

Parental leave and pay review

Evidence provided by Bliss to the online questionnaire

For more information, please contact campaign@bliss.org.uk

Question 5a: Do you think that the current parental leave and pay entitlements supports these objectives (Yes or No):

- Providing sufficient time off work with adequate pay to support maternal health - **No**
- 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 - **No**
- Ensuring adequate resources and leave for parents to facilitate the best start in life by supporting the healthy development of young children –**No**
- Providing parents the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting –**No**

Question 5b: For each objective, briefly explain the reasons for your selection above. Please provide any evidence (including links) to support your view.

Providing sufficient time-off work with adequate pay to support maternal health

1 in 7 babies requires neonatal care. Neonatal admission is often unexpected, with an uncertain outcome and can last many weeks or months. The point of discharge home may heighten anxiety as parents process their experience, and don't have reassurance of constant monitoring.

Perinatal mental health conditions affect at least 1 in 5 women, and 1 in 10 men. (Maternal Mental Health Alliance, 2025) This is exacerbated by neonatal admission, with some studies showing up to 50% of parents whose babies received neonatal care experienced PTSD (NHS England, 2021). Paternity leave (PL) and pay (PLP) are insufficient to support parental mental health. While maternal is referenced here, the impact on both parents must be assessed when considering neonatal care experience.

Family expenditure increases with a neonatal admission, just as household income drops. Babies can be born nearly 4 months preterm, so parents miss out on crucial opportunities to save before parental leave starts. Neonatal care admission is associated with increased family expenditure, with Bliss research finding the additional average cost is £405 per week for parents when their baby is in neonatal care (Bliss, 2022).

Many dads and non-birthing parents return to work before their baby is discharged from hospital. Neonatal Leave (NL) and Pay (NLP) is transformative for many parents, but the statutory rate of pay, is a significant barrier to dads taking it. Indeed, the take up of PL is only around 70% (DBT, 2019). Polling from the Trade Union Congress (TUC) found that 21% dads took no PL when their baby was born and there was wide variation depending on household income. 86% took statutory PL where

the household income was >£60k, falling to just 14% where household income was <£25k (TUC, 2023). For dads unable to take PLP, they are extremely unlikely to be able to take NLP.

Dads intend to use NL flexibly e.g., use some leave while their baby was in neonatal care, return to work, and the use remaining accrued leave post discharge. This is driven by the extremely limited length of PL – dads desperately want to be with their baby in neonatal care, and extending PL would create greater equity.

For mums, the entitlement to NLP will mean they can take back time they lost while their baby was hospitalised. However, fewer than half of women take maternity leave (ML) past 39 weeks – when statutory maternity pay (MP) ends. Uptake of ML is much lower for those on low incomes (81% earning <£20k VS 96% earning >£40k) (BT & DWP, 2025)

Recommendations

- Increase the rate of statutory parental pay, enabling parents to take their leave entitlement. Pay levels should be substantially increased, and kept in line with the cost of living, to make taking leave genuinely affordable. This is particularly important for parents taking NLP, to enable them to use their entitlement.
- Significantly increase length of PL. This leave should be reserved just for the person entitled to PL (i.e. non-transferable).

Supporting economic growth/enabling parents to remain in labour market

Parents with non-employee work statuses are impacted the most economically because they are not entitled to any parental leave or pay at all – despite working.

The common argument that non-employees can simply flex their work around caring responsibilities is unfounded and untrue for many. Bliss research found that for many of these parents their work was inflexible, making it hard to be with their baby in neonatal care. E.g. agency staff who work for a parent company have little flexibility around what jobs they agree to, and many self-employed parents told us they have ‘hidden hours of work’ not just a nine to five. These parents need financial support to take time away from work for the same reasons that employed parents do. (Bliss, 2024)

Parents not entitled to parental leave report their finances are impacted. This is compounded by a neonatal experience. Many parents in this position have no choice but to continue working. Balancing the demands of work with caring responsibilities is stressful, overwhelming and they may struggle to meet both sets of responsibilities safely. Bliss’ survey found that balancing working and caring responsibilities led to 87% reporting negative impact on familial relationships, and 81% reporting negative impacts on their mental health (Bliss, 2024)

Safe working is compromised for non-employee mums due to lack of access to adequate leave and pay. Mums are typically expected to take more time off after childbirth for physical recovery

and bonding. The financial impact of a neonatal admission causes many to return to work before they had intended to, with 67% of mums telling Bliss this was the case for them (Bliss, 2024)

Poor protection for non-employee work statuses can result in job-losses. One mum, whose baby was born premature while she was working a zero-hour contract told Bliss “I had to return to work before my baby had caught up with key milestones and my employer refused any flexibility. I sadly lost my job due to their lack of compassion around my baby’s premature birth.”

Mums not entitled to MLP are entitled to Maternity Allowance (MA). Without an extension of MA, in line with the new NLP, mothers relying on this entitlement face the same issues that ‘employees’ face without it. As MA is capped at 39 weeks, it adds to the financial strain on mums of premature babies who may be born nearly 4 months early.

Recommendations

- Paid parental leave should be available to all parents irrespective of work status, as an individual right from day-one.
- The system should ensure that parents, regardless of work status, have the right to return to the same job after taking leave, and are protected by law from losing their job during leave or upon return due to discrimination.
- Provide an extension to MA, in line with NLP provisions.

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

Neonatal services in the UK strive to achieve family integrated care, promoting a culture of partnership between families and staff. Research demonstrably shows positive short-and-long term outcomes for babies when their parents can be heavily involved in their care, (Bliss, 2024, [NHS Change Consultation](#)). However, for these benefits to realise, parents need to be present on the neonatal unit, often for long-periods of time, every day.

Parents being unable to participate in their baby’s hands-on care and decision-making leads to parents feeling disconnected from their baby’s care, out of sync with the day-to-day realities of their baby’s condition and undermines their sense of confidence in providing care. Moreover, missing critical moments like medical updates or milestones in recovery can weigh heavily on parents. Dads and non-birthing parents often rely on their partner, who may be more present, to relay updates second hand, compounding feelings of guilt.

Parental presence is likely to be limited for parents with a non-employee work status. The impact this has on a parent to be a partner in delivering their baby’s care. Bliss research (Bliss, [2024](#)) found 87% of dads and non-birthing parents felt working while their baby was unwell impacted their ability to bond and 83% of dads and non-birthing parents, and 29% of mums said their work impacted their ability to be involved with their baby’s hands-on care – regardless of their income level.

For employed parents, the recent addition of NLP to the suite of parental leave entitlements is transformative for the families who can access it, and it is anticipated to benefit around 60,000 parents a year (BEIS, 2022). To increase the reach and support that this excellent new entitlement can provide, we would urge the department to consider removing, or extending, the 12 week-cap, to ensure the small minority of parents whose baby requires care for beyond 12 weeks are able to accrue leave which reflects the experience. Babies with a neonatal stay beyond 12 weeks will most likely be babies who are born at the earliest gestations (from 22 weeks) and/or those babies who have extremely complicated medical needs.

Recommendations

- Ensure adequate paid time-off is available to all parents, irrespective of work status, as an individual day one-right, to ensure parental involvement in care of their baby is fully supported.
- Consider removing the 12-week cap on NL to ensure families whose babies have the longest neonatal stays, and the most complicated medical outcomes, can fully support their baby.
- Ensure that reforms to the parental leave system do not come at the expense of existing parental rights and entitlements.

Providing parents the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting

As outlined against previous statements, inadequate Paternity Leave and the very low level of statutory pay across all parental leave options makes it incredibly difficult for parents to co-parent. This is especially so when a baby has a neonatal admission – even with the introduction of the very welcome Neonatal Leave and Pay. To ensure parents can truly co-parent and be equally involved in caregiving, fathers and non-birthing parents must be given more equitable access to leave, and this leave must be paid at a rate which enables them to take the time they are entitled to.

Parents who are currently receiving any form of parental leave also face a barrier in terms of free-childcare hours – with some potentially losing months of available funding. Due to current rules, parents currently on parental leave may have to delay their application for free-childcare hours to the next term, if they are due to return to work in-between terms. While this is a feature of all parental leave, if a parent is also taking Neonatal Leave, this may be what nudges them past a term-cut off, and so some parents may choose to return to work rather than take the additional leave they are entitled to, and want to take.

This criteria is making it difficult for families to make childcare choices. Returning to work and securing, often expensive, childcare places is a stressful time for most parents. This criteria may also not be known until a parent is looking to apply for free hours, meaning some parents will have no choice but to either pay additional fees or return to work earlier than they intended to.

Recommendations

- Ensure adequate paid time-off is available to all parents, including those classified as workers and self-employed, as and individual day one-right, to ensure parental involvement in care of their baby is fully supported.
- Review criteria for applying to free-childcare hours to eliminate the need for parents to choose between using their full parental leave entitlement or accessing childcare before free-funding is available.

Question 6: Are there further or other objectives that you would like to see included as part of the parental leave and pay review? (Yes or No) – Yes

Question 6b: Please list and briefly explain each one, including providing links to any relevant evidence.

We have outlined in detail above, but we believe it is imperative that right to leave and pay must be extended to parents of all work statuses. This is particularly important for parents whose babies are in neonatal care. While there is a belief that self-employment, and zero-hour contracts etc. Allow people to work flexibly and to manage their time around caregiving, this is demonstrably untrue. Instead, when there is no entitlement leave and pay, and limited employment protections, parents find themselves struggling to continue their work as normally as possible while managing having a sick baby – to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing, their parental role and to their work. For more information on the work research Bliss has undertaken with parents who are not entitled to parental leave, please see this report: <https://sr-bliss.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/NNLP-not-qualifying-briefing.pdf>

While also outlined in our evidence above against existing objectives, we believe a further objective of parental leave should be that *both* parents are able to take sufficient time away from work so as to allow for recovery post-birth and to share early child-rearing. This is particularly important for parents whose baby requires neonatal admission. The inadequate length of Paternity Leave remains a barrier to dads and non-birthing parents being with their baby both while they are on the unit, and once they are discharged to home. The introduction to Neonatal Leave has been, and will continue to be, transformative to families – but the inadequacy of Paternity Leave means that dads of babies who have an extended neonatal stay, they still have no option but to return to work while their baby is in hospital, particularly if they want time with their family at home post-discharge.

Question 7: Please prioritise the objectives, including any additional objectives, in order of importance (for example with 1 being most important).

1. Parental Leave and Pay extended to people of all work statuses, and pay is set at a level which genuinely enables parents to take the leave they are entitled to.
2. Both parents should have access to an adequate length of paid leave which is their own, and non-transferable, in order to improve equity between parents.
3. Ensuring adequate resources and leave for parents to facilitate the best start in life by supporting the healthy development of young children
4. Providing sufficient time off work with adequate pay to support maternal health

5. Providing parents the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting
6. 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