

Written evidence submitted by the Petitions Committee (GRC0003)

Petitions Committee: online evidence session on maternity leave

Activity

The Petitions Committee used a post on [Facebook](#) and an online survey to ask for their experiences of maternity, adoption and parental leave during the coronavirus outbreak.

The survey was sent to people who signed the petition calling on the Government to "[Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)", which received over 100,000 signatures in less than two days.

We have summarised the key themes below and illustrated them with quotes from respondents.

Response

24k responses on Facebook

26k responses to survey

Key themes:

Family bonding

- When we asked why maternity leave should be extended, the most popular reason from our survey respondents was: "To spend time with family and friends who are not part of your household"
- Many respondents highlighted the impact of the absence of grandparents during lockdown, as future caregivers to the baby and a support system for new parents.

- Some respondents worried about how their babies would cope with being around new people after spending time with only parents and siblings.
- Many respondents acknowledged that while the early months couldn't be recovered, extra time off would allow them to introduce their children to family and friends in a gradual way.

Quotes:

Amy: "I feel that the extension would benefit my baby immensely. I will be returning to work and leaving my daughter with family who are currently virtual strangers to her. An extra 3 months would give me more time to familiarise her with my family and create a bond with them. The last thing a mother wants is to be worried that her child is distressed as they do not know the person they have been placed in the care of while at work."

Louise: "He only met his grandparents a few times before social distancing started and has never met most other family members or close friends. These are the people who'll be spending time with him and looking after him when he's older, I want him to get to know them and be comfortable with them."

Nicola: "My son was born one week after lockdown was implemented so nothing has been as we expected. He will be one month old tomorrow and he has never met his grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. His only surroundings have been our home. I worry that if lockdown continues (which I don't disagree with!) his development will be hindered; he has no social interaction out with myself and his dad, he has not spent

time with other infants or been held by another person..."

"My child has had hardly any interaction with both sets of grandparents and other family members to the point that she has no idea who they are then they see her through the window. She is 7months old and should recognise her own grandparents at this stage. I am worried about what her lack of interaction with other babies and children has done to her and how this will affect her when she starts nursery."

Groups and classes

- After seeing family and friends, one of the main things new parents reported missing out on was attending classes and baby groups.
- For those wishing to attend classes and groups, the main reason was for their baby's development. Many felt that classes were important for stimulation and learning as well as for the social benefits.
- Especially for first time mothers, these groups were considered a vital source of information, friendship and support – "building the village".
- Classes and groups were acutely missed by those struggling with specific problems, whether they were parenting challenges such as problems breastfeeding, or mental health issues such as post-natal depression (PND).

Quotes:

Deirdre: "I'm a first time mum with an 8 week old. Lockdown has greatly impacted us as we have had significant issues with breastfeeding and have been unable to get the face to face support we needed. Normally

we would have been able to attend breastfeeding support groups to get this and also meet other mums and babies...."

Emma: "As a first time Mum, I had just gained the confidence to leave the house with my new baby alone and had enjoyed my first few weeks at baby classes where I was able to meet new mums and not feel so alone on this journey. It also meant my daughter was able to begin developing social skills and learn how to be around other children. As a mum who will be returning to work full time this skill is invaluable as my daughter will be in a nursery setting with new adults and children."

"Stimulation and socialisation for baby which is provided by professionals, who also offer up to date information to parents to further education of new parents. There are resources online but being in isolation makes it difficult to know what to trust online and often isn't provided by professional bodies."

"With my first, classes and a routine out of the house were a savior to my mental health. They also helped develop the bond I had with my daughter as well as my confidence as a mother. I made friends with other mums and had a support network"

Joanne: "For me it's the fact my baby has never had interaction with any other baby and only been with me not even my family and I will be throwing him into nursery when this is over to go back to work. He hasn't built bonds with anyone else, never played with another child and I won't even be there to ease him into this strange situation or be there to comfort him when he cried because he knows no different than his mummy cuddles. I don't care I haven't met any other mums."

Getting out and about

- As well as the social aspects of seeing others and attending specific activities, some respondents highlighted the importance of getting out of the house.
- Many respondents said they would like the extra time to adapt and gain confidence with their children outside of the home.

Quotes:

Lex: "For many new mums they haven't known life with a baby outside of lockdown and I believe this will take time to adapt! Mums are going to need to gain confidence to take their babies out and establish feeding outside of the home."

Harriet: "There's no doubt that lockdown has affected not just bonding experiences, but also the confidence of a lot of mums. Feeling safe to take your baby outside, in the car, to the supermarket - it's terrifying when you haven't done it before. Having the confidence to feed and change your baby in public, have others hold them etc. Missed appointments, nursery visits, classes- all things that need to be done and can't be right now. An extra 3 months would give mums a chance to reset and get into the swing of what needs to happen next, without the restrictions of lockdown."

Mental health

- Across all the activities and experiences people identified as being missed during lockdown, a recurring theme was the effect this would have on the mothers' mental health.

- As well as missing the support of family, friends and peers both informally and in structured classes, many respondents mentioned receiving less professional support from health visitors and clinics than they would otherwise expect, which raised anxiety for parents.
- The lack of social interaction was felt very acutely by respondents already struggling with PND, or those who struggling with anxiety.

Quotes:

Davinia: "...Although I feel & agree lockdown was totally the right thing to do it has had a huge impact on my well being. Having suffered PND after my 2nd child I was so grateful for the support from various groups I attended, it really helped me to get back on track...."

Eve: "Second time Mum on maternity leave. Due to the closure of nurseries, I now have to educate and entertain my pre-schooler full time along with looking after my 4month old. As such, my baby is not having the time or opportunity for the sensory and stimulating activities we would otherwise have been doing and as such I fear for her development. Whilst I am making the most of our time together as a family, and I'm in little doubt that it will inevitably benefit the bond between my children, I'm concerned for my own bond, having sought treatment and counselling both pre and post birth for depression and anxiety. This is of course further compounded by social distancing, not being able to receive the one to one support of my councillor or family at this difficult time, or had access to other mothers in similar positions. They say it takes a village to raise a child, and and present, that village does not

exist. I fail to see how this global crisis at such a point in my baby's life will not have a detrimental impact on both of us."

Kim: "I'm a first time mum, struggling with anxiety and depression. I was having bonding and socialisation difficulty with my baby and I, and was attending group therapy which understandably had to be stopped, but my mental health has taken a decline since, despite phone consultations. I was getting much needed support in caring for myself and my baby which I feel is now gone, as a phone call is no real replacement. I grieve for the loss of this as I had gotten so much better and have declined again due to this lockdown."

"I suffered PND with my 1st and with the lockdown it is creeping in now with my 2nd. I would love for it to be extended so I can bond properly with my child and get my mental health back to normal."

"This has had a huge impact on our mental health and I know we need more time to adjust to the new normal before then adjusting to work too."

(From a healthcare worker): "It has been very difficult to support the mothers I work with. Many are feeling low and struggling with normal challenges of having a newborn because they can't get out and about to meet other mothers. [...] I run live Zoom classes and Mums say it really brightens their day, but I am very limited in what I can offer. Many have been grief stricken that this amazing time with their baby has been snatched away from them. Instead of making supportive networks, new friends and giving their babies plenty of new experiences, they've had to make do with stilted online discussion and home made sensory corners. They are doing a great job but are lonely and

low because of isolation. I would like them to have more maternity leave to enable them to make those lifelong friends and have those experiences with their babies."

Returning to work and childcare

- For those approaching the end of their maternity leave, one of the biggest worries for respondents was returning to work without adequate time to source childcare, and prepare their child for the transition.
 - Some respondents mentioned having to stay home unpaid as they could no longer ask isolating relatives to help with childcare, or found their previously arranged childcare had closed.
 - Some respondents said they had to return to work early due to the financial pressures of the pandemic.
 - Other respondents described being unable to visit nurseries or childminders to prepare for a future return. Many described the anxiety this caused, from worrying about leaving children in unfamiliar settings they could not visit beforehand, and the chance of separation anxiety for babies who had not been away from parents for several months.
 - There was also concern, especially amongst key workers, about returning to work in high risk settings where they may be exposed to coronavirus.
 - Some respondents had seen their hours/income change due to coronavirus. This affected their ability to afford childcare, and in some cases affected their eligibility for free childcare hours.
 - Several respondents mentioned KIT days, which had either been lost or
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postponed. This deprived returning parents of both contact time and payment.

Quotes:

Kayleigh: "I have absolutely loved the time spent bonding with my little boy, but I'm very apprehensive to return to work. My partner and I are both teachers and I will have to select a nursery that I know nothing about. I can't book appointments to look around and see whether it's the right one for him to go to. Some of my options are not even open at the moment. Others are for key worker children which I feel will put him at risk because we will be working and exposing ourselves to the virus and he will be with other children of key workers who are doing the same. He doesn't know my mum or my family anymore as we've lost that time to bond with them. I'd like it extended so that I can return to normality a little with my boy before having to go straight back to work, so that he can adjust and get the social experiences that all children/ babies need."

Mari: "I have had to extend my maternity leave to take the unpaid portion to allow me to care for my child as nurseries have closed. This is causing us financial hardship. Extending the paid period would be beneficial to many families in my position."

"My baby hasn't seen any relatives or friends for weeks and weeks now. He's 10 months and I'm due back to work in August. I worry about how I will be able to leave him with family when I return to work. He won't know anyone, or know where he is. I don't think he will settle with anyone. Also my relative is in the high risk group so I might not even have any child care. 3 extra months off would give

me chance to find alternative child care and socialise him when lockdown is eased."

Emily: "...Thinking on a practical level I haven't had the opportunity to visit nurseries as I had planned to see where I would like my baby to be when I return to work, I am relying on Ofsted reports and websites but feel anxious about how I will decide on the right childcare and who I feel is right to look after my son..."

Sarah Darnley: "I think considerations should be made for mums who are returning to work during the coronavirus pandemic. My maternity leave ends today, I work for the NHS so will be returning to work and risking spreading the virus to my children because of this. My last couple of months on maternity leave have been really difficult for me mentally. As my maternity leave has ended, it cannot be extended therefore I think some serious consideration should be made for those returning to work between when lockdown began and when it ends..."

Kelly-Anne: "I've just gone back on Saturday. I work for the NHS on a covid ward so my last few weeks I spent being terrified of going back then to top it all off I had my 2 weeks annual leave cancelled that I had booked months ago to extend my leave (I should add everyone had their April annual leave cancelled not just me) it's hard enough going back from mat leave being anxious about leaving your baby without worrying about whether you're going to bring home a deadly virus to them."

our boy in December. This has been a great bonding experience for us but he's missing out on bonding with close family and socialising in other environments. When I do have to go back to work for the nhs I worry how he will be as not experienced anything else and already been pulled about...."

"Adoption leave is normally a period where you get to integrate your child into your family and social network. This is essential for their sense of identity and belonging!!! It would also open further opportunities for childcare once returning to work as positive and close relationships with your wider network could enable informal childcare solutions that would meet my child's needs."

"I will have to return to work at the end of my adoption leave as savings would have run out (I took additional unpaid leave to meet the adoption agency requirement). I am unable to explore childcare options at the moment due to settings closing, I can't facilitate sufficient settling in sessions for our daughter and I genuinely feel that at the point she will be in her attachment, ensuring that childcare is of high and attuned standards to her needs is crucial and potentially damaging if we are unable to get this right. This issue causes me great worry."

Adoption leave

- Adoptive parents who responded were concerned that the effects were particularly acute for their families.
- Some respondents mentioned having to cut short unpaid leave, intended to help adoptive children settle into family and friendship groups.
- Adoptive parents also voiced concern about the effect the changes and anxiety would have on children who had already experienced upheaval.

Quotes:

"The period of adoption leave following a child moving in with their forever family is a crucial time, both for the child as well as us as parents and our adoptive son as a brother. I strongly believe that the care and parenting that we provide during these crucial months are instrumental in addressing the damage done in early life, supports positive attachment patterns and enable our child to develop the skills they will need in later life. The reality is that adopted children already have more to battle than their peers and this initial period can really help in overcoming this. The inevitable disruption and anxiety that accompanies the pandemic has had far stretching effects on all areas and I sadly feel that it has disadvantaged my daughter in a way that I would love to have the opportunity to minimise through an extended leave period."

Samantha: "I completely agree it should be extended. I'm a first time mum that adopted

Older children

- We heard from parents with multiple children who were worried about the effect having older children at home during leave was having on their family.
- Many respondents mentioned needing to home-school older children, and that this was taking their attention away from babies, causing them guilt and concern for their bond.
- Some respondents also highlighted the risk to the bond between siblings, with the competing needs of older children and babies causing resentment.

get the 1:1 time that they need and it would also improve my mental health, feeling like I am failing them both constantly."

Quotes:

"My eldest child is normally in nursery. I should have been using this time to bond with my son but instead have been home schooling and caring for an older child. This has given me very little one on one time with my baby. i have also not been able to allow family members to visit or care for my baby so he has not been able to bond with them. This is obviously a very stressful time for everyone but for new mums who need the support of their families it is particularly difficult, exhausting and I have a great deal of guilt for not being able to give my baby the same opportunities and experiences as i did with my first child . We have not been able to attend any educational groups or socialise the baby at all which feels unfair and sad."

Pamela: "I worry that it will negatively impact their relationship as my 3 year old has begun to resent the time I have to spend with her 4 month year old brother. We had a second child with a good knowledge of the support we had in place, and it has all been taken away. If we had nurseries, grandparents or play dates, both my son and daughter could

Other views and alternative ideas to support new parents

- Whilst the majority of those who shared their experiences had signed the petition, or supported its request, we also heard from some who did not, or who raised alternative ideas for supporting new parents during the unique situation lockdown had created.
- Some highlighted the benefits that could be experienced by having both parents at home during this time.
- Another suggested allowing fathers to take additional paternity to leave now, to help new mothers cope with isolation and reduce the mental health impact.
- Several respondents on Facebook mentioned the entitlement to free dental care, and that this would run out for many before they were able to use it. This was seen as a crucial benefit to new mothers.
- Others suggested extending SMP to the unpaid portion of leave.
- The role of classes and baby groups in the development of very young babies was questioned by some.

Quotes:

"I absolutely think it sucks that babies and mums can't be with their extended families for growth and support, especially mums who have given birth not long before or during lockdown as this is a difficult time emotionally, but the point of maternity leave is for mum to be with baby, and that hasn't been affected."

"It may not have allowed families to have time with their wider family, but it has allowed the collapse family to spend quality time together, and fathers to have far more time with children than they previously would have."

"I'm on maternity leave and while I don't agree that it should be extended I do think we should have extended free dental care, many of us haven't been able to take advantage of our free dental treatment due to covid19. Dental care in pregnant women and new mums is very important."

"If the government could do anything they could at least extend the SMP to cover those last few months we are entitled to so we can make the most of our last precious weeks off with our baby."

"I think one of the most beneficial things would be to extend paternity leave for fathers. I understand that a lot of people are furloughed at the minute so this wouldn't apply to everyone but for those fathers who are key workers or are still working, if their paternity leave was extended or they were allowed to work more flexibly then it would give new mothers support that they can no longer receive from elsewhere. In such an already isolating time, with no face to face support from friends or family and less support than usual available from health care professionals having the support of your partner so you're not left feeling completely on your own (daunting for first time mothers) would be a huge help and possibly reduce the amount of mental health issues that can arise from such situations."