



House of Commons  
Petitions Committee

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# Impact of Covid-19 on new parents: one year on

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**First Report of Session 2021–22**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons  
to be printed 21 September 2021*

## Petitions Committee

The Petitions Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider e-petitions submitted on [petition.parliament.uk](https://petition.parliament.uk) and public (paper) petitions presented to the House of Commons.

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## Summary

Last year, our Committee raised concerns that new parents and their children had been overlooked in the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic. Our report, *The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave*—published in July 2020—found that new parents had missed out on crucial support they could usually expect to receive during this vital time for them and their children. We also found that many employers had not met their health and safety duties towards pregnant women over this period. We were disappointed with the Government's response to our report, and—having continued to receive petitions highlighting the need for further support for this group—we have returned to this issue.

This report presents our updated findings on how covid-19 has continued to affect new parents and further recommendations for how the Government can better support this group. These include calling on the Government to:

- Provide additional funding and resources to allow catch-up mental health support for new parents impacted by covid-19 and accelerate planned capacity-building in perinatal mental health services;
- Fund local authorities to arrange in-person visits to new parents by appropriate local authority, voluntary organisation or health visiting staff before the end of the year;
- Review monitoring and enforcement activity relating to employers' health and safety obligations to pregnant women;
- Legislate as soon as possible to introduce the planned extension of redundancy protections for new and expectant mothers; and
- Commission a review into the funding and affordability of childcare, to consider how to provide greater financial security to the sector following the pandemic and ensure childcare provision meets the needs of new parents seeking to return to work.

Although the context of the pandemic has clearly changed since our last report—not least with the rollout of safe and effective vaccines, and the lifting of most legal restrictions on social and professional activities in July 2021—the further 12 months of disruption has continued to impact new parents, including new adoptive parents, and their children. The country has not returned to a pre-pandemic situation, and covid-19 continues to have a significant impact on new parents' access to support services, the availability of childcare and the economic situation in which many new parents are seeking to return to work—as well as the day-to-day context for individuals trying to keep themselves and their families safe.

After 18 months of restrictions, we heard new parents are now facing an accumulation of adversity. Our witnesses identified a clear need for the Government to focus not only on restoring services such as health visiting and maternal mental health services to their pre-pandemic levels, but also ensuring urgent catch-up support is available for parents who have missed out on support over this time. While the Government's plans

for long-term capacity-building in areas such as perinatal mental health and children's development in the first 1001 days are positive, this will not address the immediate health and developmental needs of these parents and children. This need for catch-up support was a key theme in our report last year, but the Government did not act on our recommendations at that time. It must now reconsider its response.

As more employees cease working from home and businesses continue to feel the economic impact of the pandemic, the position of new and expectant mothers at work is deserving of particular and urgent attention—both in regard to the need for adequate health and safety protections for pregnant women (who are designated as clinically vulnerable to covid-19) and the risk that new mothers in particular may be vulnerable to discrimination and redundancy. The Government's lack of progress in implementing the employment protections for new parents it promised in its response to our report last year is especially concerning in this context. Looking beyond the pandemic, the Government must also ensure the childcare system can effectively support new parents back into work, and we endorse petitioners' call for an independent review into childcare funding and affordability to help achieve this.

Too often throughout our work on this topic, both this year and last, we heard that the Government had failed to recognise or appreciate the needs and circumstances of new parents and their children in a timely manner—an impression not helped by its failure to act on the vast majority of the recommendations presented in our report last year. In light of the wide range of ways in which the pandemic has affected new parents, and in order to ensure these issues remain front and centre in Ministers' minds as we begin to move forward from the pandemic, we now recommend the Government publishes a dedicated covid-19 recovery strategy for new parents, bringing together all Government actions to support this group, with a clear delivery plan. While not a silver bullet, we hope this will go some way to ensuring these issues receive the profile and priority they deserve, but which they have not received to date.

We are immensely grateful to all of those who have engaged with our work on this topic or signed relevant petitions, and we hope the Government will take this opportunity to fully engage with and address their concerns.

# 1 Introduction

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## The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave

1. In the early stages of the covid-19 pandemic, we identified the pandemic's impact on new parents and their children as an issue that had been overlooked in the Government's response to the crisis. This was highlighted in e-petition 306691,<sup>1</sup> created by James Zammit-Garcia and Jessie Zammit, which called for a 3-month paid extension to maternity leave during the pandemic and was signed by over 238,000 people before closing in October 2020. We took evidence and conducted public engagement on the proposal to extend maternity leave and related issues including employment protections and access to childcare. This culminated in the publication of our report *The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave* on 6 July 2020.<sup>2</sup>

2. Our report examined a range of issues including: entitlements to parental leave and pay; the pandemic's impact on support services for new parents and the experience of becoming a new parent; access to childcare; and returning to work after parental leave. We found that during the first lockdown in spring 2020, new parents missed out on crucial support, with potentially harmful long-term consequences for parents' wellbeing and their children's development. We also raised concerns that many employers had not met their health and safety duties towards pregnant women over this period.

3. We made 22 recommendations, including calling for an extension to paid maternity and parental leave during the pandemic, catch-up funding to help new parents access informal and professional support that was disrupted during the pandemic, and additional legal protections for new and expectant mothers at work. A full list of our previous recommendations is included as an annex to this report.<sup>3</sup>

### Government response

4. We received the Government's response to our report on 7 September 2020.<sup>4</sup> The response, which was coordinated by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy but covered the work of multiple departments, expressed sympathy with the "unusual and frequently stressful" position that expectant and new parents had found themselves in due to the pandemic. However, the Government rejected nearly all of our recommendations, arguing that "for the vast majority of parents, the current arrangements have been sufficiently generous to cater for the variety of circumstances that new parents have found themselves in as a result of the pandemic."

5. Since receiving the Government response, we have continued to pursue the issues raised in our report. The Chair of the Committee has questioned the Prime Minister

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1 e-petition 306691, [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

2 Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), HC 526

3 See Annex: Recommendations from July 2020 report

4 Petitions Committee, Second Special Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental leave: Government Response to the Committee's First Report](#), HC 770

about issues raised by the report at Liaison Committee hearings<sup>5</sup> and we have written to government departments to ask for changes and clarifications to the Government's covid-19 guidance as it has continued to evolve.<sup>6</sup>

## The continuing challenges faced by new and expectant parents

6. Since we published our report last summer, both the overall context of the pandemic and the challenges and restrictions facing new and expectant parents have changed substantially. Most significantly, we have seen the rollout of safe and effective vaccines, which has allowed many restrictions to be lifted as of July this year.<sup>7</sup> For new and expectant parents specifically, local restrictions on visitors and birth partners in hospitals and maternity units have been relaxed in many areas, while Government guidance has allowed childcare settings to remain open since June 2020—including during subsequent lockdowns—and provided exemptions from some restrictions on gatherings for support groups and parent and baby groups.

7. However, we have continued to receive petitions highlighting the difficulties new parents and the services they rely on have continued to face over this period. These have included calls for extensions to paid maternity leave<sup>8</sup> and maternity exemption certificates,<sup>9</sup> a review into childcare funding and affordability,<sup>10</sup> additional funding for health visiting services,<sup>11</sup> and emergency financial support for parent and baby groups<sup>12</sup> and wraparound care providers.<sup>13</sup> Even with the removal of many covid-19 legal restrictions, it is clear that the pandemic's impact is still being felt by new and expectant parents, and that the Government must continue to consider how best to support this group.

8. Our inquiry last year established that the experience of the pandemic, and the associated restrictions, would have long-term and potentially significant effects on the wellbeing of new parents and their children's development. We concluded that this would require sustained attention from the Government over many years to help manage—but that swift and decisive intervention could help mitigate the worst possible consequences. We were therefore greatly concerned by the Government's failure to grasp this need for rapid, targeted action to support this cohort of new parents in its response to our recommendations last year.

9. In light of this continued need for support, together with the Government's failure to act on the scale we believe necessary over the past year, we returned to this issue. We held an evidence session in July 2021 where we heard from petitioners, representatives of parental groups and sectoral experts. We also conducted further public engagement,

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5 See [Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee on 16 September 2020](#), HC (2019–21) 744, Qq30–32; and [Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee on 7 July 2021](#), HC (2019–21) 491, Qq91–93

6 Petitions Committee, [The Government's response to Coronavirus: Correspondence](#)

7 However, the Government has indicated it will reserve the option to reimpose measures such as asking people to work from home this autumn and winter, if it judges these necessary to prevent unsustainable pressure on the NHS. See: HC Deb, 14 September 2021, [col 811](#)

8 e-petition 557195, [Extend Paid Maternity Leave by at least 4 months](#)

9 e-petition 324340, [Extend Maternity Exemption Certificates](#)

10 e-petition 568700, [Commission an independent review of childcare funding and affordability](#)

11 e-petition 589522, [Provide funding to local authorities to protect health visiting provision](#)

12 e-petition 331261, [Issue urgent guidance and voucher scheme to save baby & toddler activity sector](#)

13 e-petition 563892, [Grant wraparound and holiday care providers urgent financial support](#)



surveying over 8,700 new parents and childcare providers. We are enormously grateful to everyone who took the time to complete our survey, to the witnesses we heard from in our evidence session and to everyone who has started and signed petitions on this issue.

10. This report presents the findings from our work, together with our updated recommendations for action and investment by the Government. Our recommendations reflect the ongoing need to support new parents—both immediately and into the longer term—by tackling issues we identified in our report last year which remain unresolved, as well as addressing new issues which have emerged in the past 12 months.

## 2 Support services for new parents

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11. New and expectant parents, including new adoptive parents, can usually expect to benefit from a range of formal and informal support services to help promote their wellbeing and their child’s health and development. These can include antenatal and postnatal classes run by the NHS and voluntary groups, specialist perinatal mental health support for those who need it, statutory health visiting checks, and parent and baby group classes. Our report last year found that the pandemic had affected access to these services, with potentially harmful long-term consequences for new parents and their children.

12. Through our evidence session and public engagement this summer, we heard that new parents’ access to these services remains reduced. One witness discussed the “continuous heartache of not having support”<sup>14</sup> over the past 12 months, while another described it as “shocking” that so much of what we were told a year ago remains the same.<sup>15</sup> An overarching theme was new parents’ ongoing need for support both with the usual challenges of becoming a new parent, but also to address the negative impact of having missed out on the support usually available over this period. Sally Hogg of the Parent-Infant Foundation suggested the extended period of restrictions meant that people who became parents during or shortly before the pandemic risked missing out on their window of opportunity for much of this support, potentially affecting their wellbeing and their children’s development:

There is a whole group of parents now who have never had experience of going to a children’s centre or seeing a health visitor face to face [...] The way services are structured generally in the first two years of life, you get a lot of contact with services in the first few weeks and then it gradually declines. [...] There is a huge need to mobilise public services, voluntary services and communities to ensure that we do not lose those invisible children, or only find out about them when there are serious incidents or later down the line. That requires investment.<sup>16</sup>

**13. Since last July, new and expectant parents have continued to face severe limits on the formal and informal support for their wellbeing and their child’s development that they would normally expect. Following a further 12 months of restrictions, the cohort of parents and children in need of catch-up support is now even larger, and the cumulative impact on parents’ health and children’s development has only increased.**

**14. Support for new families is concentrated in the early months of a child’s life, but for many families this crucial time fell wholly within the extended period of restrictions. Ensuring new parents can now urgently access comprehensive support—including catching up on support they have missed out on since the start of the pandemic—must be a priority for the Government.**

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14 [Q3](#)

15 [Q9](#)

16 [Q11](#) [Sally Hogg], [Q20](#)

## Access to specific support services

### Mental health services

15. Evidence has continued to emerge about the impact of the pandemic on mental health support for new parents, and mothers in particular. Research has suggested an increased likelihood of anxiety, depression and loneliness among new and expectant mothers,<sup>17</sup> and access to mental health support among this group was around a third lower in 2020 than expected levels.<sup>18</sup> New mother Bethany Power told us about her experience of waiting over a year for remote counselling and difficulties in accessing specialist perinatal mental health services rather than general adult services.<sup>19</sup> Dr Sarah McMullen from the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) told us that, in a recent survey they had run, 25% of new mothers reported not being asked about their mental health at all in their six to eight week postnatal consultation with their GP.<sup>20</sup>

16. The Government is working with NHS England to improve and invest in perinatal mental health services in England. The NHS Long Term Plan sets out an ambition to provide access to specialist perinatal mental healthcare for at least 66,000 women by 2023–24<sup>21</sup> and the establishment of 26 maternal mental health hubs across England is planned by April 2022.<sup>22</sup> However, Dr McMullen told us “a lot of mental health issues will have been missed” among new mothers over the course of the pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Our previous report called on the Government to fund and provide additional catch-up mental health support targeted at this cohort of parents, over and above these existing plans for service improvement,<sup>24</sup> and witnesses remained supportive of further efforts to understand the mental health impact of this period on new parents and investment in extra targeted support.

17. In March 2021 the Government published its *COVID-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Action Plan*, which committed to investing £500 million in mental health services in response to the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> The Plan pledged to “continue to raise awareness of the resources and guidance developed in response to the pandemic for children and young people as well as parents and carers”.<sup>26</sup> However, of the £170 million earmarked for action to tackle “critical backlogs” as a result of the pandemic, none was specifically aimed at perinatal services or support for new parents.

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17 Centre for Mental Health, [New and expectant mums face increased mental health risks caused by the pandemic](#), 16 March 2021 (accessed 17 September 2021)

18 Royal College of Psychiatrists, [16,000 pregnant women and new mothers missed out on vital mental health support during the pandemic](#), 1 July 2021 (Accessed 17 September 2021)

19 [Q3](#)

20 [Q12](#)

21 NHS England, [Perinatal mental health](#) (Accessed 17 September 2021)

22 NHS England, [New dedicated mental health services for new expectant and bereaved mums](#), 6 April 2021 (Accessed 17 September 2021)

23 [Q12](#)

24 See Annex: Recommendations from July 2020 report, Recommendation 13

25 Department of Health and Social Care, [Mental health recovery plan backed by £500 million](#), 27 March 2021 (Accessed 17 September 2021)

26 Department of Health and Social Care and Cabinet Office, [COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan](#) p.16, 27 March 2021 (Accessed 17 September 2021)

18. We welcome the Government and NHS England’s planned programme of capacity-building for perinatal mental health services over the next 2–3 years. However, new parents are already experiencing the mental health impact of covid-19. Plans for long-term capacity-building must be adapted to meet new needs and should sit alongside more immediate investment to address the mental health needs of new parents today—as we recommended last year.

19. *We recommend that the Government provides additional funding and resources to bring forward the delivery of its perinatal mental health capacity-building programme. We also recommend that the Government fund primary healthcare services to invest in additional mental health catch-up services for new parents impacted by covid-19.*

### **Community support and parent and baby groups**

20. Since last autumn, Government guidance has allowed up to 30 people to meet as a “support group” (specifically including parent and baby groups), in an exemption from restrictions on gatherings. Witnesses suggested that while this exemption had been “really helpful” in giving some groups the confidence to restart, many others had not done so, depriving parents of what Dr McMullen described as “a vital safety net”.<sup>27</sup> In our June 2021 public survey, 93% of respondents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that they had been able to access baby and toddler groups over the past 12 months.

21. Witnesses cited factors such as staff having to self-isolate or look after children at home, as well as the complexity of “having to piece together different bits of guidance” on how to operate safely, as reasons why many groups had not restarted.<sup>28</sup> Emily Tredget of Happity (an online platform designed to help parents find baby and toddler classes in their area) suggested parent and baby group organisers were wary of restarting classes following negative experiences last winter, even with such groups having been exempted from restrictions on gatherings and now the removal of legal restrictions:

We did a survey and it said that 24% [of providers] are still very confused as to whether they can go back. Some of them are quite traumatised from their experience back in November, where we were telling them that they were allowed, the DfE was telling them that they were allowed, but still their councils were coming in, forcibly in some cases, with police, shutting them down [...] We definitely need to look at what we do going forward, in case there are any further issues.<sup>29</sup>

22. Witnesses were also concerned the pandemic may have a long-term scarring effect on the provision of community-led support groups and parent and baby groups. Emily Tredget suggested parent and baby group providers had seen an average drop of 63% in their revenues over the last 12 months,<sup>30</sup> while Dr McMullen cited figures from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) suggesting many charities organising such groups had also seen financial losses.<sup>31</sup> We heard that families in more deprived areas may be particularly affected by the loss of such services.<sup>32</sup>

27 [Q9](#) [Dr Sarah McMullen]

28 [Q9](#) [Dr Sarah McMullen]

29 [Q4](#)

30 [Q6](#)

31 [Q11](#) [Dr Sarah McMullen]

32 [Q6](#)

23. Dr McMullen called for clearer guidance and communications to support more classes to restart, arguing that for organisers of support groups, “there is still a need for a really strong focus on risk mitigation. We have a duty of care to our volunteers, practitioners, staff and the parents we are supporting”.<sup>33</sup> Despite the calls we heard for clear guidance for this sector, the Government’s guidance on the safe use of multi-purpose community facilities (which specifically covered support groups and parent and child groups) was withdrawn on 23 July,<sup>34</sup> and while guidance on safe and effective volunteering<sup>35</sup> and actions for early years and childcare providers<sup>36</sup> remains updated, they do not specifically mention such groups.

24. **Our inquiry last year heard compelling evidence on the crucial role of community support and parent and baby groups in supporting new parents’ wellbeing. The Government’s recognition of this in exempting such groups from some gathering restrictions last year was very welcome. However, the Government must now do more to clarify how organisers of these groups and classes can offer these services in a safe and responsible way following the lifting of most legal restrictions.**

25. *The Government should produce clear and dedicated guidance for organisers of community and charity-run support groups (including parent and baby groups) on how they can safely restart and continue classes in a covid-safe way. It should work with group organisers, local authorities and other relevant sector stakeholders to develop this guidance and ensure it is widely communicated.*

### Health visiting

26. We heard that new parents have continued to struggle to access support from health visitors since last summer. Many respondents to our June 2021 public engagement survey reported having had no contact at all with health visitors during the early months of their child’s life. Of those who had been able to access this support, a minority reported having received in-person visits, but far more said contact had been limited to video calls.<sup>37</sup> Overall, 74% of respondents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that they had been able to access health visiting support as much as they had wanted in the previous 12 months. Bethany Power told us that since March 2020, she had received little to no health visitor support, instead having to turn to paid-for support via charity-run classes, which parents on low incomes may not be able to access.<sup>38</sup>

27. Concerningly, several respondents to our public engagement survey felt that their child’s emerging medical or developmental needs had been identified late due to the disruption to health visits. This echoes witnesses’ concerns that while delivering health visiting checks (and other activities, including breastfeeding support and support for adoptive parents) online had been a necessary and useful innovation during the pandemic, it was often less effective at offering high-quality support, allowing for rigorous

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33 [Q12](#)

34 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [COVID-19: Guidance for the safe use of multi-purpose community facilities](#) (last updated 17 May 2021, withdrawn 23 July 2021) (Accessed 17 September 2021)

35 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, [Enabling safe and effective volunteering during coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) (last updated 1 September 2021) (Accessed 17 September 2021)

36 Department for Education, [Actions for early years and childcare providers during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#) (last updated 17 August 2021) (Accessed 17 September 2021)

37 Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: The impact of Covid 19 on new parents - one year on - ([ICP0001](#))

38 [Q3](#)

assessments, or encouraging new parents to open up about the difficulties they are facing, and should not generally be seen as a desirable long-term replacement for face-to-face provision.<sup>39</sup> Sally Hogg explained:

We know there are real risks in virtual service delivery. It can work well for some settings and some parents. If you do things like a health visitor check virtually [...] you cannot really see that interaction between the parent and the baby, or pick up on some of those cues or physical development needs [...] There is a real worry that mainstreaming some of those services, just because parents connected with them during a lockdown, will lead to substandard services going forward.<sup>40</sup>

28. The health visiting workforce has expressed concerns that health visiting services during the pandemic were targeted at families already known to be vulnerable, which— together with a downward trend in health visitor numbers since 2015—has meant they are unlikely to have reached all families in need of their support.<sup>41</sup> Dr McMullen described the decline in the health visitor workforce as a long-term issue that “needs really urgent attention” and argued the pandemic’s impact on health visiting had shown “the worst-case scenario of what happens when you have an underfunded and under-resourced service”.<sup>42</sup>

29. Our report last year recommended that the Government should fund additional health visitor services to catch up on the provision of this support to vulnerable families.<sup>43</sup> Responding to our recommendation, the Government stated that the allocation of health visitor resources is a matter for local authorities, as they are best placed to understand the needs of their local population and make decisions on funding priorities.<sup>44</sup> More recently, in an August 2021 response to an e-petition, the Government again stated that it does not “advocate a specific health visitor staffing number or case load”, and that councils are responsible for making resourcing decisions to meet the public health needs of a local population (including health visiting), with funding provided via the local public health grant. It noted this grant would increase by 1% in cash terms in 2021–22, with future allocations determined at the 2021 Spending Review. It also stated that “the most recent data available on health visitor service delivery in England shows that a high proportion of infants received mandated health reviews in 2019–20”.<sup>45</sup>

30. In our evidence session, we heard renewed calls for more in-person wellbeing check-ups for new parents and their children. Sally Hogg argued that time was of the essence in ensuring families receive an in-person health check from a health visitor or other qualified professional:

It does not necessarily have to be a health visitor [...] [Local authorities] are perhaps asking family support workers or Home-Start workers to visit the children, so it is not an official health visiting check, but at least it is eyes

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39 [Q3, Q11](#) [Dr Sarah McMullen], [Q13](#)

40 [Q11](#) [Sally Hogg]

41 Institute of Health Visiting, [Survey confirms babies and young children have been forgotten and failed in the nation’s pandemic response](#) 21 December 2020 (accessed 17 September 2021)

42 [Q15](#)

43 See Annex: Recommendations from July 2020 report, Recommendation 9

44 Petitions Committee, Second Special Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental leave: Government Response to the Committee’s First Report](#), p.12, HC 770

45 Department of Health and Social Care, [response to e-petition 589522](#), 20 August 2021

on the family and an opportunity. We need to act quickly. We need to give local authorities, CCGs and the voluntary sector some flexibility to use the resources they have.<sup>46</sup>

**31. We remain concerned at the number of new parents reporting limited or no access to health visiting services over the period of the pandemic. Virtual checks were a necessary innovation during covid-19, but new parents and their children must now urgently receive in-person visits—ideally from a health visitor, but, if this is not possible and in view of the time-sensitive nature of this need, then from another qualified professional. We agree with the Government that local authorities are best placed to make decisions on local public health funding priorities, but the unique circumstances of covid-19 demand additional central government funding for local services to meet additional need.**

***32. In order to support parents who have missed health visiting checks, we recommend that the Government provide additional funding to local authorities to enable in-person visits to new parents by appropriate local authority, voluntary organisation, or health visiting staff, to be delivered by the end of the year.***

### **Support for new adoptive parents**

33. Our previous report highlighted the increased risk of adoption breakdown as a result of covid-19, due to factors including depression among parents and disruption to children's new routines. We heard that in a recent survey of adopters' experiences, 65% reported stress, anxiety and symptoms of post-adoption depression, while some described feeling "abandoned and forgotten" once their child had been placed with their family due to the inability to arrange face-to-face support from social workers.<sup>47</sup> Dr Sue Armstrong Brown from Adoption UK told us that the challenges facing adoptive families—both those shared with birth parents, including mental health, but also those unique to their circumstances such as post-placement support—remained "a serious concern" and "something that we need to pay close attention to".<sup>48</sup>

34. Adoptive families are able to access support through the Government's Adoption Support Fund (ASF), which provides funds to local authorities and regional adoption agencies to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive and special guardianship order families. Dr Armstrong Brown praised the impact of the Fund as "fantastic", but also highlighted that demand for this funding has been outstripping supply during covid-19.<sup>49</sup> She told us that in response to the pandemic, the Government had expanded the range of support services that could be accessed through the ASF<sup>50</sup> and that this broader scope provided "a really strong set of things to build on". She called for the ASF to receive "long-term, ring-fenced funding, potentially at a higher level".<sup>51</sup> In its recently published Adoption Strategy, the Government stated that 2021–22 funding for

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46 [Q21](#)

47 [Q10](#)

48 [Q10](#)

49 [Q13](#)

50 For example, the Government's announcement of this expansion cited couples' therapy and online counselling as examples of services which could be funded via the ASF in 2020–21. See Department for Education, [Covid-19 adoption support fund scheme to help vulnerable families](#), 10 April 2020 (accessed 17 September 2021)

51 [Q13](#)

the ASF will be £46 million (an increase of £1 million compared to 2020–21) but did not confirm whether the wider range of support services that were accessible last year would continue to be in scope for the Fund in 2021–22.<sup>52</sup>

**35. We welcome the Government’s confirmation of the increased Adoption Support Fund budget for 2021–22. We agree with our witnesses that long-term funding for this initiative should be made available, as part of comprehensive and ongoing support for adoptive parents to overcome the challenges they have faced during covid-19.**

*36. We recommend that the Government conduct a review of the services funded under the Adoption Support Fund’s expanded scope in 2020–21, to consider which of the services temporarily offered in response to covid-19 should continue to be in scope for the Fund in future, or even scaled up and offered as standard across the whole of England. The review’s findings should be published in advance of the 2021 Spending Review, to ensure the long-term funding necessary to achieve this can be included in future departmental spending allocations.*

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52 Department for Education, [Adoption Strategy: achieving excellence everywhere](#), 26 July 2021 (Accessed 17 Septemehr 2021)



## 3 Employment and the work environment

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### Health and safety

37. Our previous report raised concerns that many employers had not met their health and safety duties towards pregnant women in the early stages of the pandemic—despite this group being designated as clinically vulnerable to covid-19.<sup>53</sup> One year on, we heard that this remains a concern, with little to suggest the situation has improved.

38. More than one-in-eight respondents to our June 2021 survey “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement “my workplace takes covid safety precautions seriously and I feel I am, or will be, safe”. Ros Bragg of Maternity Action told us that a quarter of calls to their advice line during the pandemic had been from women concerned about poor health and safety at work, and that for women in frontline roles in particular, “health and safety management has been consistently poor throughout the pandemic”.<sup>54</sup> Witnesses suggested that pregnant women had been a “forgotten cohort” in relation to safety at work during the pandemic.<sup>55</sup>

39. Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed told us their research in April 2021 found that less than half of pregnant women working outside the home said their employers had completed and were following a risk assessment,<sup>56</sup> despite this being required by guidance from the Health and Safety Executive<sup>57</sup> (HSE) and reiterated in guidance on GOV.UK.<sup>58</sup> Even where women were suspended from work on safety grounds, either proactively or following such an assessment, she suggested few had been suspended on correct terms with full pay, significantly impacting these women’s incomes.<sup>59</sup>

40. Last year we recommended that the Government take action to ensure women whose incomes fell due to their employer suspending them on incorrect terms (such as placing them on Statutory Sick Pay) did not see their entitlement to Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) affected as a result.<sup>60</sup> However, the Government’s response argued—despite the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, and its acknowledgement of “anecdotal evidence” of employers asking pregnant employees to take sick leave—that “women claiming Statutory Sick Pay during their earnings assessment period is not a new situation” and that it had no plans to change how periods of sick pay would be treated in SMP calculations during the pandemic.<sup>61</sup>

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53 Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), paras 28-33, HC 526

54 [Q24](#)

55 [Q26](#)

56 [Q25](#)

57 Health and Safety Executive, [Protect vulnerable workers during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#) (last updated 17 September 2021) (accessed 17 September 2021)

58 GOV.UK, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): advice for pregnant employees](#) (last updated 20 July 2021) (accessed 17 September 2021)

59 [Q24](#)

60 See Annex: Recommendations from July 2020 report, Recommendation 6

61 Petitions Committee, Second Special Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental leave: Government Response to the Committee’s First Report](#), pp.7-8, HC 770

41. Witnesses suggested the official guidance on health and safety for pregnant employees had been insufficiently specific, clear or well-communicated.<sup>62</sup> They also raised particular concerns about the effectiveness of enforcement of this guidance by HSE and local authorities, leading to many employers treating the guidance as “optional”.<sup>63</sup> As Ros Bragg put it:

The guidance is only ever going to be one small part of this picture. The biggest problem we have is employers disregarding it [...] The idea that a woman has to take her employer to an employment tribunal in order to arrange basic health and safety protections is a guarantee that women will not have the health and safety protections that they need.<sup>64</sup>

Joeli Brearley cited a Freedom of Information request by Pregnant Then Screwed to HSE in November 2020, which revealed that HSE did not specifically record formal enforcement action regarding the safety of pregnant women.<sup>65</sup> Witnesses were pessimistic about the prospects for effective enforcement of this guidance in the short-term and instead called for steps including a “marketing campaign”<sup>66</sup> and financial incentives (via a furlough-type scheme) to encourage employers to follow the guidance.<sup>67</sup>

**42. Despite existing guidance on protecting vulnerable workers on the Health and Safety Executive website and Working Safely guidance on GOV.UK, many pregnant women still report health and safety concerns at work. Adhering to this guidance should not be seen by employers as optional and there is a need to intensify messaging and enforcement to ensure new and expectant parents are, and feel, safe at work. Given that pregnant women were designated as clinically vulnerable, we are surprised to hear that HSE are not formally recording breaches of health and safety with regards to pregnant women and associated enforcement action.**

*43. We recommend that the Government urgently engage with the Health and Safety Executive and relevant stakeholder groups to review HSE’s monitoring and enforcement activity specifically relating to employers’ health and safety obligations to pregnant women. Any barriers to at-scale enforcement of these obligations must be quickly resolved, to ensure that appropriate enforcement action is taken when employers fail to meet their legal obligations—especially as more employees continue to return to work in person. The Government should also require HSE to record and publish details of enforcement action specifically relating to the safety of pregnant women in future.*

## Workplace discrimination and redundancy

44. Witnesses expressed concerns about the difficulties new parents are facing as they now return to work, especially with the end of work from home guidance since July. We heard that employers were refusing “very minor” flexible working requests, and that the impact of not being able to work flexibly was becoming much less “manageable” for new parents without the option of furlough or working from home in many cases.<sup>68</sup> Several

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62 [Qq24, 25, 28](#)

63 [Qq24, 28](#)

64 [Q29](#)

65 [Q28](#)

66 [Q28](#)

67 [Q24](#)

68 [Q31](#)

respondents to our public engagement survey in June this year told us their employer's support for flexible working had helped them to work around childcare they had secured, but others told us flexible working was not supported by their employer, with some losing their jobs as a result.<sup>69</sup> We also heard that many new parents, especially mothers, had seen their return to work affected by having to stay at home if their child was unable to attend school or an early years setting due to covid-19 isolation. In some cases, witnesses suggested these factors have led to women being forced out of work.<sup>70</sup>

45. Witnesses suggested the pandemic had shown that the existing legal framework for redundancy protection for new parents—in particular new mothers—was insufficient. While women on maternity leave already have some legal protection from redundancy, Ros Bragg argued that:

[Existing protections] help women only if there is a suitable alternative job available that they can be placed into. We are dealing with businesses downsizing, so there are very rarely suitable alternative jobs. Of course, there is protection against discrimination, but it is extraordinarily hard to prove. This is one of the most difficult things to pursue in the employment tribunal. It is time-consuming and expensive [...] The situation is really quite desperate. We are seeing large numbers of women forced out of the workforce through unfair treatment and unfair redundancies.<sup>71</sup>

46. The Women and Equalities Committee, in its February 2021 report *Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact*,<sup>72</sup> also expressed concern that pregnant women and new mothers may be particularly vulnerable to job losses as the economic impact of the pandemic continues to be felt. This may be a particular risk as Government support for businesses offered during the pandemic so far is unwound.

47. Witnesses also raised concerns about women's ability to challenge being made redundant due to childcare issues through the employment tribunal system. As well as tackling the concerns expressed by Ros Bragg about the expensive and time-consuming nature of the tribunal process, Joeli Brearley suggested the “bare minimum” the Government could do to help women attempting to pursue a tribunal claim would be to extend the current 3-month time limit to raise a claim.<sup>73</sup> We made this recommendation in our report last year; the Government's response indicated this suggestion was being considered following its 2019 consultation on pregnancy and maternity discrimination,<sup>74</sup> but the Government has not yet announced any plans to implement this proposal.

48. In response to concerns about workplace discrimination against new and expectant mothers, the Government has convened a stakeholder working group to look at the issue.<sup>75</sup>

69 Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: The impact of Covid-19 on new parents - one year on ([ICP0001](#))

70 [Q32](#)

71 [Q33](#)

72 Women and Equalities Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2019–21, [Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact](#), para 92, HC 385

73 [Q34](#)

74 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Pregnancy and maternity discrimination: extending redundancy protection for women and new parents](#) (last updated 22 July 2019) (accessed 17 September 2021)

75 Women and Equalities Committee, First Special Report of Session 2021–22, [Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact: Government response to the Committee's fifth report of Session 2019–21](#), HC

It has also repeatedly committed (including in its response to our July 2020 report<sup>76</sup>) to extend existing redundancy protections for women on maternity leave to women during pregnancy and for six months after their return to work, and has indicated it intends to implement this measure through an Employment Bill “as soon as Parliamentary time allows”.<sup>77</sup>

**49. We welcome the Government’s commitments to tackling workplace discrimination against new and expectant mothers and the actions it is taking to better understand this issue. We echo witnesses’ dismay at the apparent failure of current employment law and the tribunal system to prevent potentially discriminatory redundancies among new and expectant mothers during the pandemic. However, we note these concerns have also previously been expressed by the Women and Equalities Committee as well as in our own report last year, and we support their conclusion that the Government has not taken the necessary preventative actions on this issue—especially in light of its failure to act on the recommendations in our previous report. The Government must swiftly rectify this failing.**

*50. We echo our recommendation from last year’s report that the Government should legislate as soon as possible to introduce its planned extension of redundancy protections for new and expectant mothers. It must clarify a timeframe for doing this, and, if there is not sufficient parliamentary time to consider a full Employment Bill before the end of the year, the Government should immediately bring forward a short Bill specifically to implement these protections.*

*51. We also repeat our previous recommendation that the Government should extend the period in which new and expectant parents may bring claims to an employment tribunal. The Government must urgently conclude its work to consider this change and clarify when and how it will be implemented.*

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76 Petitions Committee, Second Special Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental leave: Government Response to the Committee’s First Report](#), p.18, HC 770

77 Liaison Committee, [Correspondence: Letter from the Prime Minister to the Chair regarding his appearance before the Committee on 7 July 2021](#), 22 July 2021

## 4 Childcare accessibility and provision

### The ongoing impact of covid-19

52. Access to childcare has been a major concern for new parents during the pandemic, and our report last year found it was a significant factor in petitioners' calls for an extension to paid parental leave.<sup>78</sup> Since June 2020, Government guidance has allowed childcare settings to remain open, including during subsequent lockdowns. However, we heard that—despite this guidance—the availability and use of formal childcare by new parents remains low in many areas. When asked to what extent childcare settings had returned to pre-pandemic levels of activity and availability, Neil Leitch of the Early Years Alliance told us: “They have not, and that is the reality”.<sup>79</sup> Official figures show the number of children attending childcare settings is currently around 75% of pre-pandemic levels, but Neil Leitch suggested this overstated current levels of activity, as the number of hours for which children are attending has fallen during covid-19.<sup>80</sup> This was echoed in the results of our June 2021 public engagement survey.<sup>81</sup>

53. The pandemic has also exacerbated pre-existing concerns about the sector's long-term financial situation, as we highlighted in our report last year.<sup>82</sup> Our June 2021 survey suggested that the Government's financial assistance for the sector has been effective in reaching providers, providing them with timely and much-needed support: 59% of respondents who ran or worked for a childcare setting reported having received support via initiatives including furlough and the business rates holiday over the past year. Despite this, 72% of respondents also told us they expected the pandemic to have a “major” or “moderate” effect on their setting's long-term financial sustainability, and 46% of respondents were “extremely” or “moderately” concerned about the impact of the future withdrawal of Government support on their setting's financial sustainability.<sup>83</sup>

54. Neil Leitch suggested that funding for settings to deliver the free childcare entitlement for 3- and 4-year olds was insufficient, leading to settings relying on charging higher fees to other parents to remain viable.<sup>84</sup> Given this reliance on “cross-subsidising”, with fewer children currently attending settings, as well as uncertainty about the long-term impact of the pandemic on demand for childcare, we were told that providers' financial situation “will not get better”.<sup>85</sup> Both Ofsted<sup>86</sup> and the charity Coram<sup>87</sup> have published data suggesting the long-term decline in the number of early years providers (in particular childminders) continued in early 2021. While Ofsted's data also suggests the overall number of places

78 Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), para 94, HC 526

79 [Q35](#)

80 [Q35](#)

81 In our survey, 95% of respondents who said they ran or worked for a childcare setting told us their setting remained open, but 57% also said that fewer children were attending in a typical week due to covid-19. See Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: The impact of Covid-19 on new parents - one year on ([ICP0001](#))

82 Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), paras 97-100, HC 526

83 Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: The impact of Covid-19 on new parents - one year on ([ICP0001](#))

84 [Q35](#)

85 [Qq35, 37](#)

86 Ofsted, [Official Statistics: Main findings: childcare providers and inspections as at 31 March 2021](#) (last updated 26 August 2021) (accessed 17 September 2021)

87 Coram Family and Childcare, [Childcare Survey 2021](#), March 2021

offered by providers on the Early Years Register has remained “broadly stable” since 2015, witnesses suggested the pandemic had put the long-term viability of the sector in greater jeopardy, especially in more deprived areas of the country.<sup>88</sup>

55. We also heard that many parents had reduced the hours they were planning to work, or found their return to work disrupted, by being unable to find affordable childcare. In our June 2021 public survey, 62% of respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “a shortage of affordable or available childcare has made it harder (or impossible) for me to go back to work”. This included many parents reporting that reduced opening hours and capacity at their preferred setting during covid-19 were preventing them from returning to work as they would like.<sup>89</sup> New mother Bethany Power told us that her return to work had been “very challenging, because of the childcare costs”, and she called for greater Government support for working parents before the 30-hours entitlement begins when a child turns 3.<sup>90</sup> While there are positive Government initiatives supporting these parents, including Tax-Free Childcare<sup>91</sup> and support for childcare costs through Universal Credit, both Bethany Power<sup>92</sup> and respondents to our survey<sup>93</sup> suggested these had only a limited impact in helping working parents meet childcare costs.

56. Witnesses supported the call of a currently open petition,<sup>94</sup> created by Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed, for an independent review of childcare funding and affordability.<sup>95</sup> At the time of writing, the petition has been signed by over 112,000 people and was debated in Westminster Hall on 13 September 2021.<sup>96</sup> In its response to the petition (provided in June), the Department for Education stated that it was “not currently planning a review of early years funding”, but noted that it would “continue to evaluate the support on offer and endeavour to provide support to both parents and providers to ensure the sustainability of the sector.”<sup>97</sup> In the September 2021 debate, the then-Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education Vicky Ford MP confirmed the Government’s position, arguing that “Given that we are in the middle of spending review negotiations, it would not be appropriate to launch a separate independent review of childcare at this time because the outcomes of such a review would not be able to feed into the spending review that is happening right now.”<sup>98</sup>

**57. Despite childcare settings being allowed to remain open since summer 2020, levels of activity remain below pre-pandemic levels. We welcome the steps taken by the Government to support the sector financially during covid-19, but this has not prevented many providers seeing a significant impact on their finances. With ongoing uncertainty about future demand for their services, there is a real risk the pandemic will contribute to an ongoing erosion of provision or even act as a tipping point and**

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88 [Qq35, 37](#)

89 Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: The impact of Covid-19 on new parents - one year on ([ICP0001](#))

90 [Q7](#)

91 GOV.UK, [Tax-Free Childcare](#) (accessed 17 September 2021)

92 [Q7](#)

93 Of those respondents to our survey who said they have received support for childcare costs from the Tax-Free Childcare scheme or from Universal Credit or tax credits, only 42% and 36% respectively agreed that these schemes “make a big difference to how affordable childcare is for my family”. See Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: The impact of Covid-19 on new parents - one year on ([ICP0001](#))

94 e-petition 586700, [Commission an independent review of childcare funding and affordability](#)

95 [Qq38, 39](#)

96 HC Deb, 13 September 2021, [cols 205–230WH](#)

97 Department for Education, [response to e-petition 586700](#), 23 June 2021

98 HC Deb, 13 September 2021, [col 227WH](#)

accelerate this trend. Long-term, targeted support from the Government will be required to avoid this outcome, which would have serious consequences for children's early education and parents' workforce participation.

58. New parents continue to struggle to access the childcare they need to effectively re-enter the workforce on the terms they want. While covid-19 has exacerbated this challenge, the high cost of paid-for childcare is a barrier which both predates covid-19 and will outlast it. More could be done to ensure that Government support, especially for parents of children under 3, alleviates the pressures of these costs for working parents.

59. *We support the call of petitioners for an independent review into childcare funding and affordability. We recommend that the Government should commission such a review, to consider how to provide greater financial security to the sector following the pandemic, as well as consulting with parents on how to ensure childcare provision meets their needs and supports their return to work. This review should include but not be limited to future sector funding allocations, and so should be separate from the ongoing Spending Review process. The Government should set the terms of reference for this review within two months, with a view to publishing the findings of the review by next summer.*

## 5 Recognising new parents' needs

60. Our report last year raised concerns that new and expectant parents often struggled to understand how their specific circumstances fit into Government policy and guidance—for example, their eligibility for furlough—and that the distinct needs, interests and circumstances of new parents were not recognised by the Government in its response to the pandemic. Beyond the immediate context of covid-19, we also pointed to specific groups of new parents—in particular, special guardians and self-employed adoptive parents—who were simply not recognised under existing parental leave and pay entitlements.<sup>99</sup> One year on, witnesses again raised concerns that new and expectant parents, and their children, continued to be overlooked in Government policy and covid-19 guidance.

### Recovery funding and the “baby blind spot”

61. In Chapter 2, we highlighted witnesses' priorities for immediate Government action and investment to meet new parents' short-term support needs. However, witnesses also separately pointed to what they saw as a lack of Government support for the long-term recovery and improvement of services aimed at new parents and children under the age of 2. Sally Hogg of the Parent-Infant Foundation described this as a “baby blind spot” in Government, arguing it should do more to prioritise babies and young children in its plans for investment and service improvement in the recovery from covid-19.<sup>100</sup> She compared the lack of funding for this age group to the Government's £3.1 billion recovery package for older children, and called for an equivalent level of “investment, focus and whole-system drive” for the youngest children.<sup>101</sup> Dr Sue Armstrong Brown of Adoption UK argued this blind spot was analogous to the need for early intervention for adoptive families experiencing difficulties.<sup>102</sup>

62. Earlier this year, the Government published its *Best Start for Life* review,<sup>103</sup> which aims to improve health outcomes in children from conception to age 2. We heard that this provides a positive framework which could guide future policies, including identifying a need to grow the health visiting workforce, but says little about what the Government's short-term priorities should be in supporting the recovery from covid-19 disruption for services aimed at supporting the health and development of children in this age range.<sup>104</sup>

**63. We welcome the long-term vision of the Government's *Best Start for Life* review, but to date covid-19 recovery funding aimed at children aged under 2 appears to have been unjustifiably neglected compared to the funding made available for older children. As we emerge from the pandemic, the Government must ensure it invests proportionately in the infrastructure which supports these families.**

99 Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), paras 18-19 and 81-83, HC 526

100 [Q11](#) [Sally Hogg]

101 [Q20](#)

102 [Q22](#)

103 Department of Health and Social Care, [The best start for life: a vision for the 1,001 critical days](#), 25 March 2021, (accessed 17 September 2021)

104 [Q14](#)



64. *Ahead of the 2021 Spending Review, we recommend that the Government assess which elements of the Best Start for Life Review’s implementation could be accelerated—in particular, opportunities to grow the health visiting workforce—and provide targeted funding to help achieve this.*

## Pregnant women and the easing of social restrictions

65. Some witnesses argued that the Government’s messaging and general approach to easing social restrictions did not appropriately consider the situation of pregnant women, who—despite being clinically vulnerable—remain less likely to have been vaccinated against covid-19. Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed argued the Government had not done enough to prevent “misinformation” about the risks of the vaccine to pregnant women,<sup>105</sup> while Dr Sarah McMullen from the NCT suggested more needed to be done “to make sure that pregnant women are informed, understand the risks, know how to take care of themselves and feel supported” as social restrictions are removed.<sup>106</sup>

66. Since our evidence session, the Government has updated its main guidance page on covid-19 restrictions and how to stay safe, which now includes a short dedicated section with information for pregnant women.<sup>107</sup> There has also been increasing communication to healthcare professionals and the public regarding the importance of vaccination for pregnant women, including from the NHS England Chief Midwifery Officer;<sup>108</sup> and healthcare staff are now being asked to provide objective, evidence-based advice on vaccination in pregnancy to women at every antenatal contact.<sup>109</sup>

67. **We welcome the steps taken by the Government and the NHS to provide pregnant women with relevant information as the vaccine rollout continues and as social restrictions are eased. It is vital these efforts are maintained so that pregnant women are effectively supported to protect themselves from covid-19. In particular, it is crucial the Government continues to build on the success of the vaccine programme by continuing to encourage pregnant women to be vaccinated.**

68. *The Government should continue to work with health authorities to communicate information about pregnancy and covid-19, including vaccine safety and emerging data on the risks of covid-19 when pregnant, to support informed decisions by pregnant women.*

## Inequalities in parental leave and pay entitlements

69. All new parents need time and financial security to effectively bond with their new child. However, there remain groups of new parents and guardians whose needs and circumstances are not reflected in existing entitlements to (or treatment of) parental leave and pay benefits. Ros Bragg from Maternity Action highlighted the “unfair” treatment of

105 [Q42](#)

106 [Q12](#)

107 Cabinet Office, [Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread](#) (last updated 14 September 2021) (accessed 17 September 2021)

108 BBC News, [Pregnant women urged to get jab as majority unvaccinated](#), 30 July 2021 (accessed 17 September 2021)

109 PQ [34580](#) [on Pregnancy: Coronavirus], 13 August 2021

Maternity Allowance compared to Statutory Maternity Pay in Universal Credit,<sup>110</sup> which we heard can cost low-income families up to £5,000 in the first year of their child's life.<sup>111</sup> Dr Armstrong Brown told us that self-employed adoptive parents, kinship carers and special guardians still lack any access to parental leave and pay, and pointed to an apparent lack of departmental ownership of this issue within the Government.<sup>112</sup>

70. Both of these issues were highlighted in our report last year as areas where the Government was again overlooking the needs of new parents,<sup>113</sup> but the Government has not acted to end these disparities. The Government's response to our report last year simply restated its position on the differing treatment of Maternity Allowance and SMP in Universal Credit without offering a clear rationale for this, while pointing to the different "health and safety considerations" around the return to work of birth parents compared to adoptive parents as an explanation for the lack of parental leave and pay entitlement for self-employed adopters. The response also indicated the Government would shortly respond to the Good Work Plan consultation on options for reform to parental leave and pay,<sup>114</sup> but we are not aware of any subsequent progress on the consultation.

**71. We are disappointed that the Government is yet to act to resolve inconsistencies in the availability or treatment of parental leave and pay entitlements for groups including self-employed adoptive parents, special guardians, and recipients of Maternity Allowance on Universal Credit, despite our report last year highlighting the financial and other negative impacts this can have on these families and recommending how these issues could be resolved.**

**72. We restate our recommendations from last year, that the treatment of Maternity Allowance and Statutory Maternity Pay in Universal Credit should be equalised; that parental benefits available to self-employed birth parents should be extended to self-employed adoptive parents; and that parental leave and pay should be offered to special guardians.**

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110 Maternity Allowance is paid to pregnant women and new mothers who are not eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP). This group includes women who are 'workers' not employees, and self-employed women. Maternity Allowance is treated as 'unearned income' under Universal Credit and so can be deducted pound-for-pound from benefits awards, whereas SMP is treated as 'earnings' and so is captured in the Work Allowance and 63% taper. See Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), table 1 and para 17, HC 526.

111 [Q40](#)

112 [Q15](#) [Dr Sue Armstrong Brown], [Qq16–17](#)

113 Petitions Committee, First Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave](#), paras 17 and 22, HC 526

114 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Good Work Plan: Proposals to support families](#) (last updated 16 March 2020) (accessed 17 September 2021)

## 6 Conclusion

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73. The Government has taken action on an unprecedented scale to financially assist individuals and businesses, and to support local authorities and voluntary groups in their work, during the pandemic. This has undoubtedly helped the situation of many new parents. Our report last year identified areas where additional, targeted support was needed specifically to safeguard the wellbeing of new and expectant parents and their children.

74. We remain disappointed that, rather than implementing our recommendations, the Government refused to act on nearly all of them. It has provided no catch-up funding specifically for health visiting, perinatal mental health support or community-led support for new parents. It continues to downplay the serious challenges to the long-term viability of the childcare sector. There is no sign of the promised Employment Bill or other measures to improve protections from discrimination at work for new and expectant parents, and there has been no progress in ending unfair discrepancies in parental leave entitlements.

75. We are beginning to see the effects of the problems we raised in our previous report not being addressed at the time. Witnesses described parents facing an “accumulation of adversity” following an additional year of restrictions<sup>115</sup> and children coming into early years classes “not as developed” as would be expected.<sup>116</sup> Following the lifting of most covid-19 legal restrictions, the Government must now urgently consider how it can act to offset this damage. This report presents a set of actions we believe could help to achieve this.

**76. The Government’s response to our report last year failed to acknowledge the need for urgent action to support new parents, rejecting almost all of our recommendations. One year on, many of the concerns we raised remain live issues. While the enormous demands of managing the nation’s response to the pandemic must be recognised, it is bitterly disappointing that the Government has failed to invest in catch-up services that could have helped mitigate the impact on new parents and their children of the first lockdown, or progressed crucial employment protections for new parents. We believe responding to the diverse needs of this group requires cross-Government buy-in and should be seen as a priority moving forward from the pandemic.**

***77. Given the multifaceted impact the pandemic has had on new parents, and to ensure their needs are specifically considered going forward, the Government should publish a covid-19 recovery strategy for new parents alongside its response to this report, and should report on progress against this strategy by next summer. This strategy should bring together all Government actions to support new parents following the covid-19 pandemic and should set targets and timeframes for how Government support will be delivered.***

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115 [Q9](#) [Sally Hogg]

116 [Q6](#)

## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Support services for new parents

1. Since last July, new and expectant parents have continued to face severe limits on the formal and informal support for their wellbeing and their child's development that they would normally expect. Following a further 12 months of restrictions, the cohort of parents and children in need of catch-up support is now even larger, and the cumulative impact on parents' health and children's development has only increased. (Paragraph 13)
2. Support for new families is concentrated in the early months of a child's life, but for many families this crucial time fell wholly within the extended period of restrictions. Ensuring new parents can now urgently access comprehensive support—including catching up on support they have missed out on since the start of the pandemic—must be a priority for the Government. (Paragraph 14)
3. We welcome the Government and NHS England's planned programme of capacity-building for perinatal mental health services over the next 2–3 years. However, new parents are already experiencing the mental health impact of covid-19. Plans for long-term capacity-building must be adapted to meet new needs and should sit alongside more immediate investment to address the mental health needs of new parents today—as we recommended last year. (Paragraph 18)
4. *We recommend that the Government provides additional funding and resources to bring forward the delivery of its perinatal mental health capacity-building programme. We also recommend that the Government fund primary healthcare services to invest in additional mental health catch-up services for new parents impacted by covid-19.* (Paragraph 19)
5. Our inquiry last year heard compelling evidence on the crucial role of community support and parent and baby groups in supporting new parents' wellbeing. The Government's recognition of this in exempting such groups from some gathering restrictions last year was very welcome. However, the Government must now do more to clarify how organisers of these groups and classes can offer these services in a safe and responsible way following the lifting of most legal restrictions. (Paragraph 24)
6. *The Government should produce clear and dedicated guidance for organisers of community and charity-run support groups (including parent and baby groups) on how they can safely restart and continue classes in a covid-safe way. It should work with group organisers, local authorities and other relevant sector stakeholders to develop this guidance and ensure it is widely communicated.* (Paragraph 25)
7. We remain concerned at the number of new parents reporting limited or no access to health visiting services over the period of the pandemic. Virtual checks were a necessary innovation during covid-19, but new parents and their children must now urgently receive in-person visits—ideally from a health visitor, but, if this is not possible and in view of the time-sensitive nature of this need, then from another qualified professional. We agree with the Government that local authorities are best

placed to make decisions on local public health funding priorities, but the unique circumstances of covid-19 demand additional central government funding for local services to meet additional need. (Paragraph 31)

8. *In order to support parents who have missed health visiting checks, we recommend that the Government provide additional funding to local authorities to enable in-person visits to new parents by appropriate local authority, voluntary organisation, or health visiting staff, to be delivered by the end of the year.* (Paragraph 32)
9. We welcome the Government's confirmation of the increased Adoption Support Fund budget for 2021–22. We agree with our witnesses that long-term funding for this initiative should be made available, as part of comprehensive and ongoing support for adoptive parents to overcome the challenges they have faced during covid-19. (Paragraph 35)
10. *We recommend that the Government conduct a review of the services funded under the Adoption Support Fund's expanded scope in 2020–21, to consider which of the services temporarily offered in response to covid-19 should continue to be in scope for the Fund in future, or even scaled up and offered as standard across the whole of England. The review's findings should be published in advance of the 2021 Spending Review, to ensure the long-term funding necessary to achieve this can be included in future departmental spending allocations.* (Paragraph 36)

## Employment and the work environment

11. Despite existing guidance on protecting vulnerable workers on the Health and Safety Executive website and Working Safely guidance on GOV.UK, many pregnant women still report health and safety concerns at work. Adhering to this guidance should not be seen by employers as optional and there is a need to intensify messaging and enforcement to ensure new and expectant parents are, and feel, safe at work. Given that pregnant women were designated as clinically vulnerable, we are surprised to hear that HSE are not formally recording breaches of health and safety with regards to pregnant women and associated enforcement action. (Paragraph 42)
12. *We recommend that the Government urgently engage with the Health and Safety Executive and relevant stakeholder groups to review HSE's monitoring and enforcement activity specifically relating to employers' health and safety obligations to pregnant women. Any barriers to at-scale enforcement of these obligations must be quickly resolved, to ensure that appropriate enforcement action is taken when employers fail to meet their legal obligations—especially as more employees continue to return to work in person. The Government should also require HSE to record and publish details of enforcement action specifically relating to the safety of pregnant women in future.* (Paragraph 43)
13. We welcome the Government's commitments to tackling workplace discrimination against new and expectant mothers and the actions it is taking to better understand this issue. We echo witnesses' dismay at the apparent failure of current employment law and the tribunal system to prevent potentially discriminatory redundancies among new and expectant mothers during the pandemic. However, we note these concerns have also previously been expressed by the Women and Equalities

Committee as well as in our own report last year, and we support their conclusion that the Government has not taken the necessary preventative actions on this issue—especially in light of its failure to act on the recommendations in our previous report. The Government must swiftly rectify this failing. (Paragraph 49)

14. *We echo our recommendation from last year's report that the Government should legislate as soon as possible to introduce its planned extension of redundancy protections for new and expectant mothers. It must clarify a timeframe for doing this, and, if there is not sufficient parliamentary time to consider a full Employment Bill before the end of the year, the Government should immediately bring forward a short Bill specifically to implement these protections.* (Paragraph 50)
15. *We also repeat our previous recommendation that the Government should extend the period in which new and expectant parents may bring claims to an employment tribunal. The Government must urgently conclude its work to consider this change and clarify when and how it will be implemented.* (Paragraph 51)

### Childcare accessibility and provision

16. Despite childcare settings being allowed to remain open since summer 2020, levels of activity remain below pre-pandemic levels. We welcome the steps taken by the Government to support the sector financially during covid-19, but this has not prevented many providers seeing a significant impact on their finances. With ongoing uncertainty about future demand for their services, there is a real risk the pandemic will contribute to an ongoing erosion of provision or even act as a tipping point and accelerate this trend. Long-term, targeted support from the Government will be required to avoid this outcome, which would have serious consequences for children's early education and parents' workforce participation. (Paragraph 57)
17. New parents continue to struggle to access the childcare they need to effectively re-enter the workforce on the terms they want. While covid-19 has exacerbated this challenge, the high cost of paid-for childcare is a barrier which both predates covid-19 and will outlast it. More could be done to ensure that Government support, especially for parents of children under 3, alleviates the pressures of these costs for working parents. (Paragraph 58)
18. *We support the call of petitioners for an independent review into childcare funding and affordability. We recommend that the Government should commission such a review, to consider how to provide greater financial security to the sector following the pandemic, as well as consulting with parents on how to ensure childcare provision meets their needs and supports their return to work. This review should include but not be limited to future sector funding allocations, and so should be separate from the ongoing Spending Review process. The Government should set the terms of reference for this review within two months, with a view to publishing the findings of the review by next summer.* (Paragraph 59)

### Recognising new parents' needs

19. We welcome the long-term vision of the Government's Best Start for Life review, but to date covid-19 recovery funding aimed at children aged under 2 appears to

have been unjustifiably neglected compared to the funding made available for older children. As we emerge from the pandemic, the Government must ensure it invests proportionately in the infrastructure which supports these families. (Paragraph 63)

20. *Ahead of the 2021 Spending Review, we recommend that the Government assess which elements of the Best Start for Life Review's implementation could be accelerated—in particular, opportunities to grow the health visiting workforce—and provide targeted funding to help achieve this.* (Paragraph 64)
21. We welcome the steps taken by the Government and the NHS to provide pregnant women with relevant information as the vaccine rollout continues and as social restrictions are eased. It is vital these efforts are maintained so that pregnant women are effectively supported to protect themselves from covid-19. In particular, it is crucial the Government continues to build on the success of the vaccine programme by continuing to encourage pregnant women to be vaccinated. (Paragraph 67)
22. *The Government should continue to work with health authorities to communicate information about pregnancy and covid-19, including vaccine safety and emerging data on the risks of covid-19 when pregnant, to support informed decisions by pregnant women.* (Paragraph 68)
23. We are disappointed that the Government is yet to act to resolve inconsistencies in the availability or treatment of parental leave and pay entitlements for groups including self-employed adoptive parents, special guardians, and recipients of Maternity Allowance on Universal Credit, despite our report last year highlighting the financial and other negative impacts this can have on these families and recommending how these issues could be resolved. (Paragraph 71)
24. *We restate our recommendations from last year, that the treatment of Maternity Allowance and Statutory Maternity Pay in Universal Credit should be equalised; that parental benefits available to self-employed birth parents should be extended to self-employed adoptive parents; and that parental leave and pay should be offered to special guardians.* (Paragraph 72)

## Conclusion

25. The Government's response to our report last year failed to acknowledge the need for urgent action to support new parents, rejecting almost all of our recommendations. One year on, many of the concerns we raised remain live issues. While the enormous demands of managing the nation's response to the pandemic must be recognised, it is bitterly disappointing that the Government has failed to invest in catch-up services that could have helped mitigate the impact on new parents and their children of the first lockdown, or progressed crucial employment protections for new parents. We believe responding to the diverse needs of this group requires cross-Government buy-in and should be seen as a priority moving forward from the pandemic. (Paragraph 76)
26. *Given the multifaceted impact the pandemic has had on new parents, and to ensure their needs are specifically considered going forward, the Government should publish a covid-19 recovery strategy for new parents alongside its response to this report, and*

*should report on progress against this strategy by next summer. This strategy should bring together all Government actions to support new parents following the covid-19 pandemic and should set targets and timeframes for how Government support will be delivered. (Paragraph 77)*



## Annex: Recommendations from July 2020 report

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Recommendation 1: The Government should capture data on the uptake of parental leave, as well as pay, so that any future review of parental leave arrangements can consider the extent to which parents from all groups are able to use their entitlements.

Recommendation 2: As a matter of urgency the Government should consider whether Maternity Allowance should be considered as earnings in the same way as Statutory Maternity Pay and should not lead to deductions from Universal Credit.

Recommendation 3: The Government should publish clear new guidance for employees and employers, including dedicated pages on GOV.UK, on supporting employees returning from parental leave that explains clearly their options and responsibilities.

Recommendation 4: We recommend that the Government publish clear guidance for employers on their obligations in respect of pregnant women who cannot safely socially distance at work, including making clear that pregnant women have a right to be suspended on full pay if they cannot work safely.

Recommendation 5: We also recommend that the Government extend the furlough scheme to include all pregnant women, so that an additional safety net is available to both pregnant women and their employers.

Recommendation 6: The Government was able to amend the Statutory Maternity Pay calculations to disregard the lower income of periods on furlough. We recommend the Government should also do so for women whose incomes have fallen through no fault of their own because their employers have failed to follow the Government's guidance on how pregnant women should be treated.

Recommendation 7: We recommend that the Government amend the terms of the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme to take into account periods of maternity and parental leave, to avoid discriminating against new parents.

Recommendation 8: We support the call of more than 226,000 petitioners and urge the Government to reconsider its decision not to extend parental leave and pay for families during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 9: The Government should review the provision of health visitor services in light of Covid-19 and consider funding increased numbers of health visitors and other allied professionals to ensure that vulnerable families are identified and given the support they need.

Recommendation 10: The Government should provide an update on its discussions with the baby group sector as part of its response to this report.

Recommendation 11: The Government should fund and provide additional catch-up support targeted at this cohort of parents to enable them to access both the professional and more informal support that plays such an important role during the first few months of parenting.

Recommendation 12: The Government should extend maternity dentist provision for new and expectant mothers affected by the pandemic for at least six months, so new mothers have the opportunity to access this important benefit.

Recommendation 13: The Government should fund and provide additional professional and mental health support especially targeted at this cohort of parents, and their children, in addition to its wider plans to significantly expand mental health services provided by the NHS.

Recommendation 14: The Government should extend adoption leave and pay for adoptive parents who have been affected by the pandemic for three months.

Recommendation 15: The Government should consider equalising the benefits for self-employed adoptive parents to those of other self-employed parents. This could be a pilot scheme for those who became new parents during the pandemic, to inform the Government's wider review on parental leave.

Recommendation 16: The Government should consider whether entitlements and benefits for parental leave and pay can be extended to special guardians.

Recommendation 17: In advance of the planned delivery of neonatal leave and pay in 2023, the Government should pilot the introduction of these reforms for those affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. If a success, the date of the general introduction of these measures could be brought forward.

Recommendation 18: The Government should prioritise rapid testing for parents of babies in neonatal care.

Recommendation 19: Conduct an urgent short-term review of funding for the childcare sector to ensure that it survives the current crisis, and if required, provide emergency funding to the childcare sector to ensure that there are sufficient childcare places for parents due to return to work.

Recommendation 20: Consider an independent review of childcare provision, including the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure that future Government funding is effective and that the sector is sustainable and works for all in the long term.

Recommendation 21: We recommend that the Government should prioritise the necessary legislation to extend redundancy protection as soon as possible and provide a timetable for its introduction and implementation.

Recommendation 22: We recommend that the Government considers extending the period in which pregnant women and new parents may bring claims before the employment tribunal to 6 months from dismissal on a temporary or permanent basis in light of current challenges posed by Covid-19.

The Government's response to our report and recommendations was received by the Committee on 7 September 2020 and published on 9 September 2020. The response is available on the Committee's website.<sup>117</sup>

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117 Petitions Committee, Second Special Report of Session 2019–21, [The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental leave: Government Response to the Committee's First Report](#), HC 770

# Formal minutes

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**Tuesday 21 September 2021**

## **Members present**

Tonia Antoniazzi, in the Chair

Elliot Colburn

Martyn Day

Nick Fletcher

## **Impact of covid-19 on new parents: one year on**

Draft Report (*Impact of covid-19 on new parents: one year on*) proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 77 agreed to.

Annex agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 134.

## **Adjournment**

[Adjourned till to Tuesday 19 October at 2pm]

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Wednesday 14 July 2021

**Bethany Power**, Petition Signatory; **Emily Tredget**, Co-Founder, Happity [Q1-7](#)

**Dr Sarah McMullen**, Director of Impact & Engagement, NCT (National Childbirth Trust); **Sue Armstrong Brown**, Chief Executive, Adoption UK; **Sally Hogg**, Head of Policy and Campaigning, Parent-Infant Foundation [Q8-22](#)

**Neil Leitch**, Chief Executive, Early Years Alliance; **Joeli Brearley**, Founder, Pregnant Then Screwed; **Rosalind Bragg**, Director, Maternity Action [Q23-42](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

ICP numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Petitions Committee - Summary of survey: Impact of Covid-19 on new parents - one year on ([ICP0001](#))

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the publications page of the Committee's website.

### Session 2019-21

<b>Number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Reference</b>
1st	The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave	HC 526
2nd	The impact of Covid-19 on university students	HC 527