directives, but are the first to break them, and try to force their own working practices on others.’*

*‘They want to take it seriously but work too long themselves and probably inadvertently put the same pressure onto others and so it goes down the chain.’*

*‘Sometimes lip service is paid to workplace culture and at other times it is the most important thing - there is not a consistent defined approach.’*



Are some organisations guilty of ‘wellbeing washing’?

During 2024, the phrase ‘wellbeing washing’ started appearing in multiple media sources. Forbes reported that while businesses had come a long way since the pandemic and the corporate wellness market was seeing a boom, businesses were often more focused on being *seen to care* than proactively taking care of employees.<sup>3</sup>

It may also be the case that in some organisations, middle and senior management believe that workplace culture is good but they are overly focused on having the right policies in place; they may not be checking on applications, assessing the real impact of policies, or consistently seeking feedback from more junior members of the team. This can create a chasm between organisational values and daily realities - putting organisations in danger of wellbeing washing.

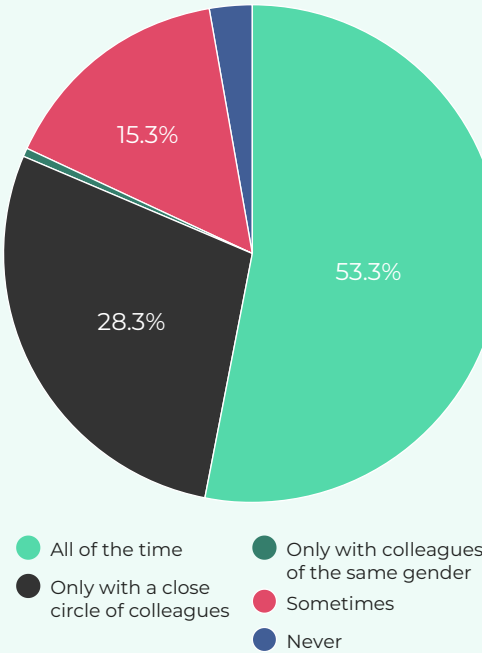
*‘For want of a better word ‘gender/culture/wellbeing washing’ is top priority, the company puts on loads of events to discuss all of these things. But from what I’ve seen, it doesn’t always transpire down to a day to day level and I do not feel comfortable going to anyone (especially not HR) to discuss these problems.’*

Some of the problems that arise when workplace culture initiatives are not consistently applied or properly embedded can be seen in the results of our survey.

Despite high numbers of respondents believing that their organisation takes workplace culture seriously, we also heard that:

- Only 53% told us that they always feel free to be their authentic self at work.
- More than a quarter of women (28%) told us that they can only be their authentic selves when with a close circle of colleagues.

Do you feel free to be your authentic self at work?



The importance of authenticity in the workplace has become more widely understood and appreciated in recent years, particularly when it comes to improving staff wellbeing, motivation, and talent retention, so these figures should be a red flag for leaders and managers.

The stark contrast between different lived experiences can also be seen in the comments our respondents gave us about this, which range from very inspiring and positive:

*‘I don’t have to alter my personality to fit in and feel confident around my colleagues.’*

*‘I’m free to work in ways which inspire me to add value.’*

*‘As a very alternative and heavily tattooed woman, it’s been a breath of fresh air to not have to hide my appearance or be treated differently.’*

To more concerning:

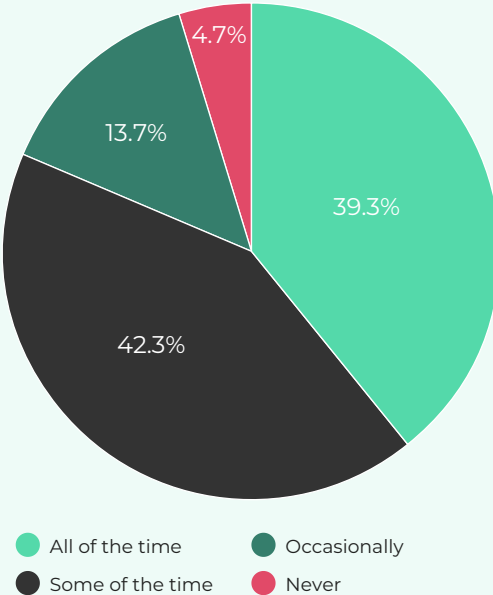
*‘It still just isn’t a safe space for women, particularly mothers, to be our true selves... I hold back constantly, questioning my right and place to express my true feelings.’*

*‘It has happened that you are labelled in a negative way by men. Rather than being assertive we are aggressive, rather than being passionate, we are emotional etc. I have to tailor how I am to ensure I don’t get belittled in front of others.’*

I need to dance as the bosses sing...

And while 39% of respondents told us they always feel that they are encouraged to reach their true potential at work, **more than half** (56%) told us this is only sometimes or occasionally true. For 5% of respondents it is never true.

Do you feel that you are encouraged to reach your true potential at work?



3 How To Avoid Wellbeing Washing: Ensuring Genuine Employee Support



Section 2

Why should utilities businesses care about culture?

In our 2024 report, *Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?*<sup>4</sup>, we highlighted a workplace culture problem within the utilities industry. Unconscious bias was preventing women from having a voice in their organisations. They could be seen but were not being heard.

It's a problem that has the potential to impact the future of the industry, with almost a third (31%) of the women who responded to last year's survey telling us that they were likely to leave the industry in the next 1-3 years.

But when organisations fail to make workplace culture a priority, employee turnover is only one part of the problem. Those organisations also have much to lose when it comes to talent acquisition, productivity, and employee satisfaction; while those that invest in a rich and diverse workplace culture will find that **resilience, innovation, and sustainable growth** follow close behind<sup>5</sup>.

Research from the World Economic Forum tells us that even amid economic volatility, organisations should continue to invest in DE&I, making it a core part of their strategy and culture:

*'Companies that prioritise equity and inclusion are more likely to attract and retain top talent, resulting in a higher-performing workforce: recent research suggests that organisations with inclusive cultures are 3.8 times more likely to harness the full potential of their employees, and to experience lower turnover rates, as employee morale tends to be higher.'*<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the 2024 POWERful Women State of the Nation report advises that achieving a gender-balanced, diverse and inclusive energy sector will be the only way to meet the needs of a net zero future.

*'DEI has a significant positive impact on business performance, problem solving, innovation, creativity, talent attraction and retention, reputation, consumer engagement and trust, brand value, and overall workplace culture... Gender and geographically diverse teams make better business decisions approximately 87% of the time.'*<sup>7</sup>

There is also a cycle of continuous improvement to consider if we are to get where we need to be; organisations need a healthy workplace culture to attract diverse talent, and diversity is a critical component of a high performing team and healthy workplace culture.

5 key benefits of building a positive workplace culture



Employee retention

Employees that feel valued and have a sense of belonging are more likely to stay, reducing costly turnover, and creating brand advocates.



Innovation and creativity

When employees feel safe to share their ideas and take risks, creativity and collaboration lead to innovation.



Better decision making

A range of diverse perspectives will help businesses overcome the limitations of uniform thought and avoid blind spots.



Enhanced efficiency

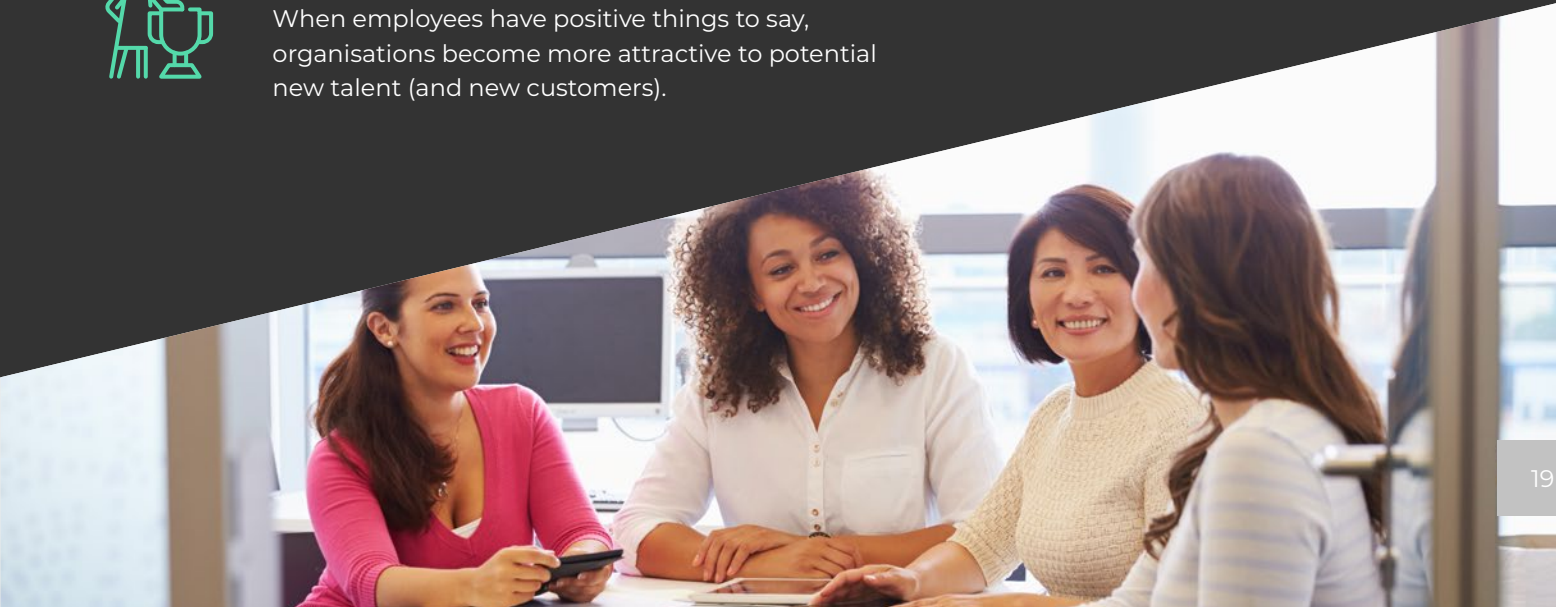
A positive culture boosts employee motivation and increases engagement, in turn improving performance and productivity.



A good reputation

When employees have positive things to say, organisations become more attractive to potential new talent (and new customers).

It's also important to acknowledge that while many utilities organisations have defined and shared their vision and values as part of their culture work, good work can be undone when leaders say one thing and do another, when behaviours that are not aligned go unchecked, and when culture is set aside because other priorities come along. A well embedded culture requires consistency.



4 [Unconscious bias in the utilities sector: what is the reality?](#)  
5 [How Investing in DEI Helps Companies Become More Adaptable](#)  
6 [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses 2024](#)  
7 [PFW Annual State of the Nation](#)

What do people value most?

So what are the organisations where culture is taken seriously doing right? And what should those that want to improve be focusing on? Our research provided some interesting insights into what people value the most:

We asked respondents to rate a number of factors out of 5 for their importance when considering a job role. These were salary, benefits, flexible working, remote or hybrid working, and distance to travel.

Just under a quarter (24%) of respondents told us that salary was a number one factor.

A quarter (25%) told us that remote or hybrid working was a number one priority.

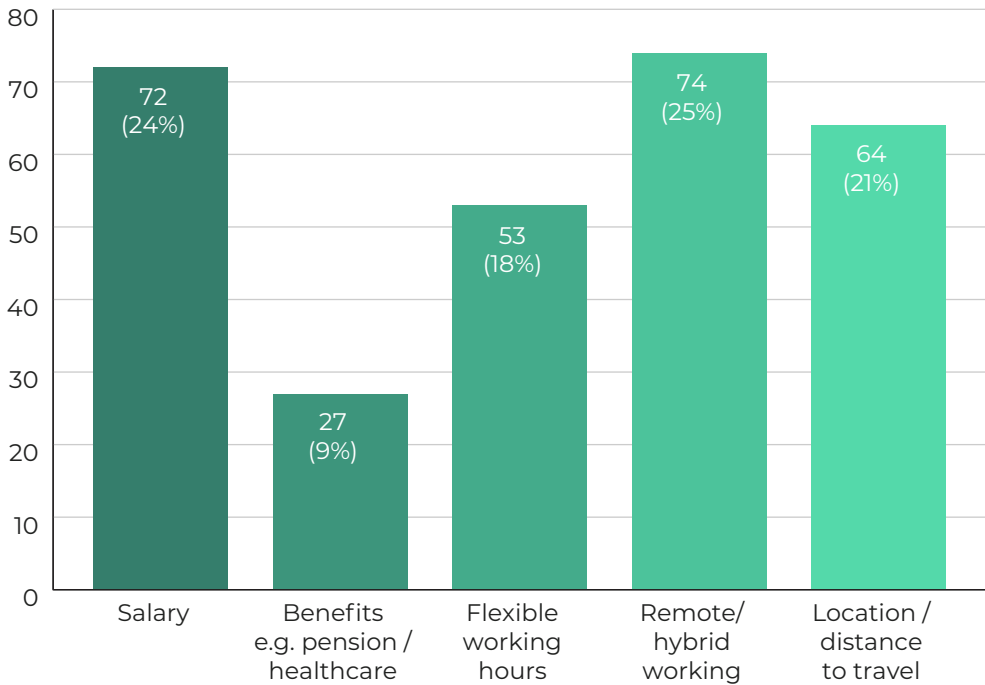
Flexible working was a top 2 priority for 43% of respondents, but a low priority (4 or 5) for 39%.

Only 9% of respondents rated benefits such as pension or healthcare as their number one priority but it was an important secondary consideration (rated 2 or 3) for 51%.

For location (distance to travel), the results were more varied, with a relatively even split across each rating. 21% told us it was their top priority and 20% told us it was their lowest.

While salary is still an important consideration, three quarters of respondents told us that it was not a number one priority when considering a job role.

Number of respondents who rated each factor when considering a job role as 1 out of 5 (most important)



What else do people consider when choosing a role?

When we asked our respondents what else would help them decide on a job role, their responses made it clear that culture is extremely important, and that training or the opportunity for career progression was also a crucial consideration for many.

‘Team culture and manager attitude/ management style. I asked about both these in my interview for my current role and the answers helped me decide to accept the job.’

‘Progression opportunities, getting into a leadership position.’

‘The environment of the workplace, did it seem friendly or toxic?’

‘Budget for upskilling and education.’

‘Experience and opportunities for progression. I don't want to end up in a role that won't take me where I want to go career wise.’

‘How important collaboration is, and how they recognise good performance.’

‘Inclusive corporate culture, commitment to EDI that is not about winning awards or greenwashing.’

‘Culture, culture, culture. I have worked in too many places that are toxic. I won't put up with that nonsense any more. Life is too short.’

‘Training opportunities offered.’

‘Career progression and support.’

‘Wider culture - are there Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) set up? Are there strong female role models?’



Section 3

Does workplace culture affect women differently?

The data from our survey makes it clear that our respondents place a high value on **remote and hybrid working**, alongside other key elements that contribute to a healthy workplace culture; such as **opportunities for training and career progression**.

But does workplace culture have a special significance for women in comparison to the workforce as a whole? And could a return to more traditional office-based working styles have a disproportionate impact on women?

The most recent *Women at Work* study from Deloitte<sup>8</sup> tells us that, while hybrid working experiences have improved compared to pre-pandemic times, many women are struggling to balance new return to office (RTO) policies with shouldering the majority of responsibilities at home. A quarter (25%) are also working through challenges related to menstruation, menopause or fertility. This has led to almost half (47%) reporting higher stress levels than a year ago.

Nearly half of women (44%) who live with a partner and have children at home bear the most responsibility for childcare.<sup>8</sup>

Hybrid working supports gender parity

So, could hybrid working be one way to 'level the playing field' for women when it comes to career development? And a way to make the pursuit of senior roles more appealing to them when the stakes of leaving their families for long days in the office feels too high?

Recruitment specialist Hays believes hybrid working could be an equaliser in the workplace, with RTO mandates potentially having the opposite effect; due to disruption of productivity, impact of commuting costs, and decreased job satisfaction all affecting women more significantly than men.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the data gathered by Hays points to the **possibility of a staff retention crisis** at a time when parity on women in

senior management roles is still far from being achieved:

**The majority (51%) of women would consider leaving their job if they were required to return to the office. This greater reluctance among women to give up their hybrid working arrangement could lead to higher turnover rates among female employees and exacerbate gender disparities in career advancement.<sup>9</sup>**

Balancing work and family life

**71%** of respondents told us that their organisation supports them to achieve a good work-life balance - but we know that this positive experience is not universal.



8 Women at Work | Deloitte UK  
9 Hays Market Insights - RTO worse for women?

While flexibility and remote or hybrid working policies have the potential to open up more career progression opportunities to women, there is another consideration which cannot be ignored and which women may need support to achieve: setting boundaries.

A recent report from Durham University shines a light on the difficulty women have in separating their working and family lives when working from home. Compared to men, the research tells us,

women are more likely to experience blurred boundaries and be more likely to interrupt their work schedules to address family needs.

The answer? There are many tools and systems that can help remote and hybrid workers maintain good levels of productivity and performance, without increasing their stress levels. That said, only one thing will truly solve the challenges that many women face: true equality in both work and family life.

As Dr Zamani, Associate Professor of Information Systems at Durham University Business School explains:

*“The greater flexibility that working from home provides has empowered women to bridge much of the gender gap in the workplace. However, our findings show that there's still a need for more shared responsibilities in the family home if we are to achieve true equality in both work and family life, as women currently are taking on a similar burden in work, but a greater burden at home.”*

Are we at a crucial tipping point?

Across the UK workforce today, **77%** of employers say employees are working in a hybrid way<sup>10</sup>. Evidence points to the provision of hybrid working as something women want - and something the workforce as a whole will benefit from.

Unfortunately, RTO mandates and the culture shift created by a reduced focus on ED&I policies in both the US and UK<sup>11</sup> have the potential to set us back.



<sup>10</sup> [Hays Salary Guide 2025](#)  
<sup>11</sup> [People Management article - ED&I rules and what it means for inclusion](#)



Section 4

Is the utilities sector supporting women at work?

We have already covered how a high percentage of women think their organisation is taking culture seriously, but now that we fully understand how important culture is to women in the workplace, it's worth taking a closer look at the ways in which our industry is getting it right and where there may be room for improvement.

According to Great Place to Work®, the UK's most inclusive workplaces are focused on three critical themes<sup>12</sup>:



Talent development and leadership

These organisations create a culture where every individual, of any gender, feels valued and free to develop themselves in ways that suit their learning preferences and vision of the future.



Pay and benefits

Transparency is a core value for these organisations, whose leaders willingly share their gender pay gap information externally. They have also shown bold levels of support for their entire workforce during times of crisis.



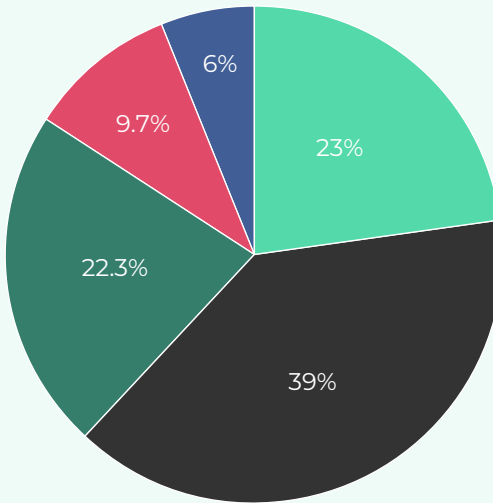
Workload stress

Employees at these organisations often comment on the team spirit and strong support network they have at work. Flexibility is a key practice adopted by these organisations; many offer flexible working hours and/or hybrid work models.

So how does this compare to the experience of our respondents?

62% told us they agree with the statement, 'There are equal opportunities for career advancement and development for women in our organisation.' Unfortunately, this leaves over a third who either feel ambivalent or disagree with that statement.

There are equal opportunities for career advancement and development for women in our organisation.



Agree very strongly   Disagree quite strongly  
Agree quite strongly   Disagree very strongly  
Neither agree or disagree

What could be making the difference?

'An inclusive environment ensures we all feel comfortable and safe at work. Opportunities for hybrid and flexible working are available to all employees (based on business needs) and policies are in place to support employees where needed.'

Vs

'They talk the talk but I'm not sure they walk the walk, especially at senior levels. There's lots about taking breaks, getting away from the screen, but the reality is there's a lot of 'can you just' and the senior leaders don't model good practice. It's like a slow creep into longer hours...'



Flexible working

It's positive to learn that **95%** of respondents have some type of flexible working arrangements available to them in their current role.

**87%** told us that they had access to hybrid working, while **45%** work remotely. Only **5%** told us that there are no flexible working options available to them.

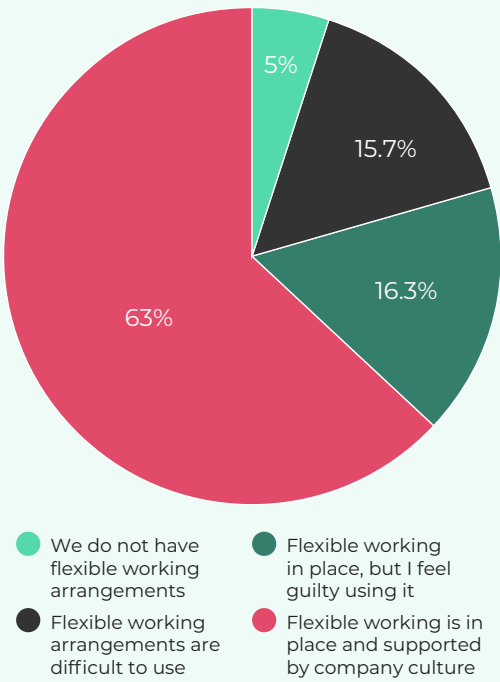
**But while flexibility is technically 'available' to the majority of respondents, does this tally up with their lived experience?**

Of those respondents who told us that they have flexible working available to them, **over a third (34%)** said that they feel guilty using them or that it is difficult to use them.

There are some positive examples to learn from:

*'Having returned from two maternity leaves in quick succession, I returned part time. I have been offered a promotion since and adjusted my working hours to suit both work and home.'*

Which statement best describes the attitude to flexibility in your organisation?



*'As long as the work is done to a high quality, flexible working is supported. It works on trust, and reciprocal flexibility... Contribution to work and our values is prioritised over presenteeism.'*

However some comments reveal a lack of clarity, or a fear that it is a 'nice to have' that can be easily whipped away:

*'Easier for some than others.'*

*'We're expected to be in the office 3 days a week (used to be 2 but a new director said it had to be 3 days for some reason - nobody really knows why). My team was then told by one of our managers that they were 'not allowed' to log off before 4pm unless she approves it because she needs us to be available... Even though we've never been given set working hours and have always been encouraged to manage our own working pattern.'*

*'We currently have flexible working in place but I am concerned this will be rolled back with a new CEO in charge who has casually commented that he likes in person meetings.'*

Other comments demonstrate that flexibility is not given without guilt:

*'Working from home is generally seen as fine but there's an unsaid rule/expectation you will work longer hours.'*

*'I promote and encourage flexible working within my team, but I definitely have a personal feeling of guilt when I look to use this as I feel the senior team sends emails out of core hours, which (maybe unintentionally) suggests a culture of always being on.'*

Part-time working

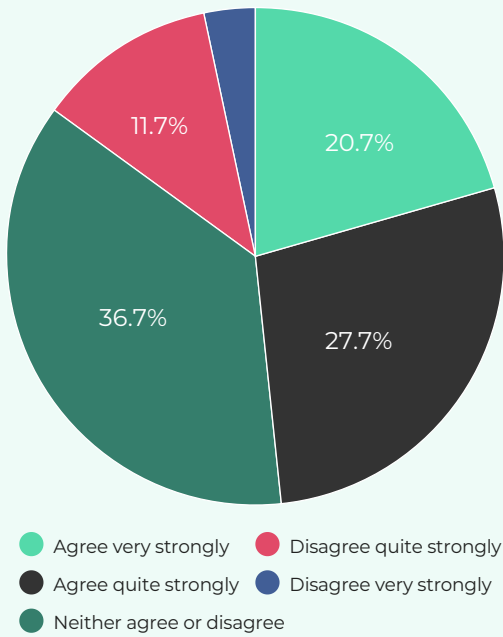
When it comes to equality for part-time workers, the results are less positive. **Less than half (48%)** agree that part-time workers have the same rights as full-time workers at their organisation.

According to the most recent government figures **36% of women in employment work part time, compared to only 14% of men**, so equality for part-time workers is an issue which needs to be addressed if we want to ensure workplaces have a healthy culture that supports women to progress in their careers.

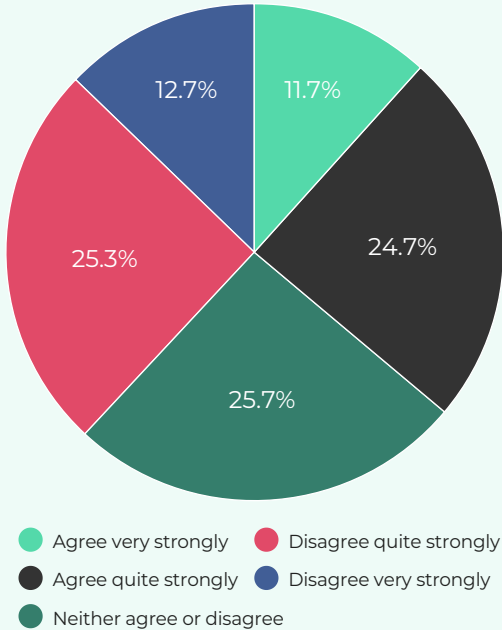
In connection to this, **over a third of respondents (36%)** told us they feel guilty if they have to leave work earlier than their colleagues.

While that guilt may sometimes be attributed to personal values or feel 'self-inflicted' it is undoubtedly affecting women's confidence at work and will have a resulting impact on their career progression. Could a more transparent culture or more consistent leadership help to solve the problem?

Part-time workers have the same opportunities as full-time workers at my organisation.



I feel guilty if I need to leave work earlier than my colleagues.



*'Leaving early for school runs and arriving late due to drop off, is not something we should have to apologise for. However we still do, it still feels like we are 'slacking' even if we deliver the same workload as others (often more as we overcompensate).'*

*'I feel a little guilty as I don't want to leave my colleagues, not because the company puts any pressure on me to feel guilty, this is my own personal feeling.'*

*'I believe it's misplaced guilt as I genuinely don't think the team would think twice given the hours I put in, but I can't help checking emails and Teams once I've finished to make sure nobody needs me.'*

*'I don't feel guilty leaving work early, and I encourage my team not to feel guilty if they need to leave. Luckily I am strong enough for this, as some leaders still feel that presenteeism is more important than outcomes.'*





A family friendly culture

67% of our respondents told us that they agree with the statement, 'My organisation is family friendly. Its culture supports career progression for parents'.

There were some extremely positive comments on this topic:

*'My experience has been very positive coming back from maternity leave.'*

*'The CEO has 2 young kids so they are very aware of the necessity of a family friendly culture.'*

*'I have been accommodated as a part-time leader so I can parent more effectively and I am very grateful for this.'*

*'I have never felt conflicted by being a working mum and all the demands that fine balancing act brings in my current role.'*

While others portrayed a less positive experience:

*'It's very much a patriarchal environment, where women have to emulate masculine characteristics to get ahead.'*

*'I don't think we often support leadership opportunities for part-time employees, who more often than not work those hours due to childcare or caring responsibilities.'*

*'We have an overcrowded office, which means parents who have the school run in the morning and can't get into the office as early cannot get a desk.'*

*'The odds are stacked against parents and those wanting to be parents. We have an outdated minimum maternity policy which is not aligned with the needs of young families.'*

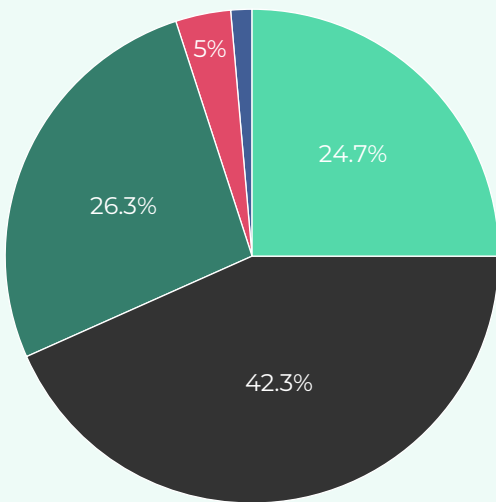
Once again, there is a suggestion in the heartfelt comments our respondents gave us that improved policies do not always translate into better lived realities:

*'It is getting better, but the main thing done is allowing all jobs to be taken at 30 hours to make them accessible, which I don't feel really gets the point - often jobs can't be done well by one person in reduced hours, and we have to be more creative about how the work is covered so it is done well and people are paid fairly for the work they do.'*

And that policies are not consistently applied, or given without guilt:

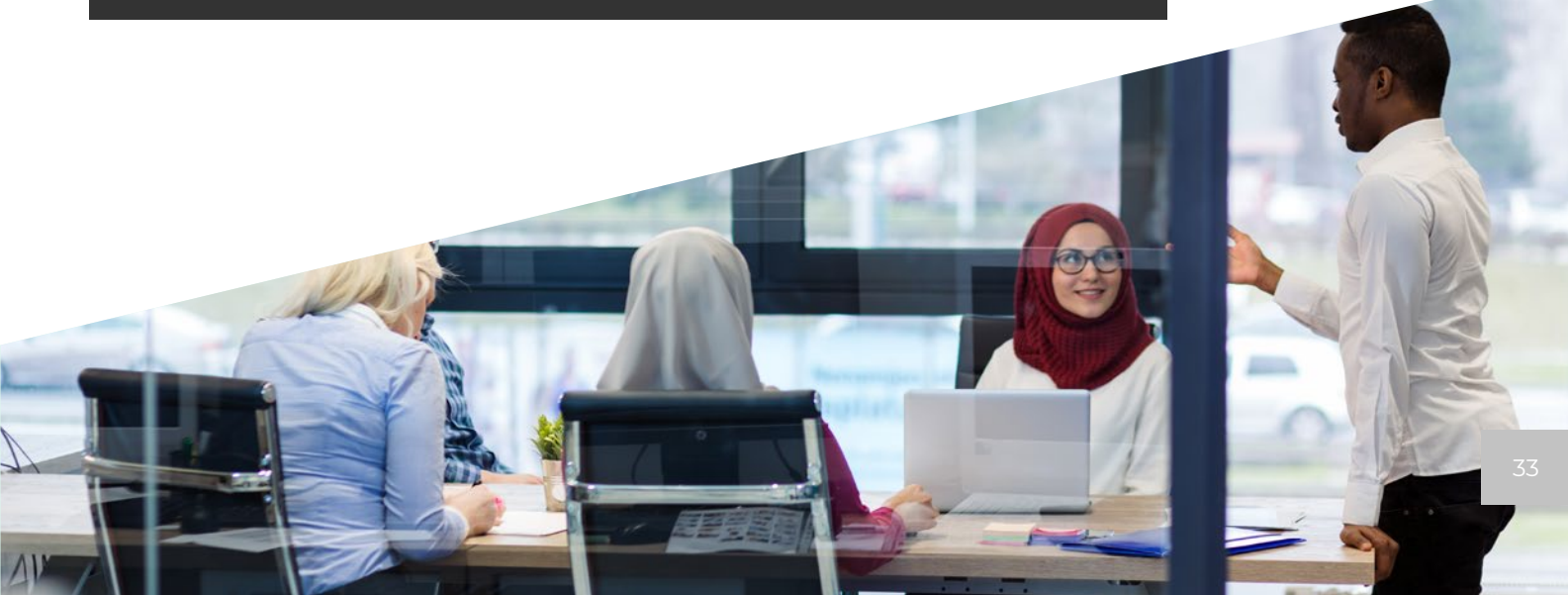
*'I think we have made changes to be more family friendly, however Dads are still made to feel guilty or less if they have childcare/caring responsibilities or needs.'*

My organisation is 'family friendly'. Its culture supports career progression for parents.



Agree very strongly  
Agree quite strongly  
Neither agree or disagree  
Disagree quite strongly  
Disagree very strongly

There is certainly some food for thought here. How can utilities organisations achieve a more consistent application of policy, to more deeply embed the desired workplace culture?



Section 5

Are women in utilities still experiencing inappropriate behaviour at work?

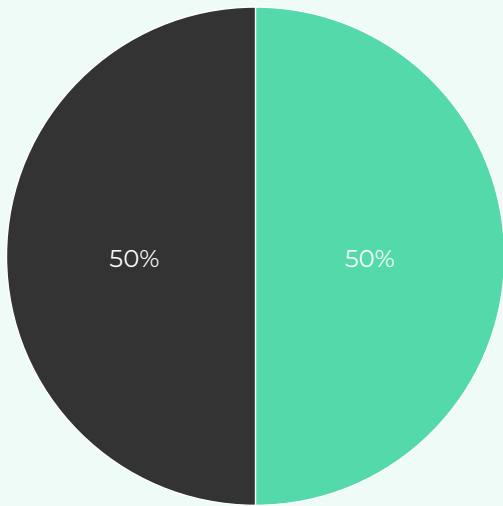
Research tells us that women are more likely to experience harassment at work than men, whether that harassment is sexual in nature or not<sup>13</sup>. It is therefore heartening to read comments like this from the women who completed our survey:

*'This behaviour is so far from anything we would experience in our office, due to the environment and culture that has been nurtured by leadership.'*

Unfortunately, this is not a consistent workplace experience for everyone. Harassment in the utilities workplace remains a critical issue and too many women are still experiencing misogynistic comments or 'misogyny thinly disguised as jokes'. Others have even reported that inappropriate behaviour has gone beyond verbal banter to become physical, with 'invasion of personal space and hands-on behaviour.'

**Half of all respondents told us that they had witnessed or experienced behaviour in the workplace that was dismissed as banter but which they felt was inappropriate.**

Have you ever experienced behaviour in the workplace that was dismissed as 'banter' but which you felt was inappropriate?



Yes  
No



Here are some of the more shocking comments we received:

*'I'd rather not write what I saw in full but it involved a senior male colleague touching a junior female. Also been on MANY boys' club type calls.'*

*'A male started a joke with "I'm not a misogynist but..." and proceeded to tell a sexist joke which was quite awkward and the 3 introverts he told it to didn't know how to respond beyond an awkward smile.'*

*'I was told this was a very masculine energy room and if it was too much I could go and sit with the admin ladies.'*

*'Some engineers were taking photos of a member of the comms team while she had her back turned. She was filling in for someone else providing training around customer experience to those engineers.'*

*'Joking with a colleague turned into inappropriate sexual comments - what I was like in my past, how 'slutty' I was, how that might apply to him if I was single...'*

*'I was unloading our office dishwasher and a male colleague said it was great that I was practicing and that I would make a great housewife sometime - all the male colleagues in the area laughed.'*

Inappropriate behaviour is not restricted to being sexist or misogynistic; our respondents told us that they had also experienced inappropriate behaviour related to age, race, religion, physical characteristics, and neurodiversity.

*'The person made a comment around "Europeans taking our jobs"- I am European.'*

*'Someone made a flippant, ableist comment "He said artistic, not autistic". I have ASD (AuDHD) and did not appreciate this.'*

*'Banter about a person's physical characteristics. I have been subjected to this for many years as I am not of average height and have been openly ridiculed via banter.'*

*'Jokes passed relating 'strictness' to sharia law.'*

And we mustn't presume that this inappropriate behaviour is always exhibited by men:

*'I saw a woman boss bully a colleague in a meeting. I was disgusted and reported it to HR.'*

*'[There is] a lot of sexually charged banter from a female colleague, which most people tolerate because it's coming from a female, but if the same came from a man that would be a different story.'*

13 Experiences of harassment in England and Wales: December 2023

How can we effectively address inappropriate behaviour?

Inappropriate behaviour is clearly still a problem - and it isn't always addressed satisfactorily. In fact, of those respondents who have witnessed or experienced inappropriate behaviour:

- **More than a third (35%)** didn't feel able or comfortable to speak up about it.
- **56%** said the inappropriate behaviour wasn't addressed by their organisation.
- **46%** were very or quite dissatisfied with the way the situation was handled.
- **A quarter (26%)** were somewhat satisfied and **only 16%** were very satisfied with how the situation was handled.

In the cases reported by our respondents, only 19 resulted in a written warning, and only 21 in disciplinary action. In 55 cases, no measures were taken when an instance of inappropriate behaviour was reported.

*'I was repeatedly made to feel that any issues I had with banter was me being too sensitive and it was 'only a joke.'*

*'It's not something that's ever challenged as is often the case with micro-aggressions - I wish I'd said something in these moments but as one of the more junior people in the office I find it hard.'*

*'Ultimately I left the organisation because of how it was handled.'*

**'The formal HR tools are extremely slow, and it can take a lot of time for organisations to realise there is a problem before the process even starts. It was using HR processes to resolve a cultural problem - if the culture was right and the expectations were set for conduct the matters being dealt with would never have arisen in the first place.'**

Dealing effectively with inappropriate behaviour begins with clear and direct communication, with well-established channels for raising concerns and with consistent and fair consequences.

Recent guidance from Acas<sup>14</sup> reminds us that by law, all employers must take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of their employees. Alongside the right policies, procedures, and training for staff, Acas recommends improving ED&I as an important step; reminding employers to 'create the right culture' by making it clear to everyone who works for them that they will never cover up or ignore a sexual harassment complaint.

*'Sexual harassment is less likely to happen in an inclusive organisation where everyone is treated with respect.'*

Acas

Helping our members #SpeakUp

This is not the first time WUN has asked important questions about inappropriate behavior. During our 2024 #SpeakUp campaign, we discovered that **84% of our members** had observed discrimination in the workplace at some point.<sup>15</sup>

The launch of this campaign coincided with new duties placed on employers under the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023.<sup>16</sup> A roundtable discussion involving HR leaders from the utilities sector concluded that the following elements were needed to nurture a culture where employees feel empowered to #SpeakUp:

- Robust processes and policies:** empowering those who have experienced sexual harassment to raise their concerns.
- Strong commitment from leadership:** ensuring senior executives add their voice to the conversation, so teams recognise its importance.
- Investment in education:** making it clear what is unacceptable behaviour; enabling leaders to recognise issues and react appropriately.
- Reverse mentoring:** giving more senior team members the chance to properly understand the experiences and challenges of others.



Interested in finding out more?

Our latest virtual #SpeakUp sessions can be viewed here: [WUN For All #SpeakUP](#) and here [WUNForALL – The role allies play supporting others in the workplace](#)

14 [Preventing sexual harassment](#)  
15 [WUN #SpeakUp campaign a blog by advocate Holly Beeston](#)  
16 [New protections from sexual harassment come into force - GOV.UK](#)



Section 6

The role of leadership and training

The comments provided by our respondents suggest that culture is significantly driven by managers, with options such as flexibility often at the manager's discretion. This would suggest that prioritising wellbeing is also at the manager's discretion and that official company policies seem to be trumped by the expectations of those leading the business.

Many respondents find themselves 'lucky' to have managers that prioritise work-life balance and wellbeing, while others express that even where policy exists, this is not their lived experience.

*'We have all of the policies and procedures in place, however some of the working practices and expectations of "just get it done at the last minute" don't match the policy.'*

*'There is always a pressure to work longer hours. Those colleagues working condensed hours are ridiculed for working part time'*

*'I think it depends more on individual managers and teams rather than a wider culture. I have a supportive manager but I don't think this is necessarily the case throughout.'*

WUN has recently had the opportunity to explore this topic in detail with industry leaders, including National Grid<sup>17</sup>, examining the importance that leadership and training plays. It is a shocking fact that at the current rate of progress it will be 180 years before we achieve equity in the workplace. But leaders who understand that an inclusive workplace culture delivers better business outcomes are already making a difference.

Here's a snapshot of what they told us:



Shifting the narrative

ED&I is a cultural norm, not a trend. It should be treated as such. It should be recognised that most people, regardless of gender, would prefer to coalesce around more compassionate and respectful cultures.



Promoting shared parenting responsibility

Mothers should not automatically be expected to take the majority of leave or responsibility. Normalisation and celebration of 'non-traditional' ways of working, the taking of paternal leave and the sharing of childcare is essential.



Embracing flexibility

Flexibility has the potential to deliver improved retention and productivity, and the best possible workforce. Super flexible working for returning parents is already paying dividends for some organisations.



Recognising the over-50 talent pool

Ensuring that we don't lose talent in this period of life is essential for growth of capability and leadership. Many people may be entering a new period of life where parenting is no longer a main responsibility.



There is a leadership responsibility to act as role models and tell our stories

Individually and collectively, senior leaders can have a significant impact on those earlier in their careers. But action and words need to be consistent, and this is a theme also recognised by a recent Forbes article<sup>18</sup>

*'Employees also need to see wellbeing in action. If senior leaders are saying one thing and doing another - burning the candle at both ends while their team is encouraged to take a full lunch hour - this does not embed a culture where wellbeing is authentically valued.'*

17 [The Importance of leadership and culture in accelerating the transition to equitable and inclusive workplaces - Womens Utilities Network](#)  
18 [How To Avoid Wellbeing Washing: Ensuring Genuine Employee Support](#)

Section 7

Creating change

At the time of writing, a new Employment Rights Bill is making its way through Parliament.<sup>19</sup> When enacted in 2026, the Government tells us that it has the potential to mark the ‘biggest upgrade to rights at work for a generation’, and if passed in its current form, it would see several key changes to rights for workers.

Arguably one of the most significant outcomes would be that flexible working would become the ‘default’ for all workers. This is defined as a way of working ‘that suits an employee's needs’, such as having flexible start and finish times, or working from home. Employers would be required to say yes to requests from employees from their first day starting in a job unless they can prove it is ‘unreasonable’.

Considering the findings of our survey, this seems like a positive step that advocates for a more inclusive workplace culture. Its basis in law could possibly serve to promote a more consistent approach across organisations; something our respondents would undoubtedly welcome.

*‘Consistency. The messages from the top are inclusive and supportive, however when you draw down to more local management this is not consistent, and for the business to change everyone needs to be following the same message.’*

*‘It needs to move to a more flexible working environment with outcome based leadership rather than bureaucratic management. The organisation needs to embrace technology and train managers to lead remote teams rather than fall backward into office based mandates.’*

That said, WUN believes that utilities organisations can go further and faster to instil a healthy and inclusive workplace culture - where women are encouraged to excel and where every team member can thrive. For those individual leaders and organisations that want to do better (and see their teams and businesses benefit) here are our top ten suggestions for building a better workplace culture:

10 ways to build a better workplace culture



**1 Don't neglect the day-to-day:** Consider how to influence teams from a larger, organisational perspective as well as within smaller teams and working groups. The right policies are crucial but remember the importance of day-to-day actions that can reinforce them.



**6 Remain consistent in challenging times:** Be consistent about culture. Resist the urge to deprioritise it during times of challenge or change - as this is when it is most important to your teams.



**2 Educate everyone:** Leaders should understand how wellbeing builds resilience - and how this can improve performance. But education is important right across the team, especially when it comes to appropriate workplace behaviours. Initiatives like working groups and reverse mentoring may help to embed your culture and values more deeply.



**7 Invest in women leaders:** Research by the American Psychological Foundation <sup>20</sup> showed women are more likely to demonstrate transformational leadership styles, and to inspire colleagues to work collaboratively towards the organisation's mission and values.<sup>21</sup> Great news for women - and the utilities industry.



**3 Identify and promote role models:** Recognise and reward individuals who consistently display the behaviours that align with your organisational values. Provide them with an opportunity to guide or mentor others.



**8 Giving clarity on flexible and remote working:** Be transparent about what working styles are available, and encourage leaders to reinforce this through their communication and behaviour. If things change, be open about the what, when, and why.



**4 Review, test, repeat:** Once values are defined, return to them regularly to review and test them. Are they effectively translating into behaviours that build a healthy workplace culture or do they need to be revised/recommunicated?



**9 Celebrate and respect differences:** Encourage understanding and respect for everyone's differences through workplace policies and initiatives, so that the whole workforce feels welcome, safe, and empowered to contribute.



**5 Communicate clearly:** Be completely clear on your organisational values and team expectations; to be sure everyone is aligned, understands what constitutes acceptable behaviour, and how to raise issues when things go wrong.



**10 Respond to the changing landscape:** Provide reassurance and certainty by refreshing policies and restating your core organisational values as the world changes. Teams may need to hear that while ED&I might be slipping down the priority list for some, and return to office (RTO) policies are gaining popularity, you will continue to put employee wellbeing first.

<sup>19</sup> [Employment Rights Bill: Will things change for women? - BBC News](#)

<sup>20</sup> [American Psychological Foundation](#)

<sup>21</sup> [How women in leadership can drive business performance | Alliance MBS](#)



5 ways you can build a better workplace culture

It's important to remember that everyone has a part to play. Here are our five quick tips for ways you can positively influence your team culture:



Live your workplace values

Show up in a way that reflects your organisation's values, being mindful about how you treat colleagues and how you communicate. Team culture is shaped in the small, everyday moments.



Celebrate what's working

When you see great behaviour, name it. This helps reinforce positive habits and shows others what good looks like.



Take opportunities to give feedback

Get involved in surveys, focus groups or Q&A sessions, and find ways to give thoughtful, respectful feedback in real time. This could be about barriers you face or suggesting a better way of doing something. And if something doesn't feel right, call it out.



Support and include others

In meetings, focus on making space for everyone to contribute. Invite quieter voices into conversations, be aware of who's in the room (and who's not), and offer support when you can.



Get involved

Whether it's an employee resource group, a wellbeing initiative or a team lunch, your involvement signals that culture and collaboration matters to you.

About Womens Utilities Network

Womens Utilities Network was started to give women the skills and confidence they need to build lasting, fulfilling careers in the utilities sector. Founded by a group of women who have themselves built successful careers in both energy and water, WUN seeks to help other women to build the right networks, get the right training, and take control of their own work lives, whichever stage of their career they are at.

We know that the inequalities in the sector won't change unless we do something about it, and we're passionate about building a community of women who can connect, support, develop, and encourage one another.

We have over 8,900 members and followers and over 60 partners. [Visit our website](#) if you would like to join as a member, partner with us or become a mentor or mentee.



About The Marketing Pod

The Marketing Pod is a B2B agency that believes in using the power of B2B marketing to help ambitious, ethical, and sustainable, businesses grow and lead by example. It is proud to count energy, water, and cleantech organisations among its key clients.

Founded by two women from corporate energy backgrounds ten years ago, the agency is now recognised as a Great

Place to Work and ranked in the top 50 for the UK's Best Place to Work for Wellbeing and Best Place to Work for Women two years in a row.

Find out more at [marketingpod.com](#)





# About the WUN Development Framework

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We know that utilities need more women in leadership and with the fast changing nature of the sector, this is more important than ever. Changes are being made but the pace isn't fast enough to make a real difference.

## We are here to help

WUN is proud to have created **a bespoke development framework to support women at different points in their utilities careers**. Our programmes have been created by women in utilities to respond to the challenges and needs reported to us by our members and partner companies.

**WUN Drive** is our bespoke Management Skills Programme. This virtual development opportunity has been created recognising the unique challenges women face in management roles. It's modular and designed to equip women with the essential skills and confidence needed to excel as managers in utilities.

**WUN Thrive** is our bespoke senior leadership programme. This in-person development opportunity has been created recognising the unique challenges women face in senior leadership roles. It's designed to help elevate women into entering senior leadership roles and provide a unique network of support.

**WUN Arrive** (coming soon) is a skills development programme designed specifically for women who are new into their careers in the utilities sector.



Find out more and reserve your place:  
[thewun.co.uk/wun-development-programmes](https://thewun.co.uk/wun-development-programmes)

WUN

