



Petitions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Paul Scully MP

Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, and Minister for London

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

22 September 2020

Dear Minister,

Thank you for submitting the Government's response to the Committee's report on the impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave. As you no doubt are already aware, petitioners are deeply disappointed with the Government's response and its unwillingness to accept or prioritise the vast majority of the Committee's recommendations. We will be holding a debate on this petition, and the Government's response to it, as soon as Westminster Hall is available, where I look forward to raising these issues further.

In the meantime, I would be grateful for your responses to issues that have arisen since the Committee's report and the Government's response. In its response to the Committee's report, the Government acknowledged the important role that parent and baby groups play in supporting new parents. Following a request by my Committee, the Government committed to hosting a meeting with representatives from the baby group sector to better understand how they can be supported during the pandemic. We welcome this commitment.

We'd be grateful for an update on your department's plans for meeting with representatives of the baby group sector. If helpful, I would be happy to be included in any such meetings, to ensure that the views of petitioners are represented.

Providers within this sector have had to work hard to reopen following the easing of lockdown restrictions—reading the guidance carefully and persuading their local councils, insurers and venues that they are safe to continue. Many will have invested in training, new equipment and more expensive venues to ensure that they can reopen safely.

Last week's announcement and new guidelines restricting meetings to 6 people, has understandably caused great distress and confusion to many within this sector. We've received correspondence telling us that providers are considering cancelling their classes just days into the new term after reading the new

guidelines. As you'll be aware the range of classes and groups are vast, which makes it difficult for them to know how they fit into the rules.

We welcome the clarification of the exemptions over the past couple of days, for example, the inclusion of playgroups and children's activities. However, as I'm sure you'll appreciate the rules can be interpreted very differently by different councils and providers. There are community 'play and stay' groups who have been told by their insurers, local councils or venues that they cannot run. We've heard from representatives of the sector that replacing the word playgroup, or expanding on it to specifically include baby and toddler groups and classes would provide the clarity needed.

We've also heard about the confusion with the exemption "supervised activities for children". Some activity providers such as soft play centres, where parents are the supervisors, are unclear whether they are included in this exemption and are therefore limiting entry to six people across the site, including children.

This sector is hugely important to parents and the under 5s. I hope that the Government can provide helpful clarification on the rules for these classes and groups. Better still would be the specific inclusion of this sector within the exemption list. Parent, baby and toddler groups are not luxuries, they are often lifelines for parents and the Government should do all it can to ensure that they are able to continue safely.

Providers have also told us that it's unclear whether under 5s should be socially distanced within baby and toddler groups—something that I can't imagine is an easy thing to do for providers or parents. Providers want to do what's right for the protection of everyone, but the lack of guidance is putting them in a very difficult position. This sector urgently needs more clarity.

I'd be grateful if you could provide an update on the above points as soon as possible to avoid further hardship being imposed on this important sector.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Catherine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee