

Parental Leave Call for Evidence

**TUC Submission to the Government
Call for Evidence on Parental Leave**

Section one

Introduction

The TUC is the voice of Britain at work. We represent over 5 million working people in 48 unions across the economy. We campaign for more and better jobs and a better working life for everyone, and we support trade unions to grow and thrive. More than half of trade union members in the UK are women. The current parental leave system is designed in a way that embeds a disproportionate share of childcare responsibilities falling upon women. It needs to be reformed to tackle gender inequality, to improve parental rights for fathers and partners and to ensure all family types and experiences have the support they need at this crucial time.

While employees in the UK have statutory entitlements to maternity, paternity, adoption, and shared parental leave and pay, and recently introduced rights to neonatal leave and pay there are numerous issues with the system which the TUC has highlighted through the course of our research and campaigning. The TUC believes fundamental reform of the system is needed to ensure all workers regardless of employment status (employee, self-employed, freelance and agency workers for example) can access parental leave and pay, alongside ensuring that statutory rates of remuneration support families during this critical time rather than pushing them into financial difficulty and often poverty.

On top of this, access to flexible working and reform of the childcare and early years system are essential if families are to genuinely have choice and flexibility in how they share parenting responsibilities. The system must also work for single parent families (the majority of whom are women) and those who support them and consideration must be given to Kinship carers. More equitable sharing of childcare within families is vital for gender equality and to ensure the progress is made to close the gender pay and pensions gaps.

Section two

TUC view on the current system

Overall, it is the TUC view that the existing system of statutory parental entitlements does not meet the current government's stated objectives, our view on each objective and supporting evidence is set out below.

Objective one: Providing sufficient time off work with adequate pay to support maternal health.

The TUC does not believe that the current statutory entitlement to maternity leave and pay meets the objective of providing sufficient time off with adequate pay to support maternal health. This includes the statutory provisions under Maternity Allowance for self-employed, some freelancers and low paid workers who are not eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) and provisions for paternity leave, adoption leave and lack of provision regarding fertility leave and breastfeeding – all of which impact maternal health. The broader system does not enable dads and partners to take the time they may wish to take to support their families during those early years.

All the statutory entitlements are remunerated at a low rate of either £187.18 a week or 90 per cent of an employee's average weekly earnings, whichever is lower. The exception to this is maternity or adoption pay which is remunerated at a rate of 90 per cent of the employee's average weekly earnings for the first six weeks of leave and then reverts to the statutory entitlement for up to 33 weeks. The statutory rate of £187.18 compares to £427 per week that someone working full time on national minimum wage would earn and is 72 per cent less than the average weekly earnings of £679 in the UK, and lags way behind comparable countries.¹

Mothers or primary adopters are entitled to up to 52 weeks of leave, but this means that the remaining 13 weeks of leave are unpaid, unless the employer has an enhanced workplace policy.

For those not eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) they may be entitled to Maternity Allowance (MA) for up to 39 weeks. Someone can be employed, self-employed or recently unemployed and be eligible for Maternity Allowance but they must have been employed or self-employed for at least 26 weeks out of the 66 weeks before the expected week of childbirth and find 13 weeks or 4 months in which they earned over £30 per week on average.

¹ TUC analysis.

However, Maternity Allowance is deducted in full from any Universal Credit award. This has led to a 45 per cent drop in recent years in the number of Maternity Allowance grants, disproportionately impacting low-paid women and families.²

As well as self-employed workers, the eligibility criteria for various entitlements can also exclude many workers in insecure work and atypical forms of employment such as freelancers and workers on short-term or project-based employment. Many of our affiliates representing workers in sectors such as the creative industries for example report that their members are often excluded from statutory entitlements.

Contracts under 12 weeks in the creative industry are often the norm, so where SMP entitlements require 26 weeks continuous service with the same employer before their qualifying week (15 weeks before their due date) this frequently excludes freelancers who are often employees, but on short term contracts. Our affiliate Bectu found that seven in ten of members that they surveyed had not made a request for statutory maternity, paternity or adoption leave and pay to their employer because they were ineligible.

Similarly, many freelancers do not apply for Maternity Allowance due to low awareness of their entitlement and the complexity of applying. Criteria for Maternity Allowance also acts as a barrier for many freelancers who can face long spells without work, followed by intense periods of long hours over a shorter period. The low rates of remuneration often do not adequately offset the costs or loss of income associated with taking the leave.

The reference periods also pose a problem for many workers. Many women who experience either a temporary drop in income, rely on overtime due to low hours contracts, or are on zero hours contracts may not meet the earnings threshold of at least £125 per week (before tax) on average in the eight weeks (if paid weekly) or two months (if paid monthly) up to the last pay day before the end of the 15th week before the baby is due, making them ineligible for Statutory Maternity Pay. This also potentially disadvantages women who experience pregnancy related sickness and health issues if they have taken sick leave and it has impacted their earnings during the reference period.

We know that insecure work and zero hours contracts have become increasingly common, with women being 34 per cent more likely to be employed on a zero-hour contract than men. Black and disabled women are even more likely to be employed on these types of insecure contracts – 103 per cent and 49 per cent more likely respectively - which may mean that many do not meet the eligibility criteria to access entitlements.³

TUC research found that half of families struggle when dads or partners take paternity leave and the financial barriers stop one in five dads and partners taking any leave at

² [Forced to return early - the impact of low rates of maternity pay - Maternity Action](#)

³ [Women are "bearing the brunt" of exploitative zero-hours contracts | TUC](#)

all, leaving many unable to take the time they would want to support their family during this critical time.⁴

Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and Pay (ShPP) was introduced in 2015 and was intended to enable families to share up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay between mums and dads/partners within the first year after childbirth or placement. However, it requires the mother/ birth parent/adopter taking leave to give up some of their leave and pay entitlements. The previous government's own evaluation of the system found that three in ten mothers understandably did not want to share their leave and that take up was low, the biggest barrier being financial.⁵ This means SPL and SHPP are not effective supplements to existing entitlements leaving the majority of dads and partners unable to support mothers in the way they may wish to post-birth.

Further, while we welcome the introduction of an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill by the government to extend bereavement leave to families experiencing pregnancy loss before 24 weeks, as with other barriers, without financial support, some families may not be able to take this leave when they need to. One in four pregnancies will end in pregnancy loss.⁶ This review should consider eligibility criteria for bereavement leave and pay due to pregnancy loss. As with all other forms of parental leave and pay, the TUC believes access to pay should be a day one right and remunerated so that families do not suffer a significant loss of income during this difficult time.

The UK is the fifth largest global economy and yet its parental leave system falls far short of average earnings and the true cost of living. Further, it is well established that the UK ranks poorly when it comes to parental rights and comparable countries, particularly for maternity leave and pay. For example, the UK ranks in the lower half of 42 OECD countries for full-time rate equivalent paid maternity leave. When considering parental leave as well, the UK is 4th lowest ranked European country when it comes to a mother's entitlement to paid leave.⁷

The inadequacy of the current system is reflected in the evidence many of our affiliated unions have gathered from their members. For example, the NEU in its 2022 maternity rights survey of 4000 members found many of their members were struggling with low maternity pay, excessive workload and a lack of flexibility when they returned to work. Many of their respondents also had issues with changing employers (within and between local authorities and Academies) and fixed term contracts leaving them ineligible for SMP.

Research undertaken by the NASUWT found that just over three quarters of teachers who had taken some form of leave would have liked to have taken more maternity,

⁴ [1 in 2 families struggle financially when dads take paternity leave – TUC poll | TUC](#)

⁵ [shared-parental-leave-evaluation-report-2023.pdf](#)

⁶ [Miscarriage and the workplace - The Miscarriage Association](#)

⁷ [Is full-time paid maternity leave in the UK one of the lowest in Europe? - FactCheckNI](#)

paternity or adoption leave, but 84 per cent said they couldn't because of financial barriers.

Trade unions play a key role negotiating collective agreements to enhance maternity and other parental entitlements.⁸ However in workplaces where unions aren't recognised or where they are unable to negotiate enhanced policies mothers (and dads and partners) are forced to rely on the low statutory pay rates, which leads to a significant drop in income.

For example, in a fire and rescue services FBU union has flagged disparities in provisions, between workplaces that have union negotiated agreements and those that don't. FBU is seeking to work with employers to address these disparities.

FBU has flagged that where basic or statutory minimum pay is provided, women lose 10% of their pay as soon as they commence maternity leave. This lasts for six weeks after which they lose a further 40% going onto half pay for the rest of their ordinary maternity leave, which is usually 33 weeks. Evidence shared with the TUC by the FBU found significant disparities between services and significant fragmentation of maternity provision across the country, finding that a firefighter in Staffordshire would be receiving more than £15,000 more than their counterpart in Cornwall in maternity pay.⁹

The reality is that for many women and families, the current system is simply not affordable, and this has been further compounded by the cost-of-living crisis in recent years. Many women struggle financially during pregnancy and maternity leave, forcing them to choose between or reduce buying essentials like healthy food and heating so that they can afford basics like heating or food for their child(ren).

Research from Maternity Action found¹⁰:

- 65 per cent of women worried a lot about money during their pregnancy or maternity leave.
- Nearly 7 in 10 (66 per cent) struggled a lot or sometimes to buy the things they needed.
- Half of new mums (50 per cent) reported spending less on healthy food due to high cost. Nearly two in five (38 per cent) were eating smaller meals or skipping meals for cost reasons. Almost one quarter (24 per cent) had gone without food themselves to feed children.
- Nearly three in five (57 per cent) had reduced the number of hours they heated their home. Nearly two in five (39 per cent) had reduced use of electrical appliances.

⁸ [Equality at work: paternity and shared parental leave | TUC](#)

⁹ Please also see Appendix A for some case study examples from the FBU.

¹⁰ [Pushed into Poverty - The Cost of Living on Maternity Leave 2025 - Maternity Action](#)

- Nearly 3 in 5 (57 per cent) were planning to return to work earlier than they had wanted to or had already done so.

Understandably this has a significant impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of mothers. Maternity Action found that three in five mothers mental health and wellbeing had been impacted by money worries during pregnancy and maternity leave.¹¹ Similarly one in five women will experience mental ill health during and up to a year after pregnancy and childbirth and the maternal mortality rate is 3 times higher for Black women compared to white women.¹² While the reasons for this are complex, contributory factors and barriers to support are often exacerbated by cultural stigma, deprivation and discrimination.¹³

Consideration also needs to be given to sector and job specific health and safety risks and how that might impact pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work. For example, women working in the fire and rescue service where the risk during and after pregnancy of being exposed to contaminants to both mother and child is significant. These risks have led to our affiliate the FBU launching their 'Fight for 52' campaign, calling for 52 weeks maternity leave on full pay. This has been adopted by several fire services in the UK with more under negotiation.¹⁴

The TUC, working with affiliates and stakeholders, secured clarification from the HSE¹⁵ that all pregnant women and new mothers are entitled to an individual risk assessments once they have informed their employer of their pregnancy and upon returning to work, and that these should be reviewed regularly.¹⁶ It is essential that maternity and parental entitlements are adequate and flexible enough that they can also protect and support pregnant women and new mothers where health and safety risks are identified.

¹¹ [Pushed into Poverty - The Cost of Living on Maternity Leave 2025 - Maternity Action](#)

¹² [Awareness Week 2025 — FIVEXMORE](#)

¹³ [rcm-perinatal-mental-health-report-2023-1.pdf](#)

¹⁴ [Fight for 52 | Fire Brigades Union](#)

¹⁵ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/employers-must-carry-out-individual-risk-assessments-pregnant-workers-and-new-mothers>

¹⁶ [Employers MUST carry out individual risk assessments for pregnant workers and new mothers | TUC](#)

Objective two: Supporting economic growth through labour market participation by enabling more parents to stay in work and advance in their careers, including reducing the gender pay gap.

And

Objective four: Providing parents the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting.

The TUC does not believe that the current statutory entitlements support economic growth by enabling more parents to stay in work to advance their careers, particularly women. Nor does it enable families to make balanced childcare choices, including more equitable co-parenting. This is reflected in the persistence of the gender pay gap and the factors that drive it as set out below.

The gender pay gap currently stands at 13.1 per cent and has only been falling on average by 0.9 percentage points over the last five years and will not close until 2040 at current rates.¹⁷ The pay gap for disabled women is much higher at 23.5 per cent¹⁸ and the gap also varies by age and sector. For example, the largest pay gaps can be found in the finance and insurance (29.8 per cent), professional, scientific and technical (20.1 per cent) and education (17.2 per cent) sectors.¹⁹

Analysis from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that once accounting for changes to educational attainment, there had been very little progress on closing the gender earnings gap over the last 25 years. The same analysis found that gender gaps in employment and wages increase substantially immediately upon parenthood²⁰, often known as the 'motherhood penalty'.²¹ We also know that the pay gap compounds throughout women's lives leading to a gender pensions gap of 36.5 per cent.²²

The gender pay and pensions gaps are driven significantly by the fact that many women have little option but to either work part-time or leave the labour market altogether when they have a family. This starts during the post birth period and continues upon returning to work. Women in heterosexual relationships often earn less than their partners, 72 per cent of women in heterosexual couples earn less than their partner, meaning they potentially will lose a greater share of their household income if the father takes more leave.²³ The previous governments own analysis of the parental

¹⁷ [TUC: Gender pay gap means women work first 48 days of the year unpaid | TUC](#)

¹⁸ [Disability pay and employment gaps | TUC](#)

¹⁹ [Ibid](#)

²⁰ [Barely any change to gender earnings gap in last 25 years once you account for increases in women's education | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

²¹ [Microsoft Word - The Motherhood Pay Penalty key findings in new template RS SH SB.docx](#)

²² [7th Annual Gender Pension Gap Report, July 2025](#)

²³ [Parental-Leave-WBG-Briefing-2024.pdf](#)

leave system found that the biggest barrier to take up of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) for eligible families was affordability.²⁴

Given the earnings gap, women then often return to the workplace following maternity leave on a part-time basis – three quarters of part-time workers are women. The lack of flexible working, including arrangements like job shares for senior roles or compressed hours, often means women must take jobs that are lower paying and lack progression opportunities, in exchange for part-time flexibility that enables them to manage childcare responsibilities²⁵.

Many parents cannot access the flexibility they need when returning to work following a period of parental leave/managing their childcare. TUC research found that 31 per cent of working mums had not asked for any flexible working and 36 per cent had only asked for some of the flexibility they needed. Of those who only asked for some of the flexible working they needed, nearly three in four said the reason they did not request everything they needed was because they believed the request would be turned down (73 per cent) and half (50 per cent) were put off by worries about harm to future career prospects.²⁶

Research from the previous government and the EHRC found that 54,000 women a year are forced out of the workplace due to pregnancy and maternity discrimination. More recent research from Pregnant then Screwed suggests this figure has risen to 74,000 women per year.²⁷ The Employment Rights Bill will further strengthen protections for pregnant women and new parents from unfair redundancy and dismissal, the TUC believes pregnant women and new parents should be protected from redundancy and unfair dismissal in all circumstances other than business closure. This is similar to protections for pregnant women and new mothers in Germany.

Evidence from our affiliates representing workers in the education sector consistently finds that poor maternity provisions and a lack of access to flexible working contribute to the recruitment crisis in teaching, where the majority of the workforce are women.²⁸ For example, the NASUWT found in a survey of nearly 4000 teachers that three in ten teachers who had made a flexible working request to their employer to manage their parental responsibilities had had their request turned down. 37 per cent of teachers surveyed were forced to consider alternative employment because of their request

²⁴ [Shared Parental Leave \(SPL\) evaluation - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shared-parental-leave-spl-evaluation)

²⁵ <https://timewise.co.uk/article/a-question-of-time-whats-happening-with-part-time-working-in-the-uk/> and <https://timewise.co.uk/article/article-real-reasons-behind-gender-pay-gap/>

²⁶ [Denied and discriminated against | TUC](#)

²⁷ [74,000 women a year lose their jobs for getting pregnant or for taking maternity leave - Pregnant Then Screwed](#)

²⁸ https://www.newbritain.org.uk/files/ugd/8be189_06c43a81df034e6598475e2b888b0c96.pdf

being refused and nearly two thirds were not given the right to appeal their employer's decision.²⁹

ONS data found that over half of mothers (56.2 per cent) said they had made a change to their employment for childcare reasons compared with 22.4 per cent of fathers.³⁰ Mothers face significant barriers to accessing the flexible working they need, however they are still more likely to ask for flexible working than dads according to research from Pregnant Then Screwed.³¹

The struggle to balance childcare and work for families is also compounded by the lack of availability of affordable, flexible childcare. Research from the Women's Budget Group in 2022 found that 1.7 million women were prevented from taking on more hours of paid work due to childcare issues, resulting in up to £28.2 billion of lost economic output every year.³²

While the expansion of funded hours may well address this lack of affordability for some families, there are several fundamental issues to be addressed to deliver high-quality early education and childcare that gives families genuine choice about how they manage and share their childcare responsibilities, gives children the best start in life and supports economic growth.

Analysis suggests that the expanded funded hours will not benefit the poorest third of families.³³ Further, the insufficiency of funding rates has several consequences, including providers having to cross subsidise through consumables and/or higher fees for some parents to make up the shortfall. The inadequate funding rates also mean many providers do not operate in more deprived areas, creating childcare deserts³⁴, and children with SEND and families working atypical hours are often excluded from early education due to a lack of adequate provision.³⁵

It will also be necessary to monitor how the expansion of funded hours for children from 9 months old impacts on the length of leave that parents and particularly mothers take. While it is welcome that families can potentially have access to funded hours from an earlier age if they wish to, mothers and primary adopters should not be put into a situation where they are having to cut their leave short if they do not want to so that they can access childcare places.

²⁹ <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/news/campaigns/being-a-teacher-and-a-parent-survey-2020.html> and <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/static/17ad7ef2-879e-40d4-96b3c014e605746a/Teachers-Wellbeing-Survey-Report-2024.pdf>

³⁰ ONS (2019) Families and the labour market

³¹ [Mothers are twice as likely as fathers to ask for flexible working after parental leave - Pregnant Then Screwed](#)

³² [Childcare and gender-PBB-Spring-2022-1.pdf](#)

³³ [What you need to know about the new childcare entitlements | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

³⁴ [England is one of the worst countries in Europe for access to childcare | Victoria University](#)

³⁵ See Coram Family and Childcare [Annual Surveys](#)

TUC analysis has found that on average women are nearly five times more likely to be out of the labour market due to caring responsibilities, rising to six times more likely for Black and Minority Ethnic women and nine times more likely for disabled women. This can be seen in every age bracket but is particularly high for women between the ages of 25 and 44, peaking for women aged 25-29, who are 14 times more likely to be out of the labour market due to caring responsibilities.³⁶

Objective three: Ensuring adequate resources and leave for parents to facilitate the best start in life by supporting the healthy development of young children.

The TUC does not believe that the current system of parental leave ensures adequate resources and leave for all parents to facilitate the best start in life and healthy development of young children.

The low rates of statutory remuneration across all types of family leave mean that many families simply cannot afford to take their entitlements. As noted previously, TUC research shows families struggle financially when dads or partners take paternity leave with many dads and partners feeling they were unable to take enough time off as paternity leave to support their families.³⁷

TUC research found that household income has a big impact on take up of paternity leave with low-income households and self-employed families finding it particularly difficult to take up their leave entitlements.

Nearly nine in 10 (86 per cent) of parents where the household income is over £60,000 take statutory paternity leave provided by their employer, but this falls to two-thirds (65 per cent) of dads/partners with a household income under £25k. And only one in seven (14 per cent) dads/partners with household income under £25k take a more generous form of paternity leave than just the statutory – compared to more than one in three (35 per cent) where the household income is over £80k.³⁸

Only one in three (31%) self-employed dads/partners took time off when their partner had a baby. Self-employed workers currently aren't eligible for any statutory paternity pay³⁹ and as noted in section two workers on atypical contracts or employment such as freelancers often find they are excluded from entitlements as well. Families going through the fostering or adoption process may also find that the eligibility criteria exclude them from entitlements, for example if the process of having a child placed with the family happens quicker than anticipated then a parent may not meet the criteria to access some forms of leave and pay if they have changed employer. While the Employment Rights Bill will make access to paternity leave and unpaid parental

³⁶ [It's Gender Pension Gap Day – and we need to talk about Carers Credit | TUC](#)

³⁷ [1 in 2 families struggle financially when dads take paternity leave – TUC poll | TUC](#)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

leave a day one right, access to pay from day one is not covered by the bill, nor is shared parental leave and pay or maternity or adoption pay.

TUC research also found that even while on paternity leave, many dads and partners cannot completely switch off from work to spend time with their newborn and support their family. One in five (18 per cent) dads/partners are still doing some work whilst on paternity leave – rising to almost one in three (30 per cent) part-time workers. More than one in five (22 per cent) do this because of the demands of their workload, and a similar percentage (19 per cent) feel pressured to do this by their employers.⁴⁰

As highlighted in previous sections, Maternity Action have found in their annual cost of living survey that the low rate of Statutory Maternity Pay and Maternity Allowance means many families are having to reduce expenditure on basics such as heating and electricity. Around half of mothers had taken on debt during their maternity leave. One in ten had to use food banks, and one in ten struggled to afford formula. Of those who had bought formula, one in four had to cut down on food for the rest of the family to afford it.⁴¹ As the survey highlights this has wide ranging impacts on mothers and families including mental health impacts, social isolation, increased financial dependency on a partner and strained relationships.

The government's own evaluation of Shared Parental Leave (SPL) found that families that do take up some or all their entitlement to SPL are more likely to be older parents, professionals, in higher paying employment, based in London and working in the public sector.⁴²

Poverty has a significant impact on infant and maternal mortality rates⁴³ and there is extensive research on the impact that poverty has on the development and outcomes of children and young people.⁴⁴ Numerous studies have shown that maternal and child mortality rates are higher in areas of deprivation, this can often be compounded for Black, Minority Ethnic, disabled families and families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).⁴⁵

Relatedly, in terms of support and access to childcare following a period of maternity or parental leave, analysis indicates that the funded hours for childcare and early education have always benefitted higher income families, with just 20 per cent of children from the bottom of the earnings distribution being able to access the full 30 hours.⁴⁶ The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) has found similar trends with the expansion

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ [Pushed into Poverty - The Cost of Living on Maternity Leave 2025 - Maternity Action](#)

⁴² [shared-parental-leave-evaluation-report-2023.pdf](#)

⁴³ [CostofLivingLiteratureReviewNov2023FINAL.pdf](#)

⁴⁴ [The impacts of poverty on children's social, emotional and behavioural outcomes. — UK Data Service](#) and [Opening doors: access to early childhood services for families impacted by poverty in the UK | NSPCC Learning](#)

⁴⁵ [CostofLivingLiteratureReviewNov2023FINAL.pdf](#)

⁴⁶ [A-Fair-Start-Summary-Report.pdf](#)

of the funded hours - due to be fully rolled out in September 2025 - finding that the expanded hours will have little benefit for the poorest third of families.⁴⁷ Families and children with SEND are even less likely to be able to access childcare and early education, with less than a third of local authorities reporting sufficient provision for 75 per cent of children with SEND in their area according to Coram Family and Childcare Trusts annual survey.⁴⁸

According to the Sutton Trust the development gap between better off and poorer children when they start primary school is already 11 months and there is strong evidence that closing that gap is at best stalling and may be widening.⁴⁹

That so much financial hardship is baked into the existing system from the start through low rates of statutory support or no support at all for some families must be a priority for reform.

Section Three

Additional objectives and principles for reform

The TUC believes that any reformed system of parental leave should seek to support all families at this critical time. Below we set out our objectives for any new or reformed system of leave and principles that should underpin them.

The TUC recognises that overhauling the system of leave will take time, where possible we have indicated what interim steps could be considered as part of progress towards wholesale reform in section four of this response. However, the TUC is clear that an ambitious plan to reform the whole system is needed and our objectives and principles reflect that. Further, it is essential that addressing the low rates of remuneration and accessibility to entitlements for all workers and family types are priorities to support the wellbeing of families from the beginning and start to drive the cultural shift towards more equitable sharing of childcare and tackling drivers of gender inequality such as the unequal division of unpaid care and domestic labour.

Objectives

The TUC believes that any reformed parental leave system should meet the following objectives:

⁴⁷ [What you need to know about the new childcare entitlements | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

⁴⁸ [Childcare Survey 2025](#)

⁴⁹ [Inequality-in-early-years-education.pdf](#)

- Support birth mothers to recover from birth and breastfeed.
- Support adoptive and surrogate parents to have time to bond with their child.⁵⁰
- Ensure parental leave is accessible for single parent families and those who may be supporting them.
- Ensure families experiencing pregnancy loss are supported, including financially, should they need to take leave.
- Enable dads and partners to spend significant time as primary carers for their children in the early years.
- Make parental rights accessible to all workers, regardless of employment status, and urgently address difficulties facing parents who are self-employed, freelancers or in other forms of atypical or insecure work.
- Ensure that the system supports financial security during this critical time rather than exacerbating financial stress and insecurity.
- Remove the barriers/obstacles that exist in the current system, that prevent working parents from taking parental leave, such as low levels of statutory pay and the complicated nature of the system.
- Seek to drive a cultural shift in the workplace that enables families to share caring responsibilities more equally so that children can spend quality time with both parents in their early years and challenge the assumption that women take on the majority of childcare, giving dads and partners more opportunities to care.
- Seek to drive a cultural shift that embeds and normalises workplace and legislative change to support working parents.
- Create a holistic system that supports all family types, including kinship carers, and takes a joined-up approach to other leave, workplace policies and support working parents may rely upon (e.g. flexible working, childcare, unpaid parental leave).
- Give families a genuine choice in how they manage their family and caring responsibilities.
- Reduce pregnancy and maternity discrimination, by rebalancing the responsibility for childcare more equally between mothers and fathers/partners.
- Cut the gender pay gap, by removing the “motherhood penalty”.
- Unleash the wasted potential in the labour market, boost workplace productivity and help employers recruit and retain staff.

⁵⁰ In 2024 the rate of adoption for same sex couples was 20 per cent of the total number of adopted children in the UK. [Statistics: England | CoramBAAF](#)

The TUC believes that to meet the objectives we have set out above, any reform of the system must be underpinned by the following principles:

- Existing maternity rights and protections must not be diminished in any way.
- Maternity rights must be enhanced including pay and redundancy protections.
- There must be a significant increase in paternity leave and pay entitlements.
- Where applicable, both parents need a standalone right to their own individual period of well-paid parental leave, which is not dependent on the other partner sacrificing some of their leave.
- Where applicable, both parents should have equal entitlements to parental leave and pay and the system should ensure adoptive, surrogate and single parents have the same, equal entitlements to leave and pay rights.
- All forms of statutory parental pay need to be significantly increased to make it feasible for parents to access their parental leave entitlements and care for their young children.
- Self-employed and freelance workers need a means to access properly paid parental leave.
- Put Maternity Allowance on an equal footing with Statutory Maternity Pay, treating it as earned income to address anomalies in the Universal Credit system.
- Reform should address inequalities in provision between workers and employees and ensure that self-employed, freelance, agency and other atypical workers, receive parental rights.
- The Employment Rights Bill will remove the continuous service element from paternity leave and unpaid parental leave. A reformed system should remove qualifying periods and earnings thresholds for all parental leave and pay entitlements, so they are available from day 1 of employment.
- Any reforms should benefit workers across all different sectors and occupations and should identify solutions where working practices differ or are atypical.
- Existing contractually enhanced policies must be protected not undermined or diminished.
- Encourage enhanced contractual leave including through collective bargaining.

Policy ambition

Policy ambition

Reforming the parental leave system will require a phased, long-term approach. Any reformed system will require significantly enhanced pay and leave entitlements and will need to ensure that all workers can access parental rights regardless of employment status. The system must also ensure that there is parity between families using maternity and parental leave and families using adoption and parental leave. The system must also ensure support for single parent and kinship carer families. Below we set out some key policy ambitions that any reform agenda must work towards, as well as wider reforms to support parents:

- Maternity and adoption pay should be increased to 90 per cent of salary beyond the existing 6-week period and a clear pathway to 100 per cent salary remuneration for a protected period in the long-term should be set out. We will consult with affiliates in more detail on this as the review progresses.
- In the future we would want to see equal entitlements to leave for both parents where relevant. In the interim and as a path towards this, extending the period of paternity leave to more than two weeks would enable a move towards more flexibility for families in how they manage their caring responsibilities, as well as beginning the culture shift required to enable more equitable sharing of childcare.
- A new standalone, individual entitlement to parental leave should be paid at 90 per cent of salary for a fixed period with a clear pathway to 100 per cent salary remuneration in the long term.
- Following this statutory pay should be raised to at least the level of the real living wage.

Parental leave reform must be part of a package of wider reforms including:

- Subsidised, affordable, flexible childcare from as soon as maternity and paternity paid leave finishes.
- Strengthening of flexible working rights, both as per provisions in the Employment Rights Bill and through further change to introduce an advertising duty.
- Strengthening redundancy and dismissal protections for pregnant women, new mothers and parents.
- Meaningful steps to promote equal pay and narrow the gender pay gap including by taking an intersectional approach and rapid expansion of pay gap reporting to ethnicity and disability, and a path to extending reporting to organisations with 50+ employees.

- Banning exploitative zero-hour contracts and giving all workers on variable hours contracts the right to a contract that reflects their regular hours, along with decent notice of shifts and compensation for short-notice cancellations.
- Government recognition of the benefits of including parental leave policies within collective bargaining.
- Rapid implementation of new statutory rights for equality reps, including amendments to relevant legislation to mirror the facility time provisions in Section 4 of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 for equality reps. Health and safety reps are entitled to paid time off "as shall be necessary" to discharge their functions and other reps, including equality reps, should be entitled to equivalent provision of paid facility time.

Appendix A – Affiliate Case Studies

Recruitment, retention and progression – FBU

The negative impact on recruitment, retention and inclusion of primarily women but also other parents of poor maternity, paternity, adoption and fertility leave and pay provision must also be addressed by this review.

Women have been working as operational firefighters since the early 1980s. Recruitment and retention of women firefighters has slowly improved since then. However, women still make up a small minority of operational positions. For example, in England (2022) only one in ten firefighters are women, only a 6% increase since 2002.⁵¹ Clearly, there is a still problem in recruiting women to the fire and rescue service.

Retention is also a concern in the fire and rescue service. This is even more noticeable as progression through the ranks is considered, with maternity leave being seen by some as time off work, a lack of commitment and unreliability. For example, individuals are essentially forced to attend residential courses as part of the training required for promotion. Some recruitment courses for trainee firefighters are also held on a residential basis. This process is a barrier to many who have caring responsibilities, disproportionately affecting women and as such having a negative effect on women applying or being successful

The FBU National Women’s Committee has collated some case studies that illustrate the issues around maternity provision and its impact on firefighters’ careers:

- “We currently have one of our women’s reps on maternity leave. Her provision is six weeks at 90% pay then SMP only. To return to work and leave her baby after six weeks would have a massively detrimental on her mental and physical health. It would also mean that breastfeeding would need to cease and the bond with the baby could be impacted.”
- “The reason I became a rep was because when I was pregnant, I had one contract terminated when I told them, and my temporary promotion ended all because I was pregnant (this was made clear in an email sent to me).”
- “I went off for a year and wasn’t told about a promotion opportunity, had no contact from line management to check on my welfare and just generally felt very let down. This contributed massively to me suffering with crippling post-natal depression.”

⁵¹ [Fire Brigades Union \(2023\) Fight for 52: the case for 12 months full pay maternity leave in the fire and rescue service.](#)

While pregnant, an employee must be given the same access to promotion and development opportunities that are advertised. While on maternity, or adoption/foster leave, the same applies. All employees are entitled to equality of opportunities regardless of their domestic situation.

This case study is analogous to this entitlement and has to be remedied. Another case study below demonstrates the inadequacy of current maternity arrangements and the lack of inclusion for women in the fire and rescue service:

- “During my first maternity leave in the service, my baby was lactose intolerant. I tried weaning him onto prescribed formula from the doctor, but he absolutely refused it. I ended up going dairy free myself so I could breastfeed him without him reacting badly. “Breastmilk/formula is a baby’s main food source until they’re a year old. So I had no choice but to accept being on SMP of £140 per week. My maternity pay from my service was cut after twelve weeks.”
- “During my second maternity leave, the first Covid lockdown happened. My husband lost his job, so we ended up supporting our household of two adults, two children and two dogs on my £140 per week SMP. To return to work, I would have had to wean my baby onto formula. Due to all the panic buying, I couldn’t face the idea of taking another baby’s only option for food while I could still breastfeed. We ended up signing up for universal credit to help pay our mortgage. I was completely mortified and felt a complete failure. Honestly, working for a professional government body, I wouldn’t have believed I would ever end up in this situation. Both my maternity leaves have been tainted with stress and anxiety due to our absolutely appalling maternity pay.”

This example is suboptimal for a fire and rescue service in the 21st century. An early return to work due to financial constraints has a detrimental effect on any new parent’s long-term wellbeing; this effect can be both physical and mental. This has been compounded by the cost-of-living crisis which is pushing many people to their financial limits and forcing people into difficult positions. These case studies are far from unique in the service and this review must address these issues need to act immediately – firefighters deserve better.⁵²

⁵² Ibid