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Austerity and the assault on working time, workload and the work-life balance: the case of the British Civil Service

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The UK Civil Service

- 412,000 civil servants on a full-time equivalent basis and 447,000 on a headcount basis.
- Perform a wide range of jobs implementing central government policy (taxation; benefits; pensions; immigration; vehicle licensing; courts service etc.)
- Also Non-Departmental Public Bodies working at 'arms-length' from Government departments
- The average salary is £25,190, lower than both the public (£28,930) and the private sector (£25,240).
- Staff reductions - 67,000 between 2008-2013

The changing Civil Service Context

Restructuring

- Breakdown of national structures – with departments giving birth to Executive agencies (Next Steps)
- Breakdown of uniform national pay and grading (Kessler et al, 2006) including increasingly punitive PM systems
- Privatisation and market testing (Ewing, 2007)
- Fragmented national fragmented bargaining (c.170 different bargaining units) with weak consultation arrangements at workplace level (legacy of Whitley)
- Casualisation in certain areas (use of agency workers)
- ‘Taylorist’ labour practices (Call centres, Lean production)

The PCS union

Public and Commercial Services Union

- one of the three main unions representing workers in Civil Service/NDPBs. It organises administrators, lower and middle management and some professional grades. Current membership is around 240,000.
- senior officials, NEC and many other committees under control of the Left (continuing influence of Socialist Party)
- focuses upon mobilise members to deliver industrial action (primarily through national disputes) over pay, pensions, redundancy and job losses – active organising strategy;
- ‘Alternative Vision’ places union in direct conflict with Coalition Government (check-off, facilities, anti-unionism)

The survey research

- Internet-based survey run July-September 2013
- 4827 responses (1.8% membership)
- Responses received from all Government Departments and many Executive Agencies, NPDBs and commercial companies (3.7%)
- 56.8% of sample have no caring responsibilities
- Comparator 2006 web-based survey with 1597 responses
- Key issues of arguing representativeness of surveys
 - Self-selection – over-estimate problems of workload
 - Reliability given relatively small response rates (especially 2006 – but see attached tables)

Key aggregate findings from 2013 survey

Increasing hours

- 52.0% of respondents work, on average, between 38 and 48 hours, even though only 11.8% are contracted to do so. More worryingly, 5.7% (n=276) work over 48 hours per week

Workload

- 73.3% state that their workload has increased in the previous year while only 4.3% of members have seen a decrease in their workload.

Work-life Balance

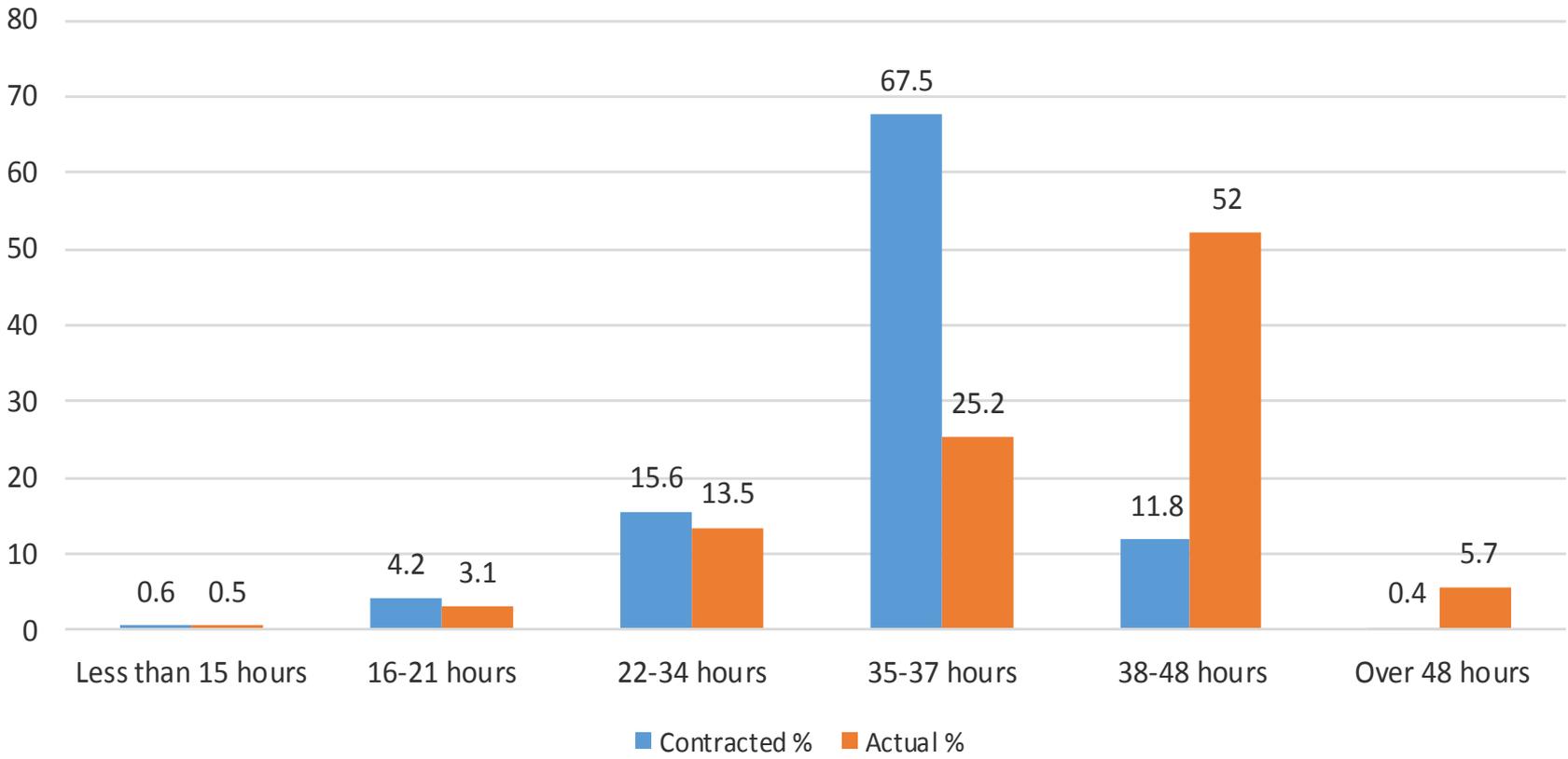
- 50.7% of respondents sometimes experience difficulties in achieving a WLB, but 21.0% find it difficult to achieve a balance at all.

Stress

- 22.4% of respondents suffer stress more than 50% of the time at work with 11.0% (n=505) experiencing stress over 75% of the time.

Working hours: 2013 survey

Figure 1 - Contracted and actual hours worked compared (%)



Examples of workload pressures

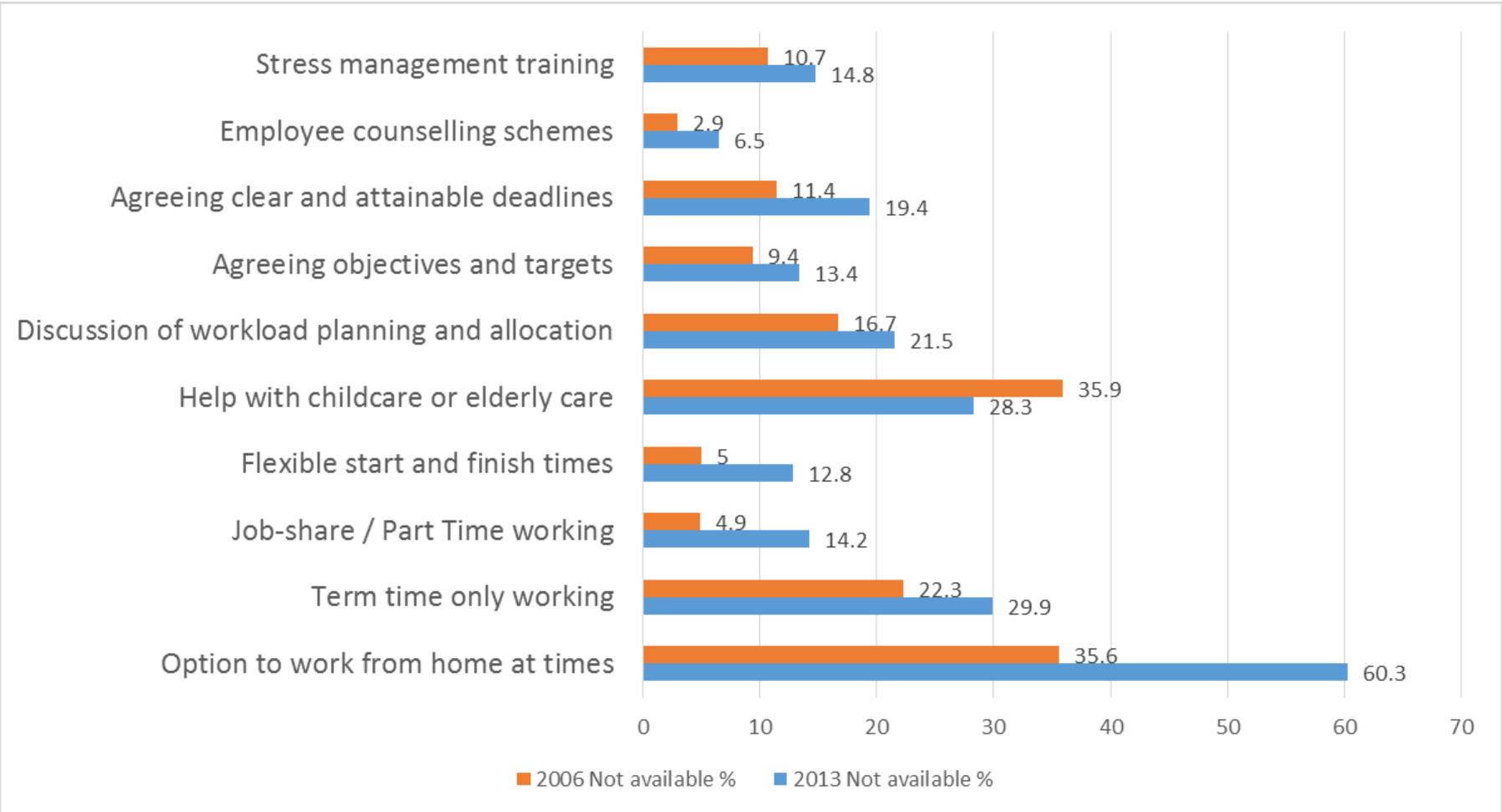
- *Staff keep changing for various reasons, retirement, departure etc. it can often take up to a year for them to be replaced and the new people need training up and for several months new people only get half a case load. This has been ongoing situation for years. We have not had a fully staffed and fully trained team for at least 5 years!*

Female administrator full-time working full-time in Yorkshire

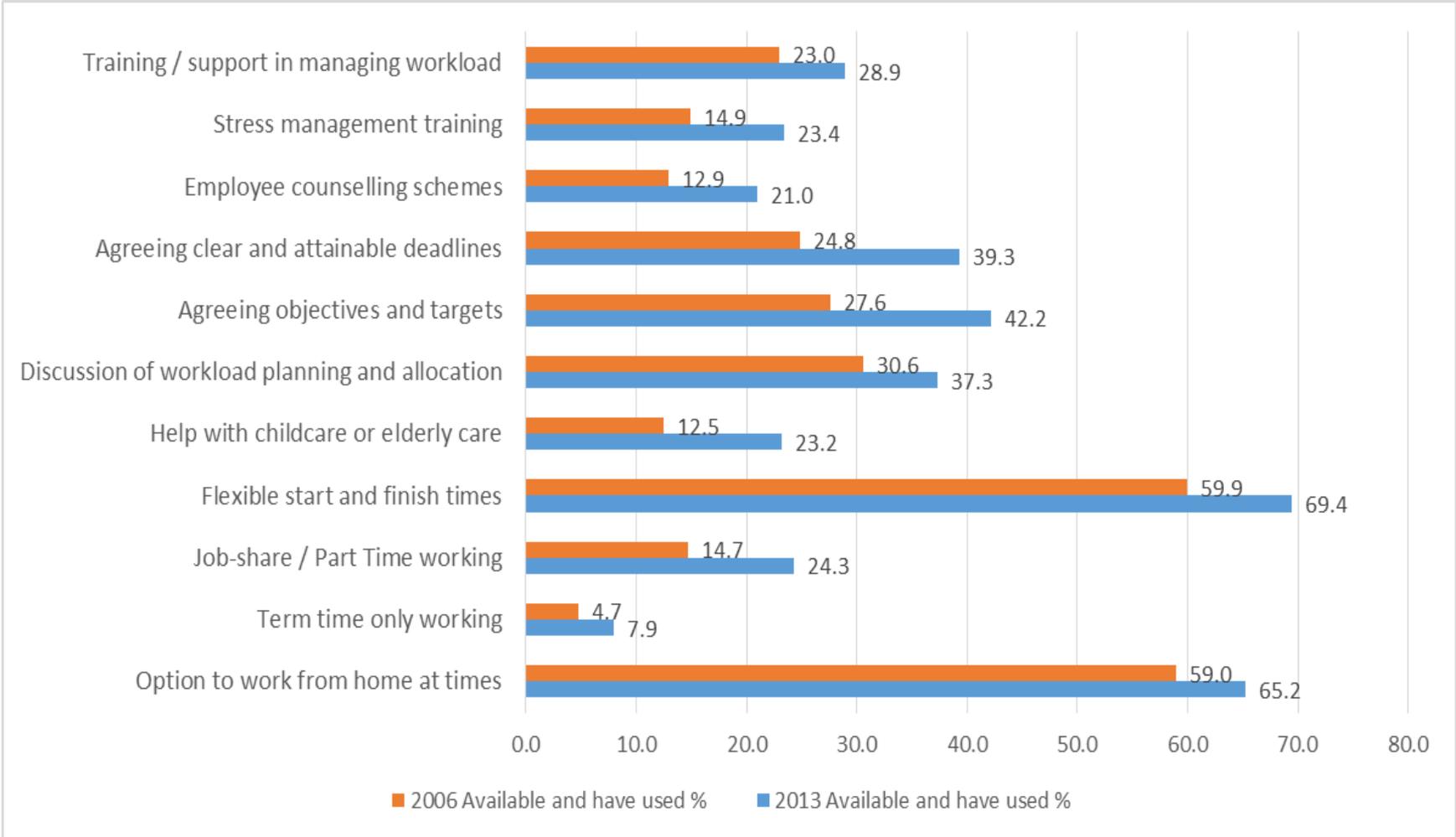
- *Covering the job of someone on maternity leave. They were going to recruit someone and it started as just 3 weeks cover but I have been doing her job as well as mine for 8 months. I am a fast worker however but I have felt under dreadful strain, affecting my health*

Female middle manager, working full-time in London & South East

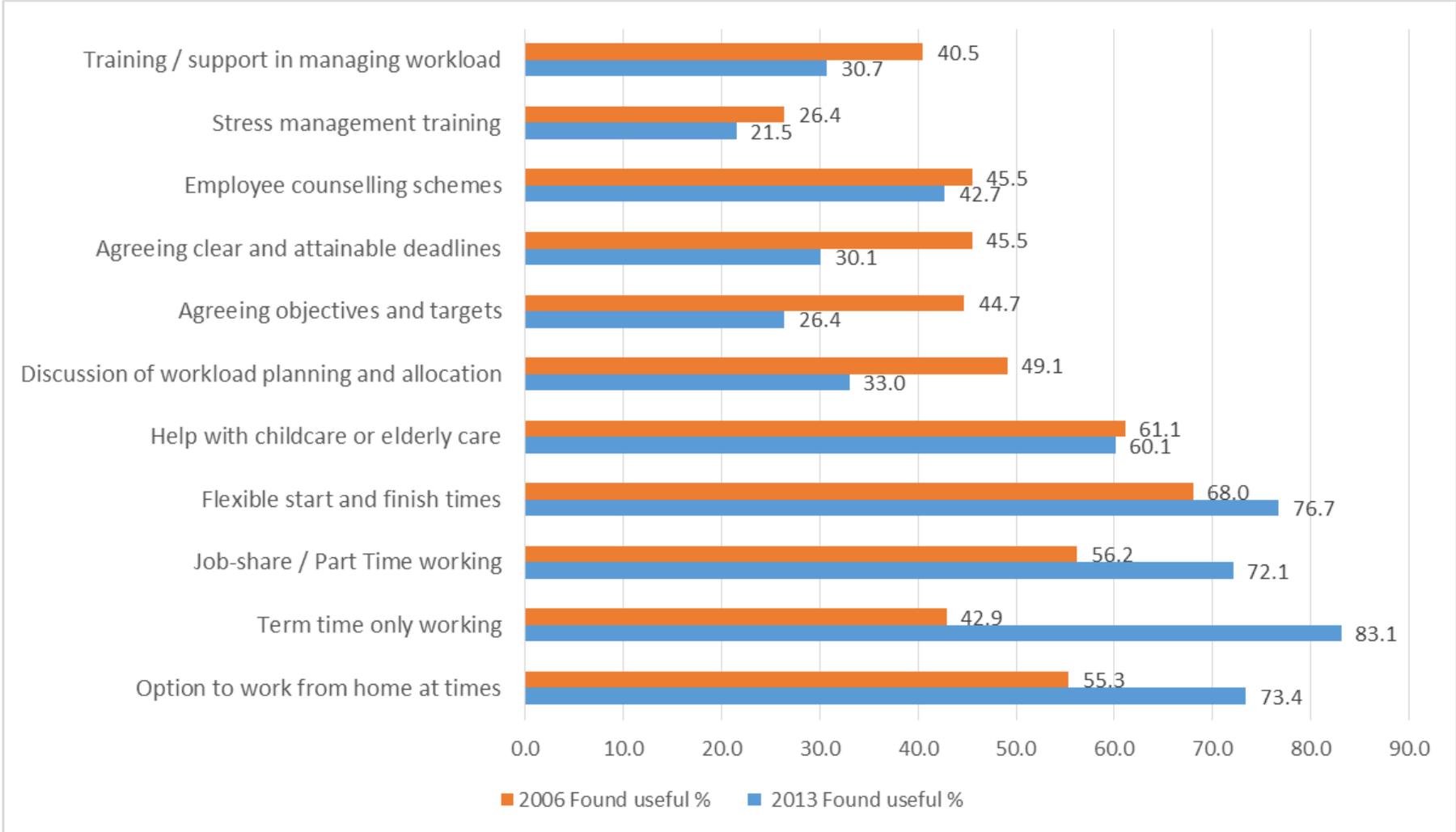
Availability of flexible working policies (2006 and 2013)



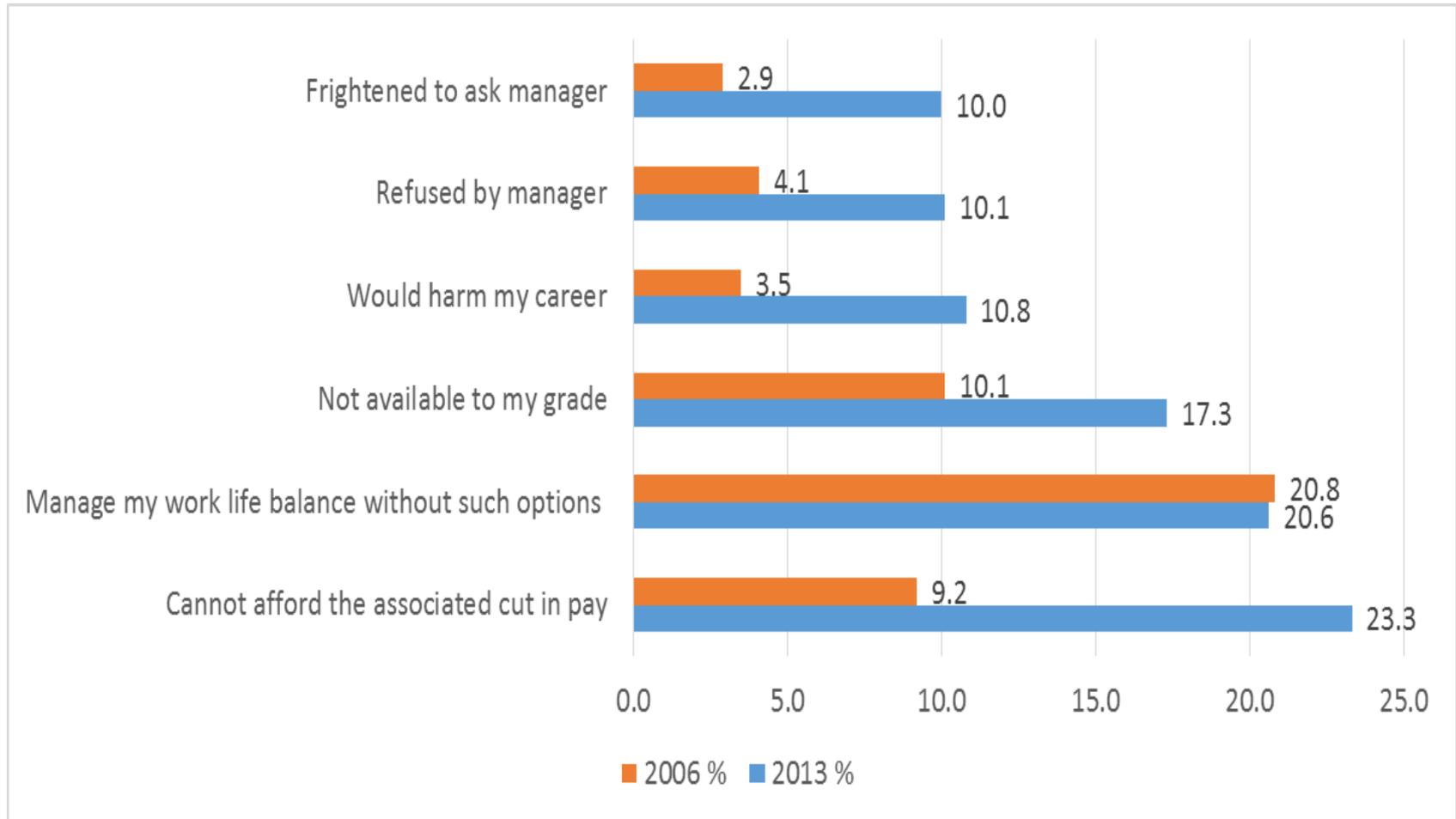
Use of flexible working policies (2006 and 2013)



Usefulness of flexible working policies (2006 and 2013)



Reasons for not using flexible working practices



Examples of workload pressures

- *Objectives and targets are set without discussion. Child care problems and requests have been refused depending on the manager.*
Female, middle manager working part-time in the North West with a child under 16
- *Discussions on objects and targets are simply discussions with individual staff having little real input - essentially the objectives are what you are told to do - the reality is that you will not achieve them all and this is understood by middle management.*
Male middle manager working full-time in Scotland
- *My manager hates working from home, he calls us all skivers and lazy dogs*
Male, BME middle manager working full-time in London & South East caring for an adult
- *Poor relationship with manager therefore would not consider asking*
Female, BME administrator working full-time in NDPB in London & South East

Conclusions

- 2013 survey highlights increasing actual hours and an absence of effective mechanisms for members to be able to regulate their workload
 - Growing effectiveness of flexible working-time policies undermined by the increasing non-availability of these policies
 - Policies providing substantive contractual support for union members (part-time working, childcare support) much more effective than those procedural policies (workload planning and consultation)
- The situation means many members have difficulties securing meaningful a work-life balance
- The situation is unlikely to improve with the Cabinet Office seeking to implement further cuts to terms and conditions since the research was completed

Trade union responses

- Check availability of flexible working practices and monitoring use and rejection.
- Use the recent extension of the right to request flexible working to bargain for more transparent and fair practices
- Use the research to limit attempts to impose contractual changes particularly legally protected groups.
- Monitor performance management outcomes
- Conduct stress surveys and monitor stress-related sickness levels.

See: http://www.pcs.org.uk/en/resources/wellbeing_at_work/work-life-balance--guide-for-negotiators.cfm