

Petition: reform maternity, paternity, shared parental & adoption leave and pay

Link to the petition: <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/638109>

The petition text has to be short, so I have explained some of the thinking behind it below.

Please sign and share the petition if you agree that **the UK's parental leave system should be reformed to be simpler, clearer, more inclusive, more gender equal, and more supportive of working parents. If you don't fully agree with the current wording, but broadly agree with the principles, please sign and share the petition anyway**, as it will lead to parliamentary discussion of parental leave reform, and all details would be decided at that later stage, by a more inclusive process. Below, I have included examples of detail to be discussed further at that stage.

If you would like to share your views or ask any questions, please email the petition author, Francesca Arduini, at francesca.arduini.21@ucl.ac.uk.

Why reforming parental leave is a priority

Parental leave reform can achieve many societal goals. For example, if we want to narrow gender pay gaps and increase representation of women at senior levels in a range of careers, it is necessary for parenthood to also become more gender equal, starting with parental leave. Promotions, high wages, and positions of responsibility inevitably go to workers who take less time away from their job and are not sole primary carers. Academic research shows that two thirds of the gender pay gap is linked to women taking more time away from work than men when they become parents. This starts during parental leave, and often continues afterwards as mothers often switch to part-time or stop working. Evidence shows that when fathers take more parental leave, they become more actively involved in childcare permanently, showing that more gender equal parental leave leads to more gender equal division of childcare and work responsibilities in the later stages of the child's life too.

As well as increasing gender equality, enabling more mothers to work would also be a powerful way of kickstarting economic growth. This is especially true in the UK's current situation of labour shortages. Additionally, by increasing parental leave pay, and thus decreasing the financial burden on working parents, reform can help young people who would like to become parents but feel financially constrained. This would help counteract the shrinking and ageing of the UK's population.

Petition text explained in more detail

Introducing a single entitlement to one year of leave per family

The current system is very complex and hard to navigate, and as a consequence some parents do not receive as much leave and pay as they are in fact entitled to. Simplifying the system into a single entitlement for each family would make it easier to understand for both parents and employers.

In terms of overall duration, it is essential for working parents to have at least a year of parental leave between them (the entitlement would be lower for families where one of the parents does not work). This is to ensure that parents can take time off work up until the time when free entitlement to early childcare starts (at nine months under the Government's recent plans). Even if both parents take leave together for the first couple of months after the birth, this allows the parents to still have a month of leave while the child settles into nursery.

Discussion about the details of the reform may include whether it would be desirable and feasible for the duration of the family entitlement to be somewhat longer than a year. It is important to find the right balance in the length of parental leave, considering both the wellbeing of parents and children, and solutions that are sustainable for employers and promote a strong economy.

The family's entitlement would be shared as preferred by the parents, with an equal split as the default

It is important to allow parents to choose how to best divide leave between themselves, depending on their specific circumstances; different ways of sharing leave may work better for different people.

However, academic evidence and past policy experience have shown the importance of setting appropriate default options. Default bias is a well-established phenomenon: people often choose the default even though they do not actually prefer it to other options, even if it may be worse for them. Making equal sharing the default would encourage more families to share responsibilities in a more gender equal way, or to discuss the best option for them if equal sharing does not work for them. It would also help to normalise a more modern, less gendered, vision of the division of work and childcare responsibilities.

Discussion about the details of the policy may include considering whether some component of the family's leave should be non-transferable. For instance, whether each parent should have a non-transferable month of leave. This discussion might include whether birth mothers should be entitled to some additional, non-transferable period of leave specifically for physical recovery (the length of which could depend on their individual health and complications during pregnancy and birth).

While some argue that birth mothers would be disadvantaged in a system where sharing parental leave equally is normal, this does not have to be the case, and the author of this petition believes the opposite would happen. Birth mothers often need at least a few weeks, sometimes months, to recover from giving birth, but it is hard for them to do so if their partner is working, and they are home alone with a baby who needs continuous care. A system where partners take more time off can help better support birth mothers, for instance by enabling both parents to take the first months after the birth off together, to lighten the birth mother's load and aid her recovery.

All leave should be paid at usual salary

Currently, statutory pay while on leave is below minimum wage. Badly paid leave is yet another factor which contributes to young people feeling financially constrained when they consider whether, and how many, children to have. Given the historically low birth rate in the UK (and many other countries), it is important to support those who wish to have children.

Moreover, if parental leave is paid below usual wage, that disincentivises the higher earner in a couple from taking parental leave. Although most of the UK gender pay gap emerges once people become parents, even in couples without children, men often earn more than women. Therefore, below-wage parental pay often incentivises women to take leave rather than men, reinforcing traditional gender norms. This in turn increases the gender pay gap, creating a vicious cycle that makes it hard to move towards more equal pay and responsibilities at work, and more equal roles in the family. Leave paid at usual salary would enable parents to more freely choose what the right split is for them, without being constrained by financial incentives for the mother to take more leave than the father.

Parental leave pay should partly be funded by the government, and partly by the employer (with larger employers contributing more)

Currently, the government fully funds statutory pay while on leave. However, many employers recognise that the current level of statutory pay is too low, and choose to top up pay to some degree (for some length of time, often for mothers but not their partners). Therefore, in practice, the current system leads to both the government and employers funding parental leave pay. This proposal aims to formalise this, by increasing statutory pay to full pay, but requiring employers to contribute a proportion of the expense. This approach would help reduce the financial burden on the government in adopting this reform.

Moreover, the way in which employers currently top up statutory pay is not consistent across industries. It is generally also gendered in the sense that maternity leave pay is topped up but shared parental leave pay is not. This is a further, substantial, financial incentive for mothers to take leave instead of fathers. Switching to a system where employers do not need to top up pay, because statutory pay is full salary, would lead to fairer, more equal conditions for people in different jobs, and also promote gender equality.

Larger employers would contribute a larger proportion of parental leave pay than small employers. The government would fully fund leave for employees of very small businesses and for the self-employed. Small businesses are impacted disproportionately by employees going on leave, so this reform would increase the level of support available to them relative to the current system.

Discussion at later stages would include exactly how much employers of different sizes should contribute.