



Women and Equalities Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA
Tel 020 7219 6123 Email womeqcom@parliament.uk Website www.parliament.uk

From the Chair

Karen Bradley
Procedure Committee, Chair

By email

8 December 2021

Dear Karen,

Voting by proxy

We are aware that the Procedure Committee is currently undertaking a review of proxy voting arrangements, currently in place for parental absence, to see whether they should be broadened to cover other circumstances.

As part of our inquiry into a Gender Sensitive Parliament, we are considering the various sources of support to Members of Parliament who are parents. Proxy voting is a relatively new arrangement, which has been welcomed.

We would like to put forward suggestions for the Proxy Voting Scheme as they relate to parental leave. The current scheme covers:

- Seven months for the biological mother of a baby, or for the primary or single adopter of a baby or child, of which a maximum of one month shall be taken before the due date or adoption date and a maximum of six months after the due date or adoption date.
- Two weeks for the biological father of a baby, the partner of the person giving birth or the second adopter of a baby or child.

The scheme also covers complications relating to childbirth, at the Speaker's discretion and in consultation with the Member.

Parity for biological mothers and fathers

The wording of the scheme assumes that the primary carer of a baby (where the baby is not adopted) will always be the biological mother, and therefore that the only MPs who require proxy voting cover following the birth will be women. It is, of course, possible that the biological father may be the primary carer of the baby, whilst the mother returns to work. This is the principal that underpins shared parental leave policies.

The Proxy Voting Scheme does not distinguish adopters of a baby by sex, but simply by primary or secondary adopter. We are not clear why adoptive fathers who are



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MPs should be able to make use of proxy voting arrangements but not biological fathers.

The scheme should be updated to recognise the, now widely accepted, fact that a couple may opt for the biological mother to return to work and for the biological father to care for the baby. The scheme should therefore reference the primary carer of the baby, not the biological mother.

Reference to due date

The policy references the 'due date' when setting out the duration for biological mothers. Where the scheme refers to the period following the 'due date', this should be changed to 'due date or birth date, whichever is later'. As currently worded, if a baby is born more than one month premature, the mother/primary carer would only be eligible for a proxy vote at the discretion of the Speaker, until one month before the due date.

Complications

A Member should be eligible for a proxy vote in circumstances where there are complications relating to pregnancy, as well as childbirth.

Duration of the dispensation

The duration of time which the primary carer of a baby is eligible to have a proxy vote for should be for up to one year after the birth date.¹ This is in line with standard public sector leave entitlements.

I know that your deadline for written submissions has now passed but I hope you will still be able to consider our proposals.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP

Chair, Women and Equalities Committee

¹ In the case of babies in neonatal care, the Government has said it will make provision for up to 12 weeks of paid leave