

# Weighing up the work-life balancing act

WHEN Moira Gibb took maternity leave from her job as a director of social services 12 years ago, she was a pioneering figure.

At the time, policies to support working mothers were in their infancy. Women were expected to choose between a career and motherhood early in their working lives.

Gibb, however, became pregnant with her son, James, at a senior point in her career and was determined to have both. That she was able to return to her role only months after James's birth was greatly helped, she said, by the attitude of her employer at the time, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Last year she decided to take on an even more challenging role as chief executive of Camden council.

"My employers at Kensington and Chelsea were very understanding about my situation," she said. "For them, it was my ability to do the work rather than how long it took that counted. I've never believed in the long-hours culture and I am acutely aware that management work will always expand to fill the time available."

While Gibb was extremely disciplined, her seniority also gave her some leeway in organising her own informal version of flexitime. She started her day early to avoid too much evening work and colleagues adapted to the times that she scheduled for meetings.

At home, she employed a full-time nanny and has shared the responsibility of bringing up James with her husband, Henry.

As chief executive of Camden, the demands on her time have increased, particularly in relation to council meetings held in the evenings. However, she said the organisation was highly supportive of people

Working parents can request flexible hours but this has caused a backlash among other employees, writes **Jane Hughes**

with family responsibilities. "There are things that I can't change, but there is also an understanding that, if I did need to take time off for an important school meeting, this would not be a problem."

Nowadays, the career expectations of working mothers have increased and the policies that support these expectations are more firmly established.

The latest Government initiative, introduced last year, gave working parents with children under six or disabled children under 18 the right to request flexible working (whether that be homeworking, a reduction in hours, flexitime or some other arrangement) while staying in their current role.

So far, according to statistics from the Department of Trade and Industry, nearly four times as many women as men have made such requests and eight out of ten of all applications have been granted.

However, such initiatives have created something of a backlash in other sectors of the workforce. A survey of 420 female graduates, aged between 21 and 28, at a women leadership event organised by the career specialist QS, found that nearly a third thought employers had gone too far in catering for working mothers. Many also felt resentful about employ-

ers considering work-life balance solely as a family issue.

"Women who don't have families can feel they are being marginalised in that they also want a work-life balance or support to help them stay on the career ladder without burning out too early," said Carole Brennan, a QS manager.

The age of those surveyed may have influenced their responses. But according to Sarah Wood, a local-council manager, some workers without children undoubtedly share this sense of unfairness.

"Quite a lot of women — and men — do complain, albeit off the record, about the extent to which working mothers get all the breaks," she said.

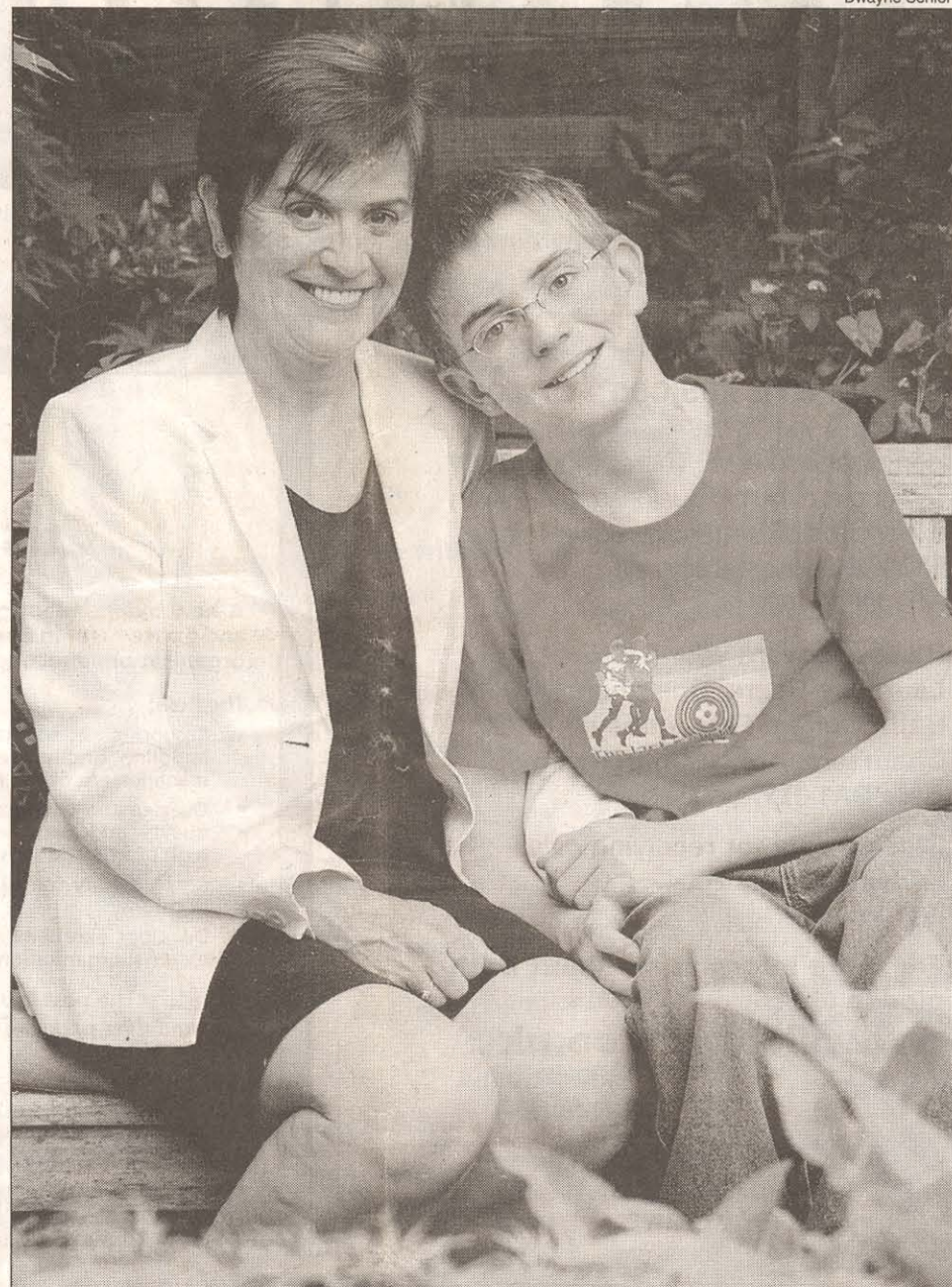
"Personally, I think it's important to support women with children, but most local councils don't go as far as they could in extending flexible working practices to the rest of the staff.

"There's this old-fashioned view that, if people aren't sitting at a desk with a pen in their hand, they aren't working. The message that performance and output are the best ways to assess someone's value has yet to filter through to many middle managers."

The current focus on creating a better work-life balance for one section of the workforce can also make things more difficult for other staff, according to Diane Vickers, a 33-year-old development manager.

"I do notice that whenever there is urgent work to do after hours it is always the single people who have to stay on," she said. "It is understandable that parents will give priority to their children, but it does leave the rest of us shouldering more of the workload."

Indeed, research carried out in the public sector by Professor Christine Edwards at



Mixing motherhood with being chief executive of a council: Moira Gibb and her son James

Kingston University Business School shows that catering for part-time employees (92% of whom are women) creates "enormous burdens" for front-line managers.

"Recruiting people to cover for those on maternity leave or employing two part-timers to share a single job increases the workforce and inevitably adds to the responsibilities for training, monitoring and managing," said Edwards.

"What's more, part-timers don't do unpaid overtime, so the full timers must take on any extra work."

Central government departments and an increasing number of local councils, such as Camden, are breaking new

ground by extending flexible working opportunities to all employees. That was vital, said Edwards, if people with valuable skills and experiences were to be retained.

However, the challenge for employers was to make the most of part-timers to avoid a backlash from full-time workers.

"Most managers are not experienced in organising a fully flexible workforce and will need training in how to manage a more diverse range of people and shifts," she said.

At Camden, where the council's work-life balance programme includes compressed working hours and unpaid career breaks, the emphasis has been on sharing responsibilities

across a team. "We recognise the pressure on managers, but we also want to retain quality staff, and women working part time give a lot back to the organisation," said Gibb.

"When you go back to work after having a child you imagine you have achieved it all. But the reality is that the demands and complexities of creating a good work-life balance just change rather than get easier."

Ultimately, she said, Camden's philosophy is that "if it meets people's needs, they will meet its requirements in getting the job done — and that has certainly worked for me".

□ Some names in this report have been changed to protect identities.

Dwayne Senior