

Follow up evidence from Happity (GRC0030) September 2020
Relating to Second Special Report - The impact of COVID-19 on maternity and parental leave: Government Response to the Committee's First Report (HC 770)

Executive Summary & Recommendations:

- New parents have had little, if any support during lockdown, and this is negatively impacting their mental health on a large scale, which will have impacts on their babies lives
- Government has recognised that baby groups are important, but actions aren't positively supporting this
- The 6 person max rules (which includes babies and children) is exacerbating the situation for new parents, and venues are pulling the plug on classes that had just restarted due to (incorrectly) believing they no longer can
- Classes aren't resuming in the volume required (only 5% so far) as no guidance for this specific industry has been made meaning there are prohibitive barriers to restarting
- The Government needs to give dedicated attention to helping this sector reopen - clear specific guidelines for the under-5s to enable private supply to come back much more rapidly whilst children centres / stay and plays remain closed for epidemiological reasons and informal meetings are restricted to 6
- But they need to be careful how they solve the access problem to ensure steps made in "levelling up" for families are not negated; vouchers similar to the eat out to help our scheme would be advised
- The Government should consult with industry experts in creating / updating guidelines as they have inadvertently caused more issues over the past week despite clearly trying to help this sector

1. New parents have had little support during lockdown

Firstly I would like to express my gratitude for the hard work the Petitions Committee has put into this petition. As a mother who struggled with severe post-natal depression and anxiety for 2 years my concern throughout Covid has been on the mental health impacts on new parents, and subsequently their children.

As the co-founder of Happity, the UK's leading platform for baby and toddler classes, I have been in the privileged position of hearing the struggles new parents and providers have had over the past 6 months. We run with the purpose to help maintain mental wellness due to my experience, and so have been involved in various campaigns and discussions with Government to help at this time.

My co-founder, Sara Tateno, and I are highly experienced having worked in corporate strategy and operations, and both studied Economics at Oxbridge. Not only have we spent the past 5 years working with this sector in depth, representing thousands of different types of class providers, but we also have direct lived experience of the issues facing new mums today.

I have therefore been saddened by the time this response has taken, and of course the overall outcome given not just the social impacts, but the economic impact this will have on the UK. I was surprised that only one of the recommendations was agreed to, although very much look forward to meeting with the BEIS Minister to

share our unique insights and experience to enable the baby & toddler sector to successfully reopen.

New parents really needed some hope to keep them mentally well at the moment, and now this has been taken away, they are really struggling. This has always been, and will always be my main concern regarding Covid and new parents, and why even before the Petitions Committee contacted me regarding talking at the first session, I had spoken to as many mental health and government depts as I could to flag the issues that I saw coming.

Firstly I am saddened because, maternity leave in Britain, isn't as generous as quoted. Whilst it is amongst the longest, it is sadly lacking in terms of financial support – actually being one of the worst in the developed world. This means that those who can afford to take the full year can, those without savings or significant income from their partner cannot. This has been further exacerbated by Covid with incomes being reduced at worst, or the threat of this at best. The mental impact of finances is bad at the best of times, but whilst we face a recession and many out of work, finding a new job is even harder. For a Government who wishes to level up the experience of families, this needs to be improved.

Secondly, this response expects employers to be the “good guys” and keep to the guidance in terms of how parents, and in particular women on maternity leave, are treated with regards to childcare. Daily I see women asking for advice after tricky discussions with HR where they've been told that childcare isn't the problem of the employer, or that they can't go onto unpaid leave and so are forced to resign. This is hugely impacting their mental health – which on top of the mental struggles of starting a new family, particularly during lockdown, means they are requiring, and will require significant support which they cannot currently access.

Additionally, this does not help those parents who cannot be furloughed, for example if they are key workers. If they cannot find childcare, and grandparents are still advised to remain 2m or 1m with a mask, who is supposed to care for their children for them to return to work?

Overall, it seems the Government are refusing the maternity petition on the grounds of theoretical things that should be available (routine dental care, child care etc) but have ignored the evidence that these things aren't actually currently available.

It is widely acknowledged that women are at their most vulnerable (in terms of Mental Health) in the first year after birth – with maternal suicide the biggest killer of new mums. There has also been a lot of acknowledgement that lockdown and the general anxiety around Covid has impacted most people in society and added to the existing mental health challenges.

A crisis, that I flagged to the DHSC through a number of lengthy telephone calls. The Government have an opportunity to address this proactively and have ignored it. It will cost more, economically and socially, in the long run. Perinatal mental health costs £8.1bn per year in normal times (Bauer, A., Parsonage, M. (2014)), but 3 times more parents are currently struggling (reported by MMHA). The impact on their children (and generations beyond) will be seen in lack of productivity, social disruption, as well as the obvious mental health costs.

As I mentioned above, perinatal mental health problems carry an economic and social long-term cost to society of c£8.1 billion for each one-year cohort of births in the UK, and this year is set to be at least **£23billion**.

70% of this cost is attributed to the child and 30% to the mother.

Split by cost:

20% is attribute to health and social care costs

30% attributed to lost productivity

50% attributed to human suffering

Split by Child and Adult:

- Child: (11% Health & Social Care, 5% Education, 4% Criminal Justice, 54% QALY losses*, 10% Productivity Losses)
- Mother: (33% Health & Social Care, 46% QALY loss*, 18% Productivity Loss)

* The quality-adjusted life year or quality-adjusted life-year (QALY) is a generic measure of disease burden, including both the quality and the quantity of life lived. It is used in economic evaluation to assess the value for money of medical interventions. One QALY equates to one year in perfect health.

As an aside, I had worked with a council, looking at how implementing Happity - our socially motivated platform helping parents to create community through baby and toddler groups - in their area to help parents would significantly reduce their part of the £8.1bn costs. We aim to be preventative, not reactive. This is this moment to be preventative AND reactive. However, with the Government's help, and at no cost, we could implement this across councils UK-wide. This would reduce the huge mental health bill coming our way, and help parents at a time when they have not felt supported.

The statement that "with the relaxation of social distancing rules that we have recently been able to introduce, there are also now more opportunities for new parents to spend their Maternity, Paternity, Adoption Leave and Shared Parental Leave in the way that they had envisaged spending it prior to the pandemic" shows the lack of understanding of the Government of the situation most new parents have found themselves in.

In the summer holidays, when much of life was returning to normal – albeit at a distance – I was further concerned for the mental health of new parents. I, as a parent of a 5yo could take advantage of the sudden rule changes which enabled summer camps to open up. If I had chosen to, I could have sent my 5yo to a different camp every day of the summer, thus mixing – with limited to no social distancing – with hundreds of different children and teachers.

However, at this same time, new parents were still not able (they were actually allowed, but in reality none could open due to lack of guidelines meaning venues/insurers weren't allowing it) to go to baby classes (where they could manage social distancing), or have other family members (particularly grandparents) touch their child and therefore couldn't have them look after their children for even an hour

as babies and toddlers need to be touched – to be fed, helped, bathed and changed. The mental health of new parents at this point actually deteriorated further. Suddenly they actually felt worse – because the rest of the world was allowed to go to the pub, or send their children to camps, and they still couldn't really change their lives. They were still in lockdown whilst the rest of society continued more back to normal.

Additionally, as this response has taken so long, for many parents maternity leave is now over – they cannot therefore spend their maternity leave as they envisaged – many can only afford to take 6 months, and that 6 months was taken up with Covid.

More specifically, regarding **Recommendation 9 & 11**, whilst the continuation of community health services is mentioned, the actual experience of new mums is very different. Many have not spoken to a health visitor throughout the pandemic, have had diagnosis of Post Natal Depression (PND) missed or responses delayed, and of course there is so much more than health visitor provision that is being missed – Children's Centres for example provide much needed support both professionally, but also through support groups. These have all been stopped, with no alternative provided.

The additional funds mentioned are welcome, however funding the suppliers directly can cause significant market issues - the class providers are struggling to return in a financially viable way, and if the wrong interventions are put into place then it will undermine the market and causes already precarious businesses to fail unnecessarily.

In normal times, the services provided by council / community are a substantially different type from private provision so don't compete directly (i.e. freeflow stay & plays vs a structured group led by a practitioner).

However, since stay & play groups cannot be operated safely at the moment, councils may be tempted to intervene and fund specific individual providers to make those free / cheap and increase provision that way - but this will be damaging to the economy.

Vouchers to increase demand would be a better solution in this instance. Where parents can choose what is most useful for them and their child.

Regarding **Recommendation 12** I was surprised to see Dental provisions will not be extended. Free Dental care is provided to women due to low calcium during and after pregnancy. Poor dental health is known to be an indicator of other issues, so missing out on check-ups is extremely detrimental. The report stated that since June appointments can be made, however many women have reported to me that they cannot get an appointment still.

2. The lack of clear, specific guidelines for the sector is a prohibitive barrier

I was happy to see that **Recommendation 10** for the Government to provide an update on its discussions with the baby group sector as part of its response to this report again being responded to positively with them recognising “the important role that parent and baby groups play in supporting new parents—including self-employed mothers”. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said they are happy to host a meeting with groups in this sector to better understand

how they can be supported to help parents return to work—particularly when parents have experienced mental health issues as a result of Covid-19 and lockdown.

I am glad that steps have now been made to investigate a date for this meeting, although it is yet to be confirmed.

I have also been in touch with Nadine Dorries and Vicky Ford, both of whom have responded, but in both instances the key issues have been left unaddressed.

There has been a big focus in responses I have had on Early Years and Schools – which is very much needed, however the baby and toddler market is also very much needed and so far has been ignored. In fact Andrea Leadsom said at the recent APPG meeting that to truly level up the prospects of children, the levelling up needs to be done from birth, or even during pregnancy. If we are to be truly preventative, and not wait until we need to be reactive at much higher cost, we need to be thinking about the 0-2s.

It is of no use to a mum of a baby or toddler that a response – much like Boris Johnson's response at the first PMQs when asked about babies – is about schools returning. Babies don't go to schools, and with many nurseries now closed down, or taking fewer children due to restrictions, new parents still can't find places in many instances.

The other area the responses have focused on are about business support available to small businesses. However, many of classes providers haven't been eligible for any support (ourselves included).

Adding to this the fact that no clear guidance has been given for classes where parents are also in attendance means that classes have found it incredibly difficult to reopen (if they can yet at all) – so parents have no support from commercial or community groups, and providers have no revenue or Government support. This is why the £2bn industry is on its knees.

Baby & toddler classes have struggled to come back to this point as they are having to talk to their council, insurer and venue and get approval from all three to run. However because there are no direct guidelines for this industry (councils often say to refer to out of school guidelines but these are only for classes with no parents in attendance, and then referred to early years guidance but again this is about nurseries not baby classes with parents joining) different councils/insurers/venues are interpreting classes to be in different silos (sports/education etc) and therefore some saying yes and others saying no. The likelihood of all three (councils, insurers and venues) saying yes is very low (hence why we currently only have c5% of our normal classes up and running again despite them being allowed for 2 months).

It's an easy thing to do - recognise their importance to society, their unique predicament, and give them the attention they deserve to have their own guidelines, like out of school activities, performing arts, etc. to enable this sector to return fully and with confidence. It would help the economy as then the £2bn industry can start up again, AND it would help all the new parents who are broken by the news of the petition not getting anywhere.

I'd also advocate rolling the class guidance petition (<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/331261>) into this one for the debate on the 5th Oct - because having the guidance (and ideally vouchers, but providers would just be

happy with guidance) as the baby class meeting was the only point they agreed to as it helps the economy, parents, and mental health.

3. Whilst some classes are reopening there is still an access crisis about to happen

The vast majority of provision previously was via community 'stay and plays' and children's centres - but these are the most challenging types of provision to reopen safely under the guidelines, due to social distancing for toddlers and the no-shared equipment rules.

Private provision will and should grow to fill this space, (although the barriers mean this has been slow going), but it will present serious access issues because:

- * increased costs / prices

- * trend towards block / term bookings to provide financial security for class providers - (whereas previously drop-ins were the predominant behaviour - so a 10 class term of 10 spaces could potentially have catered for 100 different parents in the past, whereas now it may only reach 10 families.)

The updates from the Government on 9th Sept regarding 6 people maximum also threw many classes providers, who had spent months pouring over different pieces of guidelines, spent money on Covid training, new equipment, and higher venue costs, to think that once again having just relaunched classes, they were going to have to refund classes, and again face closure. In fact many classes have shut down forever even though the demand is there. Classes are typically booking out within a few hours due to the high demand from parents, and many parents are reporting that class providers aren't even allowing them to join waiting lists as they are so long.

However, since the updates of 9th Sept, despite the new rules meaning no change for class providers as they are businesses not informal gatherings, many have misunderstood and have got in touch saying they want to cancel their reopening and refund all their classes because they are seriously worried about not being in the exceptions list.

In many cases it is their venues or insurers telling them they can no longer return as they have read different - equally non-specific guidelines.

We ask that "baby & toddler classes" are included in the exceptions list like sports etc are.

"Baby playgroups" are now excluded - however playgroups usually refer either to nurseries, or stay and plays. This has created a serious new issue and health/covid risk by specifying 'Children's playgroups' rather than 'Classes for under 5s', as most playgroups cannot return safely within the guidelines at present. They need to consult with us urgently on the matter of guidelines for this sector.

We have also found that despite being in the exclusions list, venues etc are using the guidelines instead of the exclusions. And because the guidelines are so confusing as they don't anywhere address this sector specifically, this industry isn't returning even though it can. Only 5% of classes have yet returned despite being allowed for 2 months.

Children centres are still struggling to reopen as there are many barriers preventing this. They appear to have been entirely overlooked and undervalued by the government, with nobody doing anything to help them re-open; aside from Happity! So, parents already have a limited pool of options (and sadly those with lower income still have no options).

4. What the Government needs to do

The Government needs to give urgent, dedicated attention to helping this sector reopen with clear, specific guidelines for the under-5s to enable private supply to come back much more rapidly to fill the hole left by no children centres or community offerings.

The Government needs to address the access problem, as there are good epidemiological reasons for why stay & plays are difficult to run covid safely - but they need to be careful how they solve the access problem.

In the past they funded children's centres and that was fine because they do not compete directly with class providers (freeflow stay & play, vs a practitioner led structured class) - we believe funding specific suppliers will undermine the financial viability of the industry, and instead want to see support to increase demand (like the objectives of the eat out to help out scheme).

We at Happity are keen to be consulted with regarding guidelines and schemes - we have the unique understanding of both parents and the provider industry - commercial and council/community run as we support both on our platform. We believe this is important, as whilst we hugely appreciate the effort the Government has put in the past couple of weeks to help new parents and the baby group sector, a lack of understanding of the issues and likely solutions has actually made the situation worse, with more business closures and less support for parents.