

### Written evidence submitted by Emily Tredget

Emily Tredget, mum of one, mental health campaigner and co-founder of Happity. Happity is an online platform that helps parents to connect through baby and toddler groups. We have a focus on maintaining mental wellness stemming from my experience of post-natal depression and anxiety, and have supported hundreds of providers across the UK in going online with a new interactive class format, and helped thousands of parents in getting some interaction and development opportunities.

I am submitting this evidence as having struggled with maternal mental health issues, raised awareness and campaigned in this area for nearly 5 years, and now working for Happity I see first hand the struggles parents, and particularly women are facing. I can see the economic difficulties we will find ourselves in in the future – with huge mental health costs, reduced productivity, and diminished markets.

I have spent the last 5 years trying to help parents to beat mental health issues. I have spoken with councils, Government, parents and providers to help in this area, with both a mental health and economic focus. I am passionate about finding a solution that helps parents, families and providers now and in the future, in a way that will be most economically for the Government in the long-run.

### Summary

The Government needs to:

- 1) Reduce Inequalities and Maintain Mental Health: Enable working families to go on part-time furlough to create the child-care hours they need to look after their own children - otherwise parents are going to mentally break down, and this will impact them and their child for years, or they are going to be forced to resign/made redundant
- 2) Reduce Inequality and Maintain Mental Health: Extend maternity leave until there is nursery provision/grandparent support for those returning to work - otherwise women are having to resign as they have no where for their child to go, and are likely having to repay maternity pay. This is particularly bad post 10<sup>th</sup> June where furlough is no longer an option for those returning to work after this date.
- 3) Help parents maintain good mental wellness, learn how to be a parent whilst they have no extended family around them, and help to socialise their child through interactive online as the baby & toddler market won't be ready to meet in person for a long whilst due to social distancing making classes uneconomical. Perinatal Mental Health costs £8.1bn per cohort pre-Covid. This number will be significantly higher for this cohort, and with 70% of this cost relating to helping the child throughout their life, something needs to be done soon so that we are not paying for Covid through mental health costs for generations to come.

### QUESTIONS:

- 1) **What will be the impact on inequalities within society and how should the Government address inequalities that may have been exacerbated by the crisis?**

There are two areas that have come to particular light through my work and experience of inequalities:

- 1) Parents in general
- 2) Women in particular
- 3) Especially those on maternity leave

The Government needs to:

- 1) Enable working families to go on part-time furlough to create the child-care hours they need to look after their own children - otherwise parents are going to mentally break down, and this will impact them and their child for years, or they are going to be forced to resign/made redundant
- 2) Extend maternity leave until there is nursery provision/grandparent support for those returning to work - otherwise women are having to resign as they have no where for their child to go!

The Government needs to make furlough fairer - instead of some (often those without families) on furlough and others picking up the slack (often those with families), working parents need to be part-time furlough so they can between them (assuming there is two parents per family which obviously isn't always the case) look after children/homeschool.

This would be better for both parties - as from a mental health POV, being suddenly on furlough with no job is bad for mental health, but so is juggling a full-time job and full-time childcare with no break or end in sight.

This is of particular interest to me as I campaign about mental health - helping to educate and reduce the stigma associated, particularly with mental health after having a child. I have personal experience of this, and have done much research and awareness in the media/via talks on this topic and the effect it has on children if their parents struggle.

Through my organisation, Happity, I help parents and also baby & toddler class providers. Parents by helping them find classes that are right for them, as well as providing mental health support (I struggled with PND myself). And providers by helping them find parents that are right for their classes, providing an excellent booking system, and supporting them in their business growth.

Parents have, in my opinion, been the worst hit from a mental health point of view. They have been expected to carry on their normal life - likely to be 2 jobs per family - as well as homeschool or look after potentially multiple children.

Women, in particular, are facing huge amounts of discrimination with many of them forced to resign, or made redundant as they are expected to undertake homeschooling/childcare and therefore cannot fulfil their job to their full potential.

Unfortunately, it has been widespread that employers expect the men in households to continue working, whilst the woman has to pick up the childcare regardless of her job.

And those who are coming off maternity leave are feeling it the most. This is because they are at that transition between "Covid-19 sucks" whilst on maternity leave, and "Covid-19 makes my life impossible" with the return to work. This is where parents already returned to

work have found themselves since Covid-19, with many of them having mental health breakdowns, and having to resign - if they aren't made redundant already.

And for those not yet made redundant, it seems that parents - where they are more senior in roles (office based roles being my main pool for insights here) - are having to juggle homelife as well as more responsibility at work whilst their more junior, and often with out children, colleagues are furloughed.

Parents will therefore be on a huge back-foot. Their colleagues without families, whether furloughed or not, are typically reporting having so much time to learn more skills, set up new business and relaxing. Whilst parents are working all hours, not seeing each other, hardly sleeping, and will be mentally struggling by the time life resumes properly, if they're not already.

And as I said above, it is women who are bearing the brunt of this. A report last week said women were 47% more likely to resign or be made redundant due to Covid.

With the women I am speaking with - typically on maternity leave - they have no choice but to resign. The only other option available to them at the moment, in the most part, is to leave their baby at home alone whilst they work? Their employers are not being understanding or helpful, so the government needs to do something to support. And in resigning some are being forced to face debt, having to pay back their maternity pay. This seems unreasonable given they don't want to resign, but are being forced to given the childcare situation.

Extend maternity leave due to:

- Lack of nursery provision
- Lack of time to review nurseries and settle children – particular those who haven't ever/for a long while been around anyone other than parents. Can't expect parents to drop children into unknown setting
- Lack of grandparent support requiring higher income for more nursery, of which there is less spaces available à could families be able to join one other family unit – at the moment seem to be able to see lots on individuals, but not with child so those with working partner can't get out. If matched families they could share childcare.
- Lack of time for parents to adjust to “normal” life again, before facing the huge transition of going back to work (Our previous survey showed that for mums with children over 1yr mental health support in returning to work suddenly became a hugely important issue)
- But needs to be in a ways that has the most impact – summer holidays coming when classes won't be on, or outside summer holidays difficult to be profitable with social distancing – so need to support the provision of classes being there – support good online options in the short term / over summer, and then support provision of classes as providers won't be able to make them financially viable until social distancing ends and class sizes can go back to normal (this is the case regardless of whether maternity leave is extended, so something needs to be done to support this industry, for the sake of parents and children's mental wellbeing and development)
- Job security as can't be fired when on maternity leave; part-time furlough for parents doesn't work as many are key workers and is removes job security with many parents being discriminated against as they can't work full-time due to childcare so they are the first to be made redundant at this time

**2) What will be the economic impacts of the coronavirus outbreak and the social distancing measures in terms of sectors and regions and how temporary/permanent will they be?**

I was asked to speak at the first House of Commons Petitions Committee regarding the increasing of maternity leave due to Covid-19. I was asked due to my experience in the baby & toddler class market, as well as my knowledge around the impacts of mental health struggles of parents on their children. These were my key points, which are important to answer this question:

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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 700 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.

**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 led a charity week for Mental Health Week (wc 18<sup>th</sup> May) where classes 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.

However, when social distancing relaxes enough to allow classes to resume, it is going to be very difficult to do so quickly in a sustainable way, as class sizes will have to be much smaller to allow for distancing, and therefore the market won't be sustainable in-person until social distancing is relaxed enough for full size classes.

Therefore raise awareness of the provision of interactive classes and the benefits of them – primarily regarding mental health – over other options for this period is key.

66% of those we surveyed said that interactive classes were best for their mental health, and 59% saying they are their favourite format because:

1. You can have conversations, socialise, connect, feel part of a community “Nice to have your presence acknowledged”
2. They provide structure, routine, and something to look forward to “Escape from your home for half an hour”
3. You can ask questions
4. You and your child can see the provider and other families
5. The provider can encourage your child by name

But many are not aware of these truly interactive class formats (as opposed to facebook lives or downloadables), and they are wary to paying the few pounds needed for them – but there few pounds are needed to keep class providers, mostly parents, across the UK alive.

If parents, and the government want classes to be available after Covid-19, something needs to be done to help keep the market there.

Historically reliable information about support groups and classes has been tricky to centralise, hence why Happity exists – and we are socially driven so we champion community groups (children’s centres, libraries, church groups etc) which can’t currently run

We are set up to list children’s centres as they come back but have historically had issues getting the information – most centres want to be listed but don’t have the resource to list – but if they did list they would be utilised much more – we are happy to upload these. We are known for being the most reliable platform – and as we transition back to normal, with some classes being online and others in person, it is key that parents can rely on a platform to give them the most up-to-date information in their area, and enables them to find a class that they wish to attend.

- But this needs to be done in a way that increases parent purchasing power without distorting the market
  - The baby class market has very small margins and it is already a precarious market with some councils are distorting the market by funding one provider to give free / subsidised classes. This means that other providers cannot continue, and often the format isn’t interactive as it is felt this reaches the highest number of parents. However it is not benefiting them as much as it could, and typically they therefore only use these non-interactive options a few times.
  - We need to become smarter at delivering free classes to those who need them – and this needs technology
  - If the government could provide “baby class vouchers” a bit like childcare vouchers to use across whichever providers who sign up for the scheme like nurseries this would enable parents to use the classes they like, and keep as many providers going as possible.
  - We could provide the platform should you wish to enable these “baby class vouchers” to be used across any provider who wishes to sign up to the scheme
  - This would be particular useful for the summer holidays which is going to be a very tricky time for parents. Most classes don’t run in the holiday as they are run by parents who have their school aged children at home – and this will be worse this year as there are unlikely to be summer clubs for school-aged children like normal. However, if lockdown is lifted just in time for the holidays, those wanting baby classes will find the provision isn’t actually there until September. We therefore need to make it viable for

class providers to continue online classes (which are more likely to work around their family life as this is what they are currently doing)

- Subsidising classes would help parents on maternity leave, but also keep the industry going – and hence support thousands of providers who are struggling financially, likely with no government support, to provide for their families right now. They currently are struggling to justify spending on baby classes – and particularly not on parenting/mental health support for themselves as parents always put themselves last – as they don't know their financial outlook. They could be facing much higher nursery costs than anticipate as grandparents can no longer help with childcare, or indeed may have to resign due to lack of childcare. This means they are not spending on classes/support as much as they would were they to have the assurance that maternity leave were going to be extended, or part-time furlough introduced.
- Once classes start to be in person again, they are likely to need to be with social distancing. This will mean perhaps 4 people per class where there may have been 12 previously – an obviously including venue costs and additional cleaning costs that will likely be required. Baby classes have small margins, so this will not be viable unless they increase their prices 3 fold – and then those who are likely to most be struggling with mental health at the moment (living in cramped accommodation with no outside space) still won't be able to attend. These class providers are likely to be struggling at the moment (as we are!) with no access to government help due to being sole directors of ltd companies, and potentially having run for only a couple of years. So to provide in-person classes with social distancing they will require subsidies. If you want this provision to be available, you will need to support them in a way that doesn't undermine the entire market and kill off these parent-run businesses.
- It would therefore be prudent to in fact encourage providers to continue online classes for longer than the minimum time necessary so that they can continue to survive and make any profit, and to keep everyone safe. Extending maternity leave, or enabling part-time furlough for parents, as well as highlighting the benefits of interactive classes, and ideally subsidising them, would mean parents are less likely to rush out as soon as possible to in-person classes. They would have the funds to pay for online classes, understand the importance of the interactive versions, and know they have time to do in person classes when it is both safe to do so, and economically viable for classes to do so. At the moment, if classes are opened up with social distancing, there will be very few, very expensive classes available.

*June 2020*