

**Follow up written evidence from The Smallest Things (GRC0035) 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)**

As a charity that promotes the good health of premature babies and their families, The Smallest Things is extremely disappointed by the Government's response to the Committee's reasonable – and reasoned – recommendations. More than a quarter of a million people signed the [petition to extend paid maternity leave](#) by three months and their voices have been ignored. We fully support the Petitions Committee's decision to schedule a Covid-safe Westminster Hall Debate on this as a matter of urgency.

Neonatal Leave & Pay

Following [years of campaigning](#) for extended, paid neonatal leave by The Smallest Things, the Government finally recognised the unique needs of parents of premature babies in this year's Budget and made a promise to help them through Neonatal Leave & Pay. Which begs the question: why now, when those same parents are facing yet more layers of difficulty and distress due to Covid-19, are they failing to support them? While we appreciate the complexities involved in passing legislation and setting up new systems, there must be a solution that's quick to implement. For instance, we'd be keen to know if the Government would consider setting up a one-off neonatal grant for this emergency Covid-19 period as a stopgap until the Employment Bill is brought in?

Parents' voices matter

We've heard from numerous struggling parents who've spent (or are spending) much of their precious parental leave in neonatal intensive care units during Covid-19 and they feel let down and excluded from the Government's various emergency rescue packages. Please read [Salma's story](#) as just one heart-breaking example. She adds these words in support of this evidence:

"Covid-19 stole from my family even the most basic comforts that provide solace during a NICU experience - being there for your baby and for each other."

“My time with my baby was limited to two hours. For the rest of the day, my born-too-soon-baby (who, as every piece of research said, would benefit from contact with his parents) lay in an incubator alone. My husband was not permitted access at all for 8 of the 13 weeks our baby remained in NICU. Our baby was resuscitated in that time. Because of Covid-19 I had to go into the NICU alone to see him back on a ventilator. When I cried by his incubator, my husband couldn’t be there to put his arm around me. It was months before we were afforded the opportunity to sit together in the NICU with my eldest son as a family of four – something we could have done so much more easily had our baby not been born on the cusp of a global pandemic. Instead it only happened once in 95 days.”

Salma Ishaque, mum to Eesa born at 27 weeks’ gestation on 11 March 2020

We urge the Government to reconsider, particularly on the issue of bringing forward Neonatal Leave and Pay as currently planned for 2023 (Recommendation 17 in the Committee’s Report) or look at alternative rescue packages to help those parents going through the toughest of times during the toughest of our times. Parents like Salma, who have spent weeks and months in a neonatal unit with restricted “access” to their babies and little support, have watched from the sidelines as schemes like furlough have been brought in at pace and are left wondering why they have been excluded from any help. Please don’t forget them.

[ends]