

Written evidence submitted by Emily Tredget, Co-Founder of Happity (GRC0017)

I'm Emily Tredget; a mother of a 5 year old little boy, and co-founder of Happity. I am writing today, further to my standing as an expert at the House of Commons Petitions Committee on 7th May 2020, to represent views of parents and the baby & toddler class industry, with a particular focus on mental wellness.

In addition, I struggled with post-natal depression and anxiety for 2 years after my son's birth. Since recovering, I have been actively involved with a number of perinatal mental health organisations and as such have reviewed a lot of the research in this area.

I set up Happity, because, from personal experience I found it is imperative that parents – whether they struggle with mental health or not – can connect and build their local community.

Happity.co.uk is an online platform which primarily connects parents through local (and now online) baby and toddler classes, but we also have a key mental health focus providing support and help in an accessible way.

Executive Summary:

- Government needs to take urgent action to support mental wellbeing amongst parents. This petition in particular highlights the needs of those on maternity leave, and whilst a response to this will have benefits for the youngest members of our society, our survey has revealed wide-ranging mental health issues affecting parents and children of all ages.

- Whilst in-person baby classes play a vital role in supporting parent wellbeing, the industry has reservations as to how soon it will be safe and viable for class providers to reopen them.

- In the interim, we have been able to recreate many of these benefits in an online environment, which with help, we believe we could strengthen further

- The industry faces a number of structural challenges in the online world, with widespread low-cost / free content undermining higher quality provision that would better meet mental wellbeing needs.

- Parents are also facing uncertain financial futures and therefore are finding it difficult to prioritise paying for their mental wellness

- There a number of steps the government could take to help this industry and promote the wellbeing of parents in both indirect (awareness) and direct (funding) support.
 - The first is in helping to highlight the benefits of these classes via referrals from Health Visitors and government directories, and to ensure that parents are aware that such classes exist - and that they are a very different experience from songs and videos on YouTube.
 - Secondly, to help overcome the barriers to initial trial, provide the funding for new parents to try their first few classes with approved class providers, and find something they enjoy - particularly those who've had babies since March and may have never attended a baby class before. For these parents, there will be low awareness of what a 'music and movement' versus 'sensory play' class means and what will be most suitable for them and their children.
 - Thirdly to fund parenting courses focusing on maintaining mental wellness as well as teaching skills parents cannot pick up from peers and family at this time

1. Covid19 is having a significantly negative impact on mental health in both parents and children. In turn, this will also have an ongoing, detrimental impact for the development of babies in this cohort.

78% of parents we surveyed felt lockdown has had a significantly negative effect on their mental health, affecting parents with children of all ages for a variety of reasons.

Even before covid19, up to 1 in 5 parents were suffering from a perinatal mental health illness, with research suggesting that this often leads to a lack of parent-child bonding, and poor interaction (eye contact and touch). This has a knock-on life-long impact, causing subdued-ness or over-activity in toddlers, and then anxiety in teenage girls and aggression in teenage boys due to underlying effects on the development of learning and memory, stress and emotional responses.

The cost of perinatal mental health was already estimated to be £8.1bn per year per cohort. That figure for this cohort of babies is going to be significantly higher. And with 70% of this cost attributed not to the mother's recovering, but to supporting their child throughout their life, this is something we need to investigate financially if not morally.

2. New parents do not have access to their normal support network and community. They have fewer opportunities to learn parenting skills from their peers, parents, and local baby & toddler classes

New parents currently have fewer opportunities to learn about parenting - learning they would normally get from local Children's Centres, health visitors, through baby classes, from speaking with peers in their community, and also observing how their own parents and relatives interact with their child.

Baby classes play a vital role in parent and child development, as they help to promote bonding and give parents both skills and confidence in how to interact with their child.

At the earliest stages, classes are very much about teaching parents the songs, movements, and the educational principles that will help them support their child's development for a long time to come - things that the average new parent is completely unaware of.

A large number of class practitioners are formally EYFS trained or have developed their class materials based on the EYFS framework and are parents themselves. They help explain to parents the stages of development for their child, show them what is age appropriate, the importance of repetition, and what is likely to stimulate vs. overstimulate them. For many parents, these classes help them identify what their child enjoys and gives them a wider repertoire to bring out smiles and laughter. It gives them ideas on how to foster early communication (such as baby signing), musicality, and learning vocabulary through songs.

Whilst babies may be spending more time with their parents right now, it seems likely that the quality of interaction may be significantly different vs. cohorts of new parents before covid19.

3. Parents greatly value the role of in-person baby classes in helping to maintain their mental wellness. Whilst they are keen for these to return, it is not clear this can be done safely.

One of the most important benefits of in-person baby classes is the emotional wellbeing of parents. Under normal circumstances, they provide a reason to get dressed and leave the house, and a way to meet other parents in your community. Health Visitors advise parents to attend classes in order to socialise, get outside and exercise (often through guided postnatal fitness classes), and distribute information about local classes within the baby Red Book.

Parents are currently missing this benefit, and online educational resources and videos that may help to educate parents (as per point 2 above) fall short in providing any social interaction or the opportunity to form local peer-to-peer relationships.

Whilst parents are keen for in-person classes to resume, these would typically take place indoors in fairly small spaces, often with elderly caregivers. It is not clear how this can be done safely in the foreseeable future; babies frequently place equipment in their mouths and attempting to keep children away from one another is stressful for parents.

4. Online classes, when done in the right way, can replicate many of the benefits of in-person classes

As an organisation with mental wellness of parents at the heart of its mission, Happity has worked closely with class providers to experiment with different types of provision and to develop an online format that provides the next best alternative to in-person classes.

Two thirds of parents who tried a variety of online class provision (including Facebook Lives, downloads and YouTube), said that of these, live interactive classes had the greatest positive impact on their mental health. Once a parent has tried interactive classes, they are very likely to continue.

Hosted through Zoom, Happity@Home classes are limited to a manageable number of families who are required to keep their cameras switched on for the class. The class practitioner can see them and interact with the children and both parents and children can respond to other families in the class too.

They are encouraged to stick with a regular timeslot and get to know other participants in their class, or to invite friends to join with them. They can also Facetime a grandparent to 'participate' alongside them, as many grandparents help with childcare and are missing the activities they would have been attending with their grandchildren.

Unlike one-way broadcasts, parents have reported that, much like with in-person classes, these interactive classes help to maintain structure in daily life. Having a set time ensures parents make an effort to go and provides an incentive to get washed and dressed! We also have plans to introduce cohort groupings, encouraging stronger relationships beyond the classes themselves.

Our network of baby & toddler class providers now runs over 500 of these classes each week – ranging from baby signing and massage to postnatal yoga, music and dance, as well as mental health webinars for parents in addition. It has the potential to be much bigger.

These classes are not only supporting thousands of parents, but are also enabling often independent class providers – typically parents themselves - to maintain their livelihood.

Whilst schools are closed and any social distancing measures remain in place, class providers are keen to continue online provision - for both their own safety and business survival. If classes are officially allowed to return too prematurely, they are unlikely to fill classes that have high fixed venue and teaching costs. Online classes present a lower financial risk.

5. Despite the positive health benefits, we are facing industry-wide challenges to deliver live classes sustainably. Uptake is currently being hindered, rather than helped, by government services.

Live interactive classes compete with a large amount of free content on YouTube and Facebook from celebrities and brands that, as one-way broadcasts, do not offer the same mental health benefits.

Typically, class providers are small, independent businesses with less of a voice on social media and barely-existent marketing budgets. In addition, they have lost their link with local Health Visitors, who would ordinarily be pointing parents towards such classes.

Worryingly, our survey found that the majority of most parents haven't tried interactive classes because they were either unaware of them, or not prepared to pay for them. This is despite interactive online classes being substantially cheaper than in-person classes, with many priced between £2-5 for the whole family - or even less, when purchased in a block.

Some councils have misguidedly funded independent class providers to create pre-recorded, downloadable content or YouTube videos. This has worsened the situation. Whilst they are ineffective in competing with celebrity-led content, they have undercut and increased the amount of competition for other independent class providers.

In addition, we have been unable to have our service listed in Government directories, which are currently focused on free educational resources - typically downloads or one-way broadcasts. Whilst we understand why Government are pointing to free services, we believe this method is causing more harm than good from a mental health point of view.

To help alleviate the lack of awareness and remove the barriers to new parents trying interactive classes, Happity is leading a charity week for Mental Health Week (wc 18th May) where classes will cost just £1, and proceeds donated to PANDAS - the UK's largest parental mental health charity.

However, this is a one-off event funded by small businesses who are already struggling to survive. If this type of provision is to continue during an extended period of social distancing, it will need far more structural support than we, as a small business under threat ourselves that has not qualified for government support, are currently able to offer.

Parents are not putting their mental health first in terms of financial decisions. Parents are facing uncertain futures – will they need to return to work and pay for more private nurseries as grandparents cannot help out. Or will they need to resign as there are no childcare provisions. Finances are therefore uncertain, and parents always put themselves last. We have some great mental health courses for parents, but they aren't currently confident enough to spend this money on themselves – even though it is only a very small amount compared to many other options.

6. It is imperative that action is taken to support the mental wellbeing of parents. There is an opportunity to do this right now whilst the future of social distancing measures remain uncertain.

Live interactive classes provide a cost-effective means of connecting parents and babies. It helps improve mental well-being, as well as supporting a large industry of small businesses.

In the same way that local provision, Children's Centres and library under-5s services were being funded by councils pre-covid19, we call upon Government to support the industry of live online interactive baby and toddler classes by helping parents discover the benefits for themselves - thus increasing the ongoing demand for these services.

However, with the online environment being so competitive, it is imperative that any interventions must not undermine the commercial viability of the industry.

We propose two methods to do this.

The first is in helping to highlight the benefits of these classes via referrals from Health Visitors and government directories, and to ensure that parents are aware that such classes exist - and that they are a very different experience from songs and videos on YouTube.

Secondly, to help overcome the barriers to initial trial, provide the funding for new parents to try their first few classes with approved class providers, and find something they enjoy -

particularly those who've had babies since March and may have never attended a baby class before. For these parents, there will be low awareness of what a 'music and movement' versus 'sensory play' class means and what will be most suitable for them and their children.#

Thirdly, Government should promote and ideally fund courses to help parents maintain their mental wellness, as well as to learn parenting skills. They are currently unable to pick these skills up from peers and their family, which further contributes to mental health anxieties and feeling of failure which can lead to depression. We have these courses, but parents are loathed to spend even a small amount on themselves at these uncertain times.

In conclusion, we believe that:

- Government needs to take urgent action to support mental wellbeing amongst parents. This petition in particular highlights the needs of those on maternity leave, and whilst a response to this will have benefits for the youngest members of our society, our survey has revealed wide-ranging mental health issues affecting parents and children of all ages.
- Whilst in-person baby classes play a vital role in supporting parent wellbeing, the industry has reservations as to how soon it will be safe and viable for class providers to reopen them.
- In the interim, we have been able to recreate many of these benefits in an online environment, which with help, we believe we could strengthen further
- The industry faces a number of structural challenges in the online world, with widespread low-cost / free content undermining higher quality provision that would better meet mental wellbeing needs.
- Parents are also facing uncertain financial futures and therefore are finding it difficult to prioritise paying for their mental wellness
- There a number of steps the government could take to help this industry and promote the wellbeing of parents in both indirect (awareness) and direct (funding) support.
 - The first is in helping to highlight the benefits of these classes via referrals from Health Visitors and government directories, and to ensure that parents are aware that such classes exist - and that they are a very different experience from songs and videos on YouTube.
 - Secondly, to help overcome the barriers to initial trial, provide the funding for new parents to try their first few classes with approved class providers, and find something they enjoy - particularly those who've had babies since March and may have never attended a baby class before. For these parents, there will be low awareness of what a 'music and movement' versus 'sensory play' class means and what will be most suitable for them and their children.
 - Thirdly to fund parenting courses focusing on maintaining mental wellness as well as teaching skills parents cannot pick up from peers and family at this time

May 2020