

## Petitions Committee

### Oral evidence: The Government's response to Coronavirus, HC 252

Thursday 11 June 2020

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Members present: Catherine McKinnell (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Elliot Colburn; Martyn Day; Katherine Fletcher; Nick Fletcher.

Questions 74 - 109

#### Witnesses

I: Paul Scully MP, Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Paul Scully.

**Q74 Chair:** Thank you, everyone, for joining us today. This is our third session looking at the impact of coronavirus on new parents and pregnant women. It has come as a direct result of more than 220,000 people signing a petition to extend maternity leave by three months—with pay—in the light of coronavirus.

The first session came during Maternal Mental Health Week and the second during Mental Health Awareness Week. It is quite apt, therefore, that our third and final session this week coincides with Infant Mental Health Awareness Week.

This underpins what this inquiry and the request of the petitioners is really about: the mental health of our parents and, ultimately, the impact this has on babies and children.

I would like to say a huge thank you to our petitioners, James and Jessie, who started the petition. They are parents to baby Elliot. I also thank Bethany, mum to baby Jayden, who signed the petition and has been campaigning with Jessie and James.

The inquiry has seen a record number of people take part in our public engagement: 27,000 new parents responded to our first survey. We received a record 26,000 comments to our Facebook thread, and 15,000 responses to further surveys.

I want to say thank you very much to the Minister for joining us as a witness today. As a former member of this Committee, I am sure he will appreciate the number of people who have signed this petition and engaged with us throughout our inquiry, and just how important this issue is to so many people.

The evidence we have heard so far in this inquiry has been conclusive in demonstrating how parental mental health impacts children in their formative years. We are the first group of legislators with the evidence base to demonstrate the difference that an intervention to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of new parents can make in the short and the long term on the outcomes for children who are born during this time. There is therefore clearly an imperative to minimise the impact of what is happening during this time on those groups of people.

We are also very aware that many parents are currently looking at their return to work. They will be very anxious about how that is going to happen for them at this time. Before we put our many questions to the Minister, would you like to just introduce yourself?

**Paul Scully:** Thank you very much, Chair. As the BEIS Minister for Small Business and Labour Markets, which obviously includes workers' rights and things like maternity pay and leave—I also cover consumers and am the Minister for London—I am really pleased that I was a member of the



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Committee for a number of years. I have seen the great work that you are continuing as the new Chair, and I welcome you to your place.

I know this is a very difficult time for everybody. I am really sympathetic to the petitioners—225,000 people have signed the petition—and parents up and down the country. We have tried to put policies in place that help people advance and protect businesses. Parents are employers and employees as well, so it is key that we make sure that all the work we have done covers the whole gamut of our economy and our social fabric, which includes parents.

**Q75 Chair:** I want to pick up on something that was included in the Government's response to this petition. It said that the UK's maternity leave offer is already among the most generous in the world. However, a recent report from UNICEF, when it took pay into consideration, said that the UK ranked 34 out of 41 countries.

Obviously, both statements cannot be true. Which is it, in your opinion?

**Paul Scully:** The UK has the longest maternity leave among all the OECD countries. Where we enhance pay as part of the statutory maternity pay entitlement, the rate of pay provided is higher than the international standard. It is 90% of the mother's average earnings, with no upper limit, but it is provided for a shorter period of time. When you get more weeks of enhanced pay in other countries, the rate of enhancement is not always as generous as that in the UK.

It is also worth noting that, where countries offer longer periods of paid leave, it tends to be funded through employer and employee insurance payments rather than directly by the state.

**Q76 Chair:** That obviously relates to maternity provision in general, not specifically to the current situation. Government research published in 2011 showed that less than a quarter of mothers actually take the full 52 weeks. We have heard from many mothers that they cannot afford to take the unpaid portion of the leave period. What would you say to those who argue that leave arrangements are only generous for those who are able to survive on £151.20 a week for 33 weeks and can afford to live on nothing for 13 weeks?

**Paul Scully:** The key thing is that the average parent takes nine months of parental leave. I think that 45% take more, but clearly that is a wide range between maybe a few days right the way up to 52 weeks.

There are a number of other things that we have. There is not only the statutory pay in normal times, but clearly you will have seen the announcement we have made to make sure that women who are returning to work can also be furloughed beyond 10 June. That is a key benefit. It shows we have been responsive to the needs of women who have had children and want to spend time with them.



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As part of the Employment Act, we are also looking to review family and parental leave. We are hoping to legislate for that as soon as parliamentary time allows.

**Q77 Chair:** You mention furlough, which was mentioned in the Government's written response to the petition. Do you know the proportion of women returning from maternity leave who have been offered, or have been put on, furlough as a means of extending their leave?

**Paul Scully:** I do not have that information. Furlough is for employers to decide. The scheme is there to protect jobs. That is the key spine of it. All the support that we gave was based on trying to help as many people as we could at any given time. We had to wrap our arms around the economy, making sure that we were protecting jobs, livelihoods and businesses.

Therefore, a key thing is to make sure that mothers and parents can come back to a good job, whereas it was looking quite dismal all those months ago with the format that we had. That is why the furlough scheme is considered by many to be quite generous when you compare it to international standards.

**Q78 Chair:** Without doubt it has been hugely important for a large number of people, but our survey showed that 96.6% of parents who responded said that this was not given as an option by their employer, or that they are not eligible for it because they are either key workers or work in the public sector. For many of those people their maternity leave cannot be extended through the furlough, despite facing many of the difficulties that we know new parents face at this time, because they do not meet the eligibility criteria.

First, have the Government specifically set out for employers that they can use the furlough scheme to extend maternity leave? Secondly, are they aware of how many are ineligible, and what is it going to do for them?

**Paul Scully:** The extension was announced earlier this week and further guidance will come out as soon as possible.

The public sector is receiving taxpayers' money to provide jobs. That money is already there and it would be expected to use that.

The furlough scheme is a minimum. As I say, it is there to help businesses, workers and employers to get through the system without having to make permanent redundancies. Again, there are a number of examples where employers are still paying 100% or are going further than the furlough scheme, where that allows.

**Q79 Chair:** The announcement was that some new mothers on maternity leave can take advantage of the furlough scheme, if their employer enables them to do so and if they meet the eligibility criteria on which the employer is already furloughing other employees. Many people do not fall into those categories. They face the prospect of having to return to work now in the middle of this situation, when childcare may well not be available for them



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and they cannot rely on extended family due to shielding and the need to remain socially distant and responsible about not spreading the virus. There are those on maternity, shared parental and adoption leave who will not be eligible for any of this support that is now potentially available to some.

Have the Government undertaken an analysis of how many can take advantage of this? What consideration have they given to those who are not eligible?

**Paul Scully:** The announcement made earlier this week allowed people who had not been furloughed because they were on parental leave to be added to the furlough scheme. That is an extra flexibility. The company would have had to use the furlough scheme in the first phase of this, but it is an extension and it is very much in response to the discussions that we have on a regular basis.

I cannot tell you, because I do not have any figures in front of me, the specific numbers you are referring to, but we speak to employers from a number of different sectors week in and week out. It is sessions like this that inform us. I have seen the transcripts of your earlier sessions, and I know that your Facebook post had 25,000 comments. There is clearly a lot there that will help inform us moving forward.

What we try to do—and you have seen it in other areas of schemes we have introduced, whether it is the loan scheme, the various reliefs or the grant schemes—is remain flexible. We must ensure that we are protecting jobs and that parents have a job to get back to.

You can be furloughed if lack of childcare is an issue. That is a specific thing available to people. They can go to their employer and say, “I cannot get childcare.” They can be furloughed on that basis. That is why we looked at opening nurseries on 1 June. We are looking to open schools more widely as soon as possible so that people can get back to a sense of normality.

It is going to be a new normal. We know these conditions are going to be with us for some time, but clearly that is the best way of moving forward.

**Chair:** I am going to bring in some colleagues now. I just want to reiterate on behalf of petitioners that getting back to the new normal for many new parents, and particularly new mothers, is an entirely different reality. Putting coronavirus aside, being a new parent is a whole new normal for them on top of having to deal with all the challenges and disruption affecting all of us.

That is why, on behalf of the petitioners, we urge the Government to go above and beyond and to try to find a way to make this transition, which is particularly hard for this group of people, and extend it as much as possible, and to speak to the Treasury about what can be done. It is not just to have the furlough opportunity, which will serve some, but to put in place the extra support that so many need at this time.



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I will bring in some colleagues now who have more detailed questions on the range of issues facing many new parents at this time.

**Q80 Nick Fletcher:** Pregnant women were identified by the NHS as clinically vulnerable. We have heard evidence that many women have been sent home on unpaid leave or statutory sick pay, which has put a huge financial strain on them and affected their eligibility for SMP. Others have been forced to start their maternity leave early.

Can you confirm that where a pregnant woman is unable to socially distance safely at work, and in the absence of any safe alternative, the Government advice is that she should be suspended on full pay?

**Paul Scully:** Yes. It is really important to say that the law on this has not changed at all. The guidelines have clearly changed according to the health conditions at the time, but the duty of the employer remains the same. Therefore, pregnant women need to be dealt with in that respectful way.

**Q81 Nick Fletcher:** Will the Government make that clear to employers? They obviously do not seem to realise this.

**Paul Scully:** As I say, we have talked about this a number of times. I have responded to a number of MPs' correspondence on this very position, but I am happy to state that here now.

**Q82 Nick Fletcher:** What advice would you give women who are having problems with their employers?

**Paul Scully:** First, I would encourage them to have a good conversation with their employers in the first place and remind them of their responsibilities. Clearly, if there are issues where they believe their employers are not looking at the guidelines properly, ACAS has a good set of resources. I would recommend that they look at the ACAS website, where they can find a lot of guidance and a lot of support as to what to do next.

**Q83 Nick Fletcher:** Will the Government also extend the furlough scheme for pregnant women to support businesses who need to suspend pregnant women on full pay when it is unsafe for them to work?

**Paul Scully:** If it is unsafe, they can furlough people who are not able to work. You have identified before that for anybody who is clinically extremely vulnerable and having to shield there is statutory sick pay as well.

**Q84 Nick Fletcher:** The Government amended statutory maternity pay regulations to ensure that pregnant women who were furloughed had their SMP calculated based on their normal earnings. Will the Government be doing the same to take into account pregnant women who have been put on sick leave due to their vulnerable status or those who are complying with the Government's test and trace guidance?

**Paul Scully:** Let me look into that. When you talk about "normal" pay, I should say that enhanced pay is included within the furlough as well. They



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do not need to lose any extra money that they are getting. It would be 80% of the enhanced pay and not the shorter pay. Let me come back to you on that, Nick.

**Q85 Nick Fletcher:** Finally, given the confusion around the position of, and options for, pregnant women and those on maternity or other parental leave, will the Government accept there is a lack of clarity in their guidance for pregnant women, new parents and their employers? Will you commit to a dedicated webpage that clearly states what their options and rights are?

**Paul Scully:** We can always do more in clarifying the situation. First of all, we want to make sure that as a Government we are communicating well. We need to make sure that all the various business representatives and other groups that support pregnant women and new mothers can articulate that. That is why I have regular meetings with Citizens Advice and other organisations. You have been speaking to a number of charities and organisations that support mothers. I would expect that, yes, we need to communicate better. We can share that with those other organisations.

On your other question, I have found a bit that I should have known for you. As per the existing policy, statutory sick pay will still form part of the earnings calculation for women claiming family-related statutory pay or maternity allowance. As the job retention scheme is new, it is wholly appropriate that earnings calculations are adjusted to accommodate it. Women claiming statutory sick pay during their earnings assessment period is not new, and the retention scheme does not have any bearing on that.

**Q86 Chair:** For very good reason, the state has always, as you put it, put its arm around new mums and new parents as much as possible to recognise the additional financial and societal impact of having a new baby. When that coincides with the current interventions that the Government are making to cope with the current Covid crisis, it does create some complicated anomalies, particularly in relation to women who may be off on statutory sick pay, which then affects their statutory maternity pay with all the earnings knock-on effect.

There is a proposal for a dedicated webpage to enable employers to be aware of the support that the Government are making available, and for employees and affected new mums to be able to find that help and what they are entitled to. Would the Government at least agree to produce a dedicated webpage to make sure there is as much clarity as possible about what are quite complicated Government interventions from a maternity and Covid perspective?

**Paul Scully:** I will take that away and reflect on it. I will see what more we can do to communicate. I am always happy to improve communication.

**Q87 Katherine Fletcher:** With two Fletchers in a row, Minister, you are truly blessed.



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This SEISS scheme to help self-employed people has been hugely welcomed, but there are a lot of questions, as the Committee has heard, about the way maternity pay calculations are taken into account. There is a perception that it is not really fair if you have taken a reduction in income during maternity pay and it is affecting your overall level of SEISS support. Can you talk to that? Some people feel it is discriminatory.

**Paul Scully:** I appreciate that. I know from experience that there are particular challenges for self-employed people at any time, frankly, but especially when you have the arrival of a new baby. The interaction between the support scheme that you mention and the reduction in trading profits is an issue of which we are aware. The Government are exploring options to support individuals who did not submit a 2018-19 self-assessment income tax return for the reason of taking a break in their trade for that purpose.

If they are eligible for the scheme, the existing grant calculation will remain because it already mitigates against periods of reduced earnings—it is averaged over a period of time. All self-employed individuals can experience that if there are breaks, but we are exploring what more can be done for the particular break you are talking about.

Q88 **Katherine Fletcher:** That is very good to hear. Would you commit to writing back to the Committee when you have any further clarity on that?

**Paul Scully:** I certainly will.

Q89 **Katherine Fletcher:** This question is aligned but slightly separate. If someone is self-employed and they take the very noble step of adopting a child and bringing another child into their family, there seems to be an issue with the way they can or cannot claim. If you are self-employed as a mother, you can claim maternity allowance. If you are adopting, you are not allowed adoption leave pay. It is one of those things in the weeds in a fast-moving situation. Can you talk to that, or would you commit to having a look at it?

**Paul Scully:** Yes. Obviously, we have to celebrate and congratulate those people who adopt. We must support what they are doing. There are a lot of challenges involved. A lot of the parental leave and pay policies focus on supporting employed people because they do not generally have the same flexibility over timetables and schedules as the self-employed. The Government are not ruling out any further support for self-employed parents in the future.

As part of the spring Budget earlier in 2020, we committed to consider how we can provide that appropriate support so that they continue to run their businesses. We are having a wider review of parental pay and leave. Therefore, we will work that through in terms of the consultation. We will report on that consultation.

One of the key things you will notice in the wider reviews the Government have done is the fact that, over the past few years, the gaps between the



benefits available to the self-employed and the benefits available to those in employment have closed significantly. The Chancellor stated, when he announced the self-employed scheme, that it is starting to become a lot harder to justify the inconsistent tax contributions between people of different employment statuses. There may be quid pro quos in there, but none the less we are reviewing parental pay and leave. We are consulting on it and we will make sure that we come back with the results and the responses to that consultation.

**Q90 Katherine Fletcher:** That is wonderful. Would it be possible to make sure that special guardians—I can speak with some personal experience—are included within that? In Britain in the 21st century, the family is an ethereal concept that is moving around. I would like to make sure that we are oriented around the children rather than the status of the people looking after the children.

**Paul Scully:** I totally appreciate the work of special guardians. I will certainly look into that.

**Q91 Katherine Fletcher:** Finally, we have had some evidence from the parents of sick or premature babies. Everyone has been hard hit by this awful Covid thing and it is a very difficult position to get into. Do we have any views on neonatal parental leave and pay that the Government were planning to introduce in 2023? There is some push to bring that forward, if possible.

**Paul Scully:** We will look at parental leave and pay in the Employment Bill. We talked about that in our manifesto and it is a really key part of my role within BEIS. I am looking forward to starting work on that.

Clearly, this environment has changed the way we are working in the short term, but I look forward to coming back, and neonatal will obviously be part of that parental leave and pay review, which we will then act upon in the Employment Bill when it comes before Parliament.

**Q92 Katherine Fletcher:** I am sorry to press, but do you have any idea of the timescales for when you will be able to come back to us on that? I get that you and your officials have been sleeping under the desk in the last few months, and it is appreciated, but can we go back to people and say anything on timescales?

**Paul Scully:** I cannot give you a timescale at the moment. It will just be introduced when parliamentary time allows. As I say, there are a lot of additional pressures, and not just for us—I appreciate your sympathies—but for the parliamentary timetable. I understand the impetus that is required, but we also want to make sure that we get it right and that we listen to people. It is getting that balance.

**Chair:** Minister, if you followed the evidence session that we took, you will have heard some of the really difficult challenges that many parents have faced where only one parent has been able to go and visit the child during the period of hospitalisation. There is a need to be able to have extra time to bond at home as a family during what is a particularly difficult and



challenging time with this crisis, on top of the challenges of being a parent of a sometimes very sick neonatal baby.

**Q93 Tonia Antoniazzi:** Research commissioned by BEIS in 2015 found that one in nine women said they had been fired or made redundant, or were treated so badly that they felt forced out of their job, when they returned to work. Following the publication of the Taylor review and the Good Work Plan, the Government announced they would extend redundancy protections for new mothers for six months after they return to work.

The Government have a bit of a reputation for not implementing the recommendations of reviews. When do this Government plan to implement those promised reforms?

**Paul Scully:** I appreciate what the Chair said about visitors. I know that a number of neonatal units have reduced visitors, but in some ways that can actually be a good thing because they can spend more time with both parents. It should not be the partner, or one parent or the other, who is considered a visitor. I want to make that clear, but I appreciate the evidence you are getting on that point.

The Good Work Plan will, again, be wrapped up within the Employment Bill following that bit of work by Matthew Taylor. We will need to bring forward a Bill that strikes the right balance between flexibility at work and protection.

When you talk about pregnant women being made redundant, the law is absolutely clear, as I said before. Discrimination in the workplace is unlawful and unacceptable. This situation has not changed it. Any rules that prevent discrimination because of pregnancy and maternity still stand, and employers should follow those rules.

**Q94 Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do you agree that the current situation puts women at risk of being unfairly selected for redundancy, which is just exacerbating the inequality? What steps are you putting in place now to prevent it happening?

**Paul Scully:** You are talking about the Good Work Plan. We are committed to reform the law and to extend the redundancy protections that parents currently enjoy when they are on family-related leave and into the period when they return to work. They need to have that.

We totally understand the feeling, or the sense, that people are saying there is a perceived vulnerability for them. We have to make sure that we work on that. We are going to extend the protections by six months from the date the mother actually returns to work.

I come back to the point that any sense of discrimination is still legislated for at this point in time as well.

**Q95 Tonia Antoniazzi:** If I am a woman in that position, where should I go? What should I do?



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**Paul Scully:** I will come back to my original answer. The first thing I would do, if you cannot get any sensible response from your employer, is to go to the ACAS website. There are a number of resources there. ACAS itself has been doing amazing work over this period. Its level of support and the level of inquiries have increased substantially, but it has raised its game to be able to meet that. ACAS has a lot of really good guidance and support that people can read. It also has a good advice service.

Q96 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Evidently, as you are speaking very highly of it, it has your full backing.

**Paul Scully:** ACAS absolutely does. I speak to Brendan Barber and members of ACAS on a regular basis.

Q97 **Chair:** I am sorry if I missed it, Minister, but did you put a timescale on when those reforms are going to be implemented to protect new mothers for six months after they have returned to work?

**Paul Scully:** No, that is going to be within the Employment Bill.

Q98 **Chair:** Do we know when that is going to be? My thinking is that, currently, one of the big challenges we found in the evidence we have taken is the level of anxiety that new mothers are already generally facing by becoming new parents. In addition, they are dealing with this Covid crisis and all the anxiety that comes with that. On top of that, there is the anxiety about work and whether you are going to be able to return to it, or whether you are going to be one of the people picked for redundancy.

Clearly, we are going to be facing some choppy waters ahead in the employment market. It would seem to me that these protections to protect new parents are of some urgency. It would be really helpful to understand what the timeframe is.

**Paul Scully:** I can understand the frustration of a lot of parents that the proposed changes are not in place at the moment. I am sure the Committee will realise and recognise that we have had to prioritise and take forward policies that are going to benefit as many people as possible.

This is an important group of people. I am certainly not underestimating that. The policies that we have already put in place have enabled more employers to continue trading and to try to reduce those redundancies in the first place. The furlough scheme is protecting 8.9 million jobs. There are 1.1 million claims from companies, which is a significant achievement in itself. None the less, as I say, it is not just the pressure on our Department. We are ready to go as best we can, but there are significant pressures on legislation going through the House at the moment. We will bring it as soon as we can.

Q99 **Chair:** I would also put forward the case that while numbers matter—the number of people the Government are intervening to protect—for every mother you protect from a level of anxiety about their employment, you protect a child who will be impacted by the knock-on effect of that anxiety.



That has come out very strongly in the evidence that we have taken.

**Paul Scully:** That is not lost on me, Chair. I agree.

Q100 **Nick Fletcher:** In this inquiry, we have heard that the childcare sector faces significant challenges in the coming months and years, for obvious reasons, which is likely to reduce the availability of quality early-years childcare.

This sector was already struggling prior to the crisis. It has been recognised in previous petition debates as unaffordable for many new parents returning from parental leave.

The Prime Minister, at his appearance in front of the Liaison Committee, stated that “childcare is absolutely critical for the success of our economy.” How do the Government plan to ensure that childcare providers survive, especially with the challenges of operating below capacity for safety?

**Paul Scully:** It is a challenge for childcare providers at the moment—I understand that—and obviously for parents. That is why we were keen to get them open on 1 June. Local authorities are ready to stand in support of parents to find childcare provision. It might not be their usual provision, but clearly they can advise on the settings that have capacity to take more children in view of the protective measures.

As I say, that might not be their first choice, but we are in strange times. It is important to make sure that children are safe. Employed parents can also use their paid annual leave and unpaid parental leave, subject to eligibility, to give them extra time to find that childcare.

We already offer, as a childcare package for parents and carers, 30 hours for working parents of three and four-year-olds. That has been rolled out successfully. There are about 600,000 children in the first two years of delivery. That makes childcare more affordable and more accessible. It saves families up to £5,000 per child per year. We are planning to spend more than £3.6 billion on early education entitlements over the next year.

We are doing a number of things. We are making some temporary changes to the 30-hour pre-tax entitlement and tax-free childcare so that all eligible parents, including critical workers, are not disadvantaged during the outbreak. That means that parents who do not meet the minimum income threshold of 16 hours per week at the national minimum or living wage, due to their lower earnings as a direct result of coronavirus, will be treated as meeting that test during the outbreak. That is going to apply only to parents who need to apply for, or reconfirm, their 30 hours for a tax-free childcare place during the outbreak this year. I hope that will go some way to supporting more parents.

Q101 **Nick Fletcher:** From personal experience of dealing with my constituents, it is not the 30 hours that is the problem; it is the amount per hour that they are receiving. They really are struggling to get care for that amount of money. Obviously, this is going to be made even more difficult with



social distancing.

Can you commit to working across Government with parents and childcare providers to work your way through this?

**Paul Scully:** It is really important that we work across Government. Clearly it is not within my specific remit but it has massive repercussions for my remit, so it is in my interest to make sure that all the people I have to work with directly get the support, whether it is childcare, transport or any number of other issues. This is a really key one, and we will always keep it under review. We will make sure that we speak to childcare providers and the relevant Minister to do our best.

Q102 **Martyn Day:** Many parents and childcare providers expect a significant level of separation anxiety in babies who have only been with their parents under lockdown. What options are there for parents due to return to work, who need time not only to find suitable childcare but to help their children adjust?

**Paul Scully:** I was interested to see some of the evidence from Professor Meins in one of your sessions. She was saying that there is no body of evidence either way—this is unprecedented—that suggests what is actually happening in terms of the child.

In some ways, if people are at home, there is the suggestion that with both parents being able to spend time with the child it can help, but clearly if there are other children in the house being home educated there can be other pressures. That is why we have tried to bring schools back. We have tried to make sure that there are other offers as well such as online education and the provision of laptops and the like, using the BBC to provide Bitesize education programmes. It is those kinds of things.

Clearly, if parents have not been able to get out or have not been able to interact, I can understand their worry. We are working with a number of charities to increase their funding so they can offer more support. It is important that parents seek advice if they are worried about their own mental health or that of their children. I know that a number of parents cannot participate in some of the activities—maybe with parent and baby groups—physically. A number of virtual options are available to them. I think you had Happity before you, which is looking to try to innovate in different ways to work through this particularly difficult time.

I come back to the point, ultimately, that the more we can start to open up the economy, the more we can get back to that new normal, which is what is going to benefit those parents in the medium term.

Q103 **Martyn Day:** We know that statutory requests for flexible working can take up to three months. We have heard from some parents who cannot even get hold of their employers at the moment due to the lockdown difficulties. Would you expect employers to show greater flexibility to parents who need to change their working patterns due to childcare considerations in these times?



**Paul Scully:** Yes, absolutely. One of the key drivers of the Employment Bill is exactly that. It is flexibility and the fact that a good employer will be flexible, will invest in people and will understand that people are right at the centre of what most businesses do, if not every business, frankly. Any good employer should be doing that. It is important that not only are Government wrapping their arms around them but that we are encouraging the business community to step up and do not only what is morally right but, in nearly every example, is the best thing for them as well business-wise.

Q104 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** We have heard compelling evidence about the serious impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of pregnant women and new parents. We have also heard about the scientific evidence that now exists on the serious impact that parental mental health can have on children. It is perhaps fitting that we are discussing these issues, as the Chair has already mentioned, during Infant Mental Health Awareness Week.

The London School of Economics estimates that each case of maternal depression or anxiety costs nearly £10,000 to the public sector alone. Considering an extra 13 weeks of statutory maternity pay would cost just £1,966 per person, would it not be a sound investment given the difference it could make to parental mental health?

I would also like to point out that it is easier, and well known, that a Government can increase their generosity rather than make fundamental changes. You could literally do this overnight.

**Paul Scully:** You have highlighted the mental health issues, and I think it is key that we understand that. That is why there is innovation to make sure that parents can access services, whether it is with health visitors or engagement with other parents on a virtual basis.

What we are trying to do—which is why we are not looking at extending the provision of maternity pay at the moment—is to get the balance right between supporting as many parents as we can and supporting employers. There is a significant crossover.

I talked about flexibility with Martyn, but it is not quite as easy as doing something overnight. Employers are worrying about cash flow, which is everything to them at the moment, and we have to get the balance right on whether we want to have those jobs for the mothers and fathers to go back to. That is where we are at the moment.

Q105 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** We also need to think about the mental health of the mother or the father so they can go back to work. They need to be fit to go back to work.

We have heard from entrepreneurial mothers who have set up a business to help parents find baby groups and connect with other parents following their experiences of post-natal depression. Would the Minister commit to holding a discussion with these groups on how this sector could be supported?



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**Paul Scully:** I am happy to work through, go back and see who might be best suited to speak to such a group. Whether I am best placed to do that, I do not know. I want to make sure that they get the most out of it as well. It is really important that we speak to as many people offering innovative services as possible. I will certainly take that away and reflect on it. I will come back to you.

Q106 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** That is very useful, Minister.

We have heard from witnesses to this inquiry about a potential tsunami of mental health problems in new parents following the lockdown. What assessment have the Government made of the potential impacts of coronavirus on parental mental health? You have touched on that.

What support and additional funding will the Government offer to help this cohort of parents? Have you earmarked anything specific?

**Paul Scully:** We have given £5 million-worth of additional funding to mental health charities. On 22 May we announced a further £4.2 million to mental health charities as part of that £750 million package overall. I hope that will go some way to help fund some of this innovation—some of the support—that we need.

I do not have those numbers to hand. I do not know if that sort of detail has been done, but I do appreciate the fact that this is difficult for any number of people. New parents are in a special place, where there is that extra pressure on them. As I say, if they are particularly concerned about anxiety, depression or feeling low, they need to contact a health professional immediately. The Samaritans are there. Mental health helplines are available, and we are helping to support those through that extra funding.

Q107 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do the Government, and your Department in particular, get a report back on where this money has been invested in mental health services so that we know it has gone into this area?

**Paul Scully:** This is why we work with other Government Departments. Clearly, mental health sits within the Department of Health and Social Care. The childcare that you are talking about sits within the Department for Education. In the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, we work on the return to work.

We piece this all together as best we can. That is not just to support now, but it is going to be even more important for the economic recovery and how we then move to the next stage. Over the last few months we have been working in real time. To most people outside looking in on this, that may seem what they do from week to week, but, with Government, consultation normally takes months, if not years, on some of these things. The fact that some of our consultations are taking 12 hours shows the speed at which we are actually working. We try to collate as much information as we can across those Government Departments to make sure



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we can see where the impacts are and where people are falling between the cracks.

Coming back to a wider answer to your question, we have shown that we are flexible and responsive. We know that we are showing the next bit of flexibility as the economy starts to open. We will try to look at the whole piece as best we can. As I say, it is sessions like this and the evidence that you are gathering that are really useful to us. That is why I do appreciate your work.

**Q108 Chair:** I wanted to put to you the 2014 study by the London School of Economics that Tonia mentioned. It puts the cost of perinatal mental health problems, including the costs associated with the parent and the effects on the children, the costs of depression, anxiety, post-natal psychosis and the long-term societal impacts of that on a per birth basis in the UK at £8.1 billion.

The costs of getting wrong the level of support and input that needs to be given to new parents is significant to the Government. Added to that are the costs of the impact of this current crisis and the challenge that so many people are facing, knowing that there is already a significant vulnerability. This is not about money but about the experience of new mothers and trying to make it as positive as possible in this current crisis.

When it comes to the Government and the decisions that the Treasury will make, it does come down to money. We would not be doing our petitioners justice if we did not put forward the very compelling evidence for the economic case to give that additional support to new mothers, in particular, at this time and the impact that this crisis is having on them on a whole range of levels.

Clearly, you are aware of that and are sensitive to a whole range of those issues. In the short term, would you commit the Government to looking at the evidence we have taken and reconsidering the request of this petition—specifically, to deliver some immediate and crucial relief in the short term—to support new parents who are seriously struggling and who we fear have been overlooked during this pandemic in terms of the immediate need they have to extend the period of maternity leave to be able to manage their way better through this crisis?

**Paul Scully:** In terms of the mental health concerns with which you started your comments, I totally agree that there are always consequences that go way beyond the immediacy of a mental health concern from a single parent, in terms of the child, the public services and support around that. That is why we need to remind ourselves to get back to the business as usual of Government, which is putting mental health on a par with physical health.

It does get forgotten about and does not get spoken about nearly enough. Frankly, a lot of the support for small businesses in particular is not just about the self-employed scheme, the grants or things. It is actually, what is it like to be working from home for the first time? There are lots of



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pressures. You put your home at risk to provide jobs in the first place by being self-employed, and then suddenly this occurs. As someone who was self-employed for 20 years before I got here, I know that stress and those mental health issues only too well.

There are no plans to extend unpaid maternity leave and the paid extension. We believe it is generous. Employed parents can already have access to paid annual leave, which continues to accrue throughout the maternity leave. There is access to universal credit for low-income families during the period that parents are on unpaid leave. Their entitlement clearly depends on individual household circumstances.

Chair, we were original members of the Petitions Committee when it first started five years ago. I very much value the thought of nearly a quarter of a million people signing this and other petitions. Our previous Chair used to say that signing a petition is not a single event but part of a wider campaign. I am always happy to listen, to learn, to review and to work with people. As I say, this session is incredibly important for me. I have two ears and one mouth, and I tend to do my politics in that way.

**Q109 Chair:** We intend to give power to your elbow to go and wrestle over this with the Treasury. Ultimately, many of these interventions have to come from Treasury decisions. For the short term, the request from the petitioners is to provide that immediate relief. I have a rough figure that the policy would cost £850 million. In the scheme of the £15 billion that is being spent on the job retention scheme, in order to provide that additional support to this particular vulnerable group it would appear to be a reasonable request.

For the longer term, I know this Government talk a lot about following the science. Clearly, there is a lot of very clear science on the support and the return that comes from supporting new parents, recognising that targeting that investment at these vulnerable groups brings about returns in the short, medium and longer term as well.

Thank you very much for the evidence and answers you have given today. We will be producing a report. We hope that you will read and use it to try to target the support the Government are giving to a whole range of people in society, but particularly to this group who are so affected by this current crisis in a very particular way.

**Paul Scully:** Thank you for your time, thank you for your questions and thank you for your work.

**Chair:** Thank you, Minister.