



# House of Commons Petitions Committee



## The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave

First Report of Session 2019–21



House of Commons  
Petitions Committee

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# The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave

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**First Report of Session 2019–21**

*Report, together with formal minutes relating to the  
report*

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## Petitions Committee

The Petitions Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to consider e-petitions submitted on [petition.parliament.uk](https://petition.parliament.uk) and public (paper) petitions presented to the House of Commons.

### Current membership

[Catherine McKinnell MP](#) (*Labour, Newcastle upon Tyne North*) (Chair)

[Tonia Antoniazzi MP](#) (*Labour, Gower*)

[Elliot Colburn MP](#) (*Conservative, Carshalton and Wallington*)

[Martyn Day MP](#) (*Scottish National Party, Linlithgow and East Falkirk*)

[Steve Double MP](#) (*Conservative, St Austell and Newquay*)

[Chris Evans MP](#) (*Labour, Islywn*)

[Katherine Fletcher MP](#) (*Conservative, South Ribble*)

[Nick Fletcher MP](#) (*Conservative, Don Valley*)

[Mike Hill MP](#) (*Labour, Hartlepool*)

[Tom Hunt MP](#) (*Conservative, Ipswich*)

[Theresa Villiers MP](#) (*Conservative, Chipping Barnet*)

Kerry McCarthy MP (Bristol East) was also a member of the committee during this inquiry.

### Powers

The powers of the Committee are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 145A. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](https://www.parliament.uk).

### Publications

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Committee reports are published on the [Committee's website](#) and in print by Order of the House.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Paul Connolly (Media Relations Officer), Ed Faulkner (Second Clerk), Stella-Maria Gabriel (Senior Committee Assistant), Kay Gammie (Enquiries and Engagement Assistant), Zoe Hays (Petitions and Engagement Officer), Emma McIntosh (Head of Petitions Engagement), Hannah Olbison (Senior Media Relations Officer), Shane Pathmanathan (Petitions Moderation Officer), Ben Sneddon (Clerk), and Stephen Wilson (Petitions and Communication Manager).

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## Summary



More than 226,000 people have signed an e-petition started by Jessie Zammit and her husband James Zammit-Garcia that calls for the Government to extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of Covid-19. As welcome support schemes were announced for businesses, for workers and for the self-employed, all of whom were suffering as a result of the unprecedented impact that Covid-19 has had, new and expectant parents found themselves seemingly forgotten. The huge support that Jessie and James' petition has received, and the many moving stories we have heard from new and expecting parents about the worries that they have as they face a return to the workplace, made it clear that this was an issue that the Government needs to consider as a matter of urgency.

The request from petitioners to extend maternity leave is not a request for some extra time off from work in order to relax at home or go out and enjoy the summer. It is a request for time to do all the things that have been impossible while parents and children have been isolated at home. It is a request for time to adjust back to the realities of working life. It is a request for time to do the things needed to help get life back to normal, including accessing childcare, introducing new babies to families and friends, and attending baby classes. And, it is a request for time to get the support many have missed out on, from health visitors, mental health services, dentists and doctors. The Government's response to the petition to date has been to turn down these requests for time.

Throughout our inquiry we have heard from parents who are despairing at the Government's response and who are desperate for good news. We received more than 69,000 responses when we asked petitioners and other members of the public for their experiences and their views on the Government's response and action that needs to be taken. We have heard from parents finding that their jobs are at risk because they haven't been able to find childcare, parents whose mental health has been severely affected, and from parents who are desperate for help and support to bring up their children. As we took evidence throughout this inquiry we heard about the importance of nurturing and supporting new parents, and just how critical the first years of a child's life are. By investing now in our parents and children, we can help to prevent a future crisis.

In this report, we ask the Government to look again at its refusal to grant this extra support, and this extra time for new parents. However, our inquiry has also uncovered many more

issues on which we hope the Government will urgently consider further action, with or without an extension to paid parental leave. As the UK gradually exits lockdown and returns to normality, we propose a catch-up fund, similar to that announced for school-age children, to ensure access to formal and informal sources of support and interaction for new parents. We ask that the Government consider extending access to free dental treatment for new mothers, make it easier for parents of babies in neonatal care to access Covid-19 testing to help them spend time with their children, and also consider whether greater protection is needed to ensure people do not lose their jobs as a result of being pregnant or a new parent.

Central to the challenges facing new parents is the uncertainty over access to childcare, whether families or formal providers. We call for the Government to review the provision of childcare to ensure it is sustainable and can be accessed by all who need it, and to provide urgent funding to ensure it can survive during the current pandemic. For expectant mothers required to work, we urge the Government to provide clear guidance on their rights to be suspended on full pay if they can't work safely. We urge the Government to ensure that pregnant women who were wrongfully put on Statutory Sick Pay or unpaid leave do not lose out on their entitlements to Statutory Maternity Pay and to extend the furlough scheme for pregnant women to support businesses to look after their pregnant employees.

Throughout our inquiry we have been contacted by parents who feel that they are anomalies, their circumstances being missed by the Government. As a result of what we have heard, we are calling on the Government to consider what steps can be taken to ensure self-employed parents are treated fairly, and to end the disparities that adoptive parents and special guardians face when trying to take time to care for children, and to consider the impact on Universal Credit that people face if in receipt of Maternity Allowance.

This report cannot cover every experience and every challenge that new parents are facing during the Covid-19 pandemic. We hope that the Government will seriously consider the issues we raise and the experiences of parents that we have highlighted and bring forward the changes that will help new parents grapple with the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown. Parents who are asking for this support are asking that the youngest and most vulnerable in society have the best possible start; that they have time to bond with family members; that they have quality time with their parents without the stress and anxiety that the pandemic has added to our lives; and, that parents have time to find appropriate childcare before they return to work and play their part in rebuilding our economy.

**Box 1: Timeline of inquiry**

20 April, 4.10pm: Petition opened

21 April, 9.23am: Petition passes 10k signatures

21 April, 7.47pm: Petition reaches 100K signatures

28 April: The Petitions Committee meets and decides to hear oral evidence on this issue

30 April: A Facebook post asking for comments receives 26,000 replies, and a survey sent to petitioners asking them to share their experiences gets 27,000 responses

7 May: The Committee holds its first evidence session, to hear from petitioners and experts

14 May: The Government provides its written response to the Petition

15 May: The Committee surveys parents returning to work and childcare providers, getting a further 16,000 responses

21 May: The Committee holds its second evidence session, to hear from experts on maternal mental health, adoption and childcare

29 May: The Chancellor announces the furlough scheme will close to new entrants after 10 June

9 June: Government announces exemption to furlough closing date for some parents returning from parental leave

11 June: The Committee questions Paul Scully MP on the Government's response to the petition and other issues around parental leave

6 July: The Committee publishes its report, including recommendations to the Government



# 1 Introduction

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1. We have received an unprecedented number of petitions since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak. With the suspension of petition debates in Westminster Hall due to social distancing measures, we have focused our efforts on identifying issues that may have been overlooked by the Government in its response to the crisis and which are not being looked at in other ways by Parliament. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on new parents and their children has so far not been given as much attention as it should have been and we are hugely grateful to the petitioners for bringing this important issue to the attention of Parliament and Government.

## Box 2: What is a Select Committee Report?

For many people reading this report, this might be the first time you've followed the work of a House of Commons Select Committee. We wanted to explain how this report was written, what you can find in it, and what happens next.

House of Commons Select Committees, cross-party groups of MPs, publish reports that call on the Government to take action on a huge range of subjects. Before a Committee publishes a report it will usually have conducted an inquiry into this issue. They will have asked people to give their views (submitting written evidence) and invited some people to speak directly to the Committee (giving oral evidence).

Lots of inquiries, like this one, will have also asked people to take part in other ways, like completing a survey or commenting on an online thread, to make sure their views are heard. Because we heard from so many people, we haven't been able to include every comment we received, but we've included a summary of all our public engagement at the end of this report, and you can find our written evidence and transcripts of our oral evidence on the Committee's website.<sup>1</sup>

Once a Committee has concluded its inquiry, it will publish a report like this one. The report will try to include as much of the evidence the Committee has received as possible and use this to draw conclusions and make recommendations. This report has several chapters that look at different aspects of parental leave and being a new parent, and different types of people who have been affected by the current situation.

You can find the Committee's conclusions (what the Committee thinks) and recommendations (what the Committee thinks the Government should do) in a summary near the end of this report. You'll also find these conclusions and recommendations throughout the report. Within the report conclusions are in **bold text** and the recommendations are in **bold italic text**, to help make them easy to find.

This report has made lots of recommendations to the Government about what it should do to help support new parents. The next step is for the Government to read our report, consider our conclusions and decide whether to accept our recommendations or take other action. The Government will send the Committee its response, which we'll then publish and consider further action. The Government has two months to do this, but we know that this is an urgent issue affecting many parents, so we have asked them to respond much sooner than that.

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1 Petitions Committee, [The Government's response to Coronavirus](#), HC 252 (2019–21)

## The Petition

2. The petition which prompted our investigation of the impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave was started on petition.parliament.uk by James Zammit-Garcia and his wife Jessie Zammit on 20 April 2020.<sup>2</sup> The petition reads:

### **Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19**

In light of the recent outbreak and lockdown, those on maternity leave should be given 3 extra months paid leave, at least. This time is for bonding and social engaging with other parents and babies through baby groups which are vital for development and now everything has been cancelled.

These groups are vital for baby development, bonding and educating both babies and parents. Given that the government have closed down many areas of the community, new parents and babies are confined to their homes with no social interaction which will ultimately impact on the development of children.

We are calling on Boris Johnson and the government to extend paid maternity leave by an additional 3 months, at least to allow for this development and bonding to take place.

The petition is still open for signatures but at the time of publication it had received more than 226,000 signatures.

## The Government's response

3. The Government provided a written response to the petition on 14 May 2020. In its response, the Government stated that the UK's maternity leave was "already amongst the most generous in the world" and said that it had no plans to extend it. It spoke about the job retention (furlough) scheme and that it had ensured that pregnant women on furlough continued to have their Statutory Maternity Pay calculated on their normal earnings, rather than the reduced amount. The Government also stated that it was "possible for employers to offer furlough pay at the end of a woman's maternity leave and pay period, in effect extending the period a woman is away from work.". This is an option that we discovered was rarely offered and, despite a welcome recent extension, is no longer available for the majority of those returning to work in the coming weeks and months. In response to the points about baby groups, the Government responded that it was "regrettable but necessary to help safeguard the health of individuals, including other new mothers and babies."<sup>3</sup>

## The inquiry

4. This inquiry was led by our petitioners and the wider public. We are hugely grateful to Jessie and James, who started the petition and are parents to baby Elliot. We'd also like to thank Bethany Power, mum to baby Jayden, who also petitioned and campaigned on this issue and gave evidence to us. We prioritised finding out more about why people signed this petition and supported the call for extended maternity leave, and sought the

2 e-petition 306691, [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

3 Government response to e-petition 306691, [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

views of the public. This inquiry has seen a record number of people take part in our public engagement: 27,000 new parents responded to our first survey. We received a record 26,000 comments to our Facebook thread, and 16,000 responses to further surveys. We are grateful to everyone who got in touch with us and contributed to our public engagement, which informed every step of our work on this issue.

### ***The aim of the inquiry***

5. The role of the Petitions Committee is to hold the Government to account on behalf of petitioners. We recognise the huge task that the Government has as we navigate our way through this pandemic and beyond. While it is inevitable that in such extreme circumstances important issues are sometimes overlooked, in conducting this inquiry we are offering the Government an opportunity to look again at the treatment of maternity and parental leave and bring forward changes that will benefit new parents, children and businesses. It would be irresponsible for the Government to respond to this report without seriously examining the evidence that we've received during this inquiry.

6. In addition to exploring the impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave, our inquiry has also identified a number of issues regarding existing entitlements to parental leave and pay, and the childcare sector. We have therefore also highlighted areas where action would be helpful to address inconsistencies and ensure a viable childcare sector.

## 2 Current entitlements for new parents

### Current entitlements for new parents

7. Generous parental leave and pay, along with access to flexible working and quality childcare provision, are recognised as being beneficial to parents, children, businesses and the wider economy. These policies have been shown to be vital in increasing women's participation in the workforce and contribution to GDP, and to help close the gender pay gap and allow businesses to retain experienced employees, all whilst allowing families the time and flexibility to bond and spend the vital early months of their babies' lives as they choose.<sup>4</sup>

8. The UK has made significant progress in this area, from the early 1970s when leave and pay were not widely available and women could still be fired for being pregnant, to the introduction of Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) in 1987, and the expansion of leave and protections made by successive governments since then, including the Employment Rights Act 1996.<sup>5</sup> This established maternity leave as a 'day one' right, meaning all employees are entitled to it irrespective of employment length, and also introduced rights to adoption and paternity leave.

9. However, as Table 1 illustrates, entitlement to leave and pay varies significantly for different parents and carers, according to their employment status and whether they are birth parents, adoptive parents or other carers. Inconsistencies like these often occur when provisions have developed over time, but these inconsistencies can widen existing inequalities and, in times of crisis such as this, can lead to entire groups missing vital support that is meant to be provided by new and existing safety nets. Our engagement with different groups during this inquiry has highlighted this profoundly, as shown by these responses:

On adoption leave and pay for self-employed workers: "I am about to go on adoption leave (although I don't receive any pay as I am self-employed) so I am going to try and work from home. This will be impossible really though."<sup>6</sup>

On the treatment of Maternity Allowance by Universal Credit: "Maternity allowance (MA) does the same job as statutory maternity pay (SMP) and yet is penalised more harshly through universal credit."<sup>7</sup>

On the income provided by Maternity Allowance: "I work for an agency so I am only entitled to maternity allowance of £595 a month. This isn't even equivalent to the national living wage. I have had to come off maternity leave early due to my husband being newly self-employed and not able to get any government help."<sup>8</sup>

4 UNICEF, [Family-Friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future](#), 2019

5 Employment Relations Act 1999, [Schedule 4](#)

6 Annex 1

7 Annex 1

8 Annex 1

Table 1: Statutory entitlements to parental leave and pay

Scheme or entitlement	Details
Statutory Maternity Leave (SML)	<p>Available to employees (but not 'workers'), regardless of length of service – a 'day-one' right.</p> <p>Leave up to 52 weeks, made up of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ordinary Maternity Leave - first 26 weeks</li> <li>• Additional Maternity Leave - last 26 weeks</li> </ul> <p>Only the two weeks after the birth is compulsory (4 for factory workers).</p>
Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP)	<p>Paid for up to 39 weeks. Employees get:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 90% of their average weekly earnings (before tax) for the first 6 weeks</li> <li>• £151.20 or 90% of their average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for the next 33 weeks</li> </ul> <p>To qualify for SMP they must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• earn on average at least £120 a week</li> <li>• have worked for their employer continuously for at least 26 weeks continuing into the 'qualifying week' - the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth</li> </ul>
Paternity Leave and Pay	<p>One or two weeks' pay and leave.</p> <p>To qualify they must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• earn on average at least £120 a week</li> <li>• have worked for their employer continuously for at least 26 weeks continuing into the 'qualifying week' - the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth</li> </ul>
Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and Shared Parental Pay (ShPP)	<p>Allows parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks and pay. They can take leave in blocks separated by periods of work, or take it all in one go.</p> <p>They can also choose to be off work together or to stagger the leave and pay.</p> <p>Eligibility is different for birth parents and adoptive parents, and also for the mother and her partner.</p>
Adoption Leave and Pay	<p>Mirror the arrangement for SML and SMP, for adoptive parents who are 'employees' rather than 'workers'.</p> <p>In addition they may be eligible to paid time off work to attend up to five adoption appointments after they have been matched with a child.</p>

Scheme or entitlement	Details
Maternity Allowance	<p>Available to those who do not qualify for SMP, including 'workers' and self-employed mothers.</p> <p>£151.20 a week or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is less) for 39 weeks</p> <p>Subject to a number of eligibility criteria, lower rates available for those who do not qualify for full rate. Is classed as 'unearned income' for benefits calculations so can reduce other payments.</p>
Unpaid Parental Leave	<p>Can be taken by parents to look after their child's welfare, for example to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spend more time with their children</li> <li>• look at new schools</li> <li>• settle children into new childcare arrangements</li> <li>• spend more time with family, such as visiting grandparents</li> </ul> <p>Parents are entitled to 18 weeks' leave for each child, up to their 18th birthday with a limit on 4 weeks a year for each child (unless the employer agrees otherwise). Eligibility criteria apply, including being employed for more than one year.</p>
Time off for family and dependants	<p>Employees are allowed time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependant (e.g. spouse, partner, child, grandchild, parent, or someone who depends on them for care).</p> <p>This leave is unpaid, and not time limited, but must be 'reasonable'. You can't have time off if you knew about a situation beforehand.</p>

This table is a summary and does not include all details and eligibility criteria. Full details can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/browse/childcare-parenting/financial-help-children>

10. Whilst many employers top up parental pay with their own schemes, statutory pay is mostly funded by the state, with employers reclaiming the cost. Table 2 shows the costs of the different entitlements.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2: Public expenditure on statutory parental pay entitlements**

Parental entitlement	Annual cost
Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP)	£2.55 billion
Maternity Allowance	£425 million
Statutory Adoption, Paternity and Shared Parental Pay	£79 million
Statutory Adoption pay	£23.8 million

Source: DWP, [Benefit Expenditure and Caseload Tables 2020](#), maternity benefits table, HM Revenue and Customs, [Great Britain National Insurance Fund Account: 2018/19](#), HC 14 (2019) p 17, PQ [113235](#) [on Parental Pay: Adoption], answered on 24 November 2017

<sup>9</sup> Responsibility for parental pay is split between departments, with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) taking the cost of SMP and Maternity Allowance, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) leading on Adoption, Paternity and Shared Parental Pay.

## Statutory Maternity Leave and Pay

11. When the Government responded to the petition which prompted this inquiry, it stated that:

The UK's Maternity Leave offer is already amongst the most generous in the World—up to 52 weeks of leave are available, 39 weeks of which are paid—and we currently have no plans to extend it.<sup>10</sup>

We asked the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, Paul Scully MP, why the Government felt the current offering was already generous, and he told us:

The UK has the longest maternity leave among all the OECD countries. Where we enhance pay as part of the statutory maternity pay entitlement, the rate of pay provided is higher than the international standard. It is 90% of the mother's average earnings, with no upper limit, but it is provided for a shorter period of time. When you get more weeks of enhanced pay in other countries, the rate of enhancement is not always as generous as that in the UK.

It is also worth noting that, where countries offer longer periods of paid leave, it tends to be funded through employer and employee insurance payments rather than directly by the state.<sup>11</sup>

While it is true that 52 weeks places the UK amongst the most generous for leave, and for six weeks the pay rate is quite generous, this does not give the full story. Responding to our surveys, many parents told us that they simply could not afford to take the unpaid section of leave (the last 13 weeks), and it was already a struggle for them to survive on the lower rate of SMP (33 weeks at £151.20 per week).<sup>12</sup>

12. As the Government has no involvement in the unpaid portion of leave there is limited data on uptake of this entitlement, but research commissioned by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in 2008 suggested that less than a quarter (23%) of mothers taking maternity leave took the full 52 weeks, and only 45% took 40 weeks or more.<sup>13</sup> It is unsurprising that a link was noted between income and likelihood to take longer leave, with those with higher maternal and partner income being more likely to take a longer period of leave.

13. It appears then that current entitlements are only generous to those who can afford to use them. This point was made repeatedly by those we asked for views on current maternity arrangements. One survey respondent told us that:

My husband and I are both key workers working for the police. We therefore cannot work from home. We cannot afford to be on unpaid leave so I have to return to work after nine months' maternity leave. I could stay off work for a further three months to take the full twelve months maternity leave

10 Government response to e-petition 306691, [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

11 [Q75](#) (all references to oral and written evidence in this Report refer to evidence reported under HC 252, [The Government's response to Coronavirus](#))

12 Annex 2

13 DWP, [Maternity and Paternity - Rights and Women Returners Survey 2009/10](#), Figure 2.2, p27



but as the final three months are completely unpaid we can't afford for me to do this.<sup>14</sup>

Another said:

I have chosen to take 9 months maternity as this is paid leave. I have the option to extend my maternity leave by 3 months but this would be unpaid. We could not afford 3 months with no second income as my husbands' income does not cover the bills. I am stuck between the choice of the safety of my family or being homeless. A choice I believe I shouldn't have to make.<sup>15</sup>

14. In a 2019 report on family friendly policies, UNICEF used four measures to rank 41 different high- and middle-income countries. These included the full-time equivalent of paid maternity leave, which for the UK works out as 12 weeks and meant the UK was ranked 34 out of 41 countries. UNICEF also considered paternity leave provision and enrolment in childcare, which is seen as beneficial for educational and development outcomes. When all four measures were considered, the UK only ranked 28th out of 41 nations.<sup>16</sup>

**15. The Government's response has argued that the UK's maternity leave offer is already amongst the most generous in the world. Although up to 52 weeks leave is generous compared to other countries, the amount of maternity pay is not the most generous in the world. While we accept that other more generous schemes are often not funded by the state, it remains the case that many new mothers in the UK can't afford to take their full leave entitlement. Successive governments have not examined systematically enough the scale of take-up of the full maternity leave available, and reasons for not taking their full entitlements. This would better enable us to consider the suitability of current arrangements. *The Government should capture data on the uptake of parental leave, as well as pay, so that any future review of parental leave arrangements can consider the extent to which parents from all groups are able to use their entitlements.***

## Maternity Allowance

16. While it is clear that maternity leave and pay for employees are not without their limitations, maternity arrangements for self-employed workers can be even more challenging. The charity Pregnant then Screwed told us "self-employed mothers already face a number of disadvantages compared to their employed peers", that self-employed mothers are already likely to suffer reduced incomes after having children, and explained a number of the limitations of Maternity Allowance compared to schemes for employed people:

Unlike their employed peers, self-employed mothers on maternity allowance are not allowed to do any work beyond their 10 keeping in touch days, making it difficult to retain clients while on mat[ernity] leave. Research by Parental Pay Equality in 2018 showed that only 20% of self-employed women were back to their pre-baby earnings by the time their child was 2,

14 Annex 2

15 Annex 2

16 UNICEF, [Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU](#), June 2019, Table 1, p6



compared to 26% of employed mothers working full-time by the time their child was 2.<sup>17</sup>

In families where both parents are self-employed, only the mother can claim maternity allowance—there is no paternity leave or shared parental leave for families where both parents are self-employed. This means that the primary carer role almost always falls to the mother, so even mothers who were the higher earner or want to go back to work earlier often don't have this option.<sup>18</sup>

17. There is also a disparity in the treatment of Maternity Allowance and SMP when it comes to Universal Credit, further penalising self-employed mothers and those on lower incomes. Maternity Action explained this problem in their written evidence to the Committee:

Under the Universal Credit Regulations 2013, Maternity Allowance is treated as 'unearned income' and is deducted pound for pound from any Universal Credit award, whereas Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) is treated as 'earnings' and is largely disregarded under the Work Allowance and 63% taper. This inequitable treatment of Maternity Allowance can result in women losing out on Universal Credit altogether, leaving them up to £5,000 worse off over 39 weeks of maternity leave than women in the same circumstances who qualify for SMP and claim Universal Credit.

In 2019, more than half of the some 60,000 women granted Maternity Allowance also applied for Universal Credit, and in the current circumstances the number of low-income women who fail to qualify for SMP and end up on Maternity Allowance is likely to increase substantially.<sup>19</sup>

The unequal treatment of two schemes designed to do the same thing—provide support to new mothers during their maternity leave—is causing real hardship. An Early Day Motion (EDM) signed by 110 MPs from across the House calls for this “anomalous injustice” to be remedied by amending the Universal Credit Regulations 2013.<sup>20</sup> The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was also asked about it in the House of Commons on the 4 May, and agreed to look into it, but no action has been forthcoming<sup>21</sup> It should cost only £45 million to address this anomaly, once Universal Credit has been fully rolled out.<sup>22</sup> This represents less than 0.07% of the £65.5 billion that the Department for Work and Pensions are forecast to spend on Universal Credit and legacy equivalents in 2020/21.<sup>23</sup> ***As a matter of urgency the Government should consider whether Maternity Allowance should be considered as earnings in the same way as Statutory Maternity Pay and should not lead to deductions from Universal Credit.***

17 Parental Pay Equality, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/3013/pdf/>

18 Pregnant then Screwed ([GRC0022](#))

19 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#))

20 EDM [421](#) (2019–21), Tabled 04 May 2020 signature count as of 23 June 2020

21 HC Deb, 4 May 2020, col [426](#) [Commons Chamber]

22 This estimate has been calculated by estimating the increased annual cost of Universal Credit, after full rollout, if Maternity Allowance was treated as earned income, as opposed to unearned income.

23 Office for Budget Responsibility, [Economic and Fiscal Outlook March 2020](#), Table 3.18, p102

## Adoption pay and leave, special guardians and neonatal leave

### *Adoption and special guardianship*

18. The disparity in entitlements is also especially acute for self-employed adoptive parents or other carers. There is no equivalent of Maternity Allowance available to adoptive parents. For special guardians, there is no statutory entitlement to either pay or leave, whether they are employees or self-employed. Both can apply to local authorities for allowances, but there is no statutory right to support. Despite a Government-commissioned review in 2016 that highlighted this disadvantage, no action has been taken to remedy this.<sup>24</sup>

19. For years Adoption UK and others have been campaigning for equality for adoptive parents who are self-employed.<sup>25</sup> Since 2016, the Petitions Committee has received four petitions about this issue; however, these have only received a small number of signatures and not been eligible for a response from the Government or consideration for debate.<sup>26</sup> It is clear that this is an issue that affects only a small number of families, but that does not mean that it can be ignored. Not only could a lack of paid adoptive leave or an adoption allowance cause hardship to new adoptive parents, it appears to be discriminatory compared to the rights of birth parents and could be a deterrent to self-employed people who are considering adoption. We also heard that over 50% of special guardians are forced to give up work to be able to spend time settling a child into its new family, as they have no entitlement to statutory leave or pay.<sup>27</sup>

### *Neonatal leave*

20. Whilst most parents get to spend the first weeks of their parental leave at home bonding with their babies, for those whose children are born prematurely or sick, this precious time may be spent in neonatal units or travelling long distances to be with their children. This is an acutely stressful time for parents, made worse by the knowledge that every week spent in hospital is one lost from their leave. We heard from the charity Bliss that some parents, especially fathers, have reported spending the entirety of their parental leave in hospital.<sup>28</sup>

21. The Government has recognised this issue, and recently announced plans to introduce neonatal leave, to cover up to 12 weeks when a baby is receiving neonatal care, and this is very welcome.<sup>29</sup> Sadly for the families of the 300,000 babies who will spend time in neonatal care in the next three years, it is not expected to be available until 2023, and the Minister was unable to commit to bringing this date forward.<sup>30</sup> Josie Anderson from Bliss told us:

We were absolutely delighted that the Government have recognised that current parental leave laws are inadequate for families who have a neonatal

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24 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

25 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

26 e-petition 187801, [Statutory Adoption Allowance for Self-Employed](#), e-petition 203061, [Make statutory adoption leave and pay available for the self employed](#), e-petition 237953, [Provide adoption allowance to self-employed people](#), e-petition 227534, [Make statutory adoption leave and pay available for the self employed](#)

27 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

28 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

29 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Neonatal leave and pay: Good Work Plan: Proposals to Support Families: Government Response](#), March 2020

30 [Q92](#)

experience. This unprecedented situation calls for some unprecedented action, and providing a short-term emergency measure and some access to extended leave and pay would really help to support families at this time.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

22. Parental leave and pay are not unique in having different provisions for employed and self-employed people, and this is just one area of a complex benefit system. It is however apparent that many of the inequalities are not a reflection of differing circumstances, but more of an oversight by successive governments. In the case of self-employed adoptive parents, and all special guardians, they are getting less support than others. That the current entitlements have been added over a number of years may explain some of these disparities, but it does not remove the challenges posed. There are some discrepancies in the current provisions for parental leave that should be addressed: these include provisions for neonatal leave; self-employed adoptive parents and special guardians. *Benefits for self-employed adoptive parents should be equalised to those of other self-employed parents, and parental leave and pay provisions should be extended to special guardians.*

### 3 Support for new parents during Covid-19

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23. When the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown became clear, the Government moved swiftly and introduced unprecedented support packages to help prevent mass unemployment and to replace lost income. We recognise the scale of this challenge and the Government's response. However, as is often the case when major changes are introduced at pace, there has been a lack of clarity about how different groups fit into both the support schemes and the Government's guidance. Pregnant women and new parents have particularly struggled to understand how the guidance applies to their circumstances, and in many cases this has had unintended and serious consequences.

#### The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

24. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) represents an unprecedented level of state support. While the long-term impact on unemployment will only start to show itself later this year, this scheme has spared many from the immediate threat of redundancy. The scheme allows employers to furlough employees and claim up to 80% of their salary from the Government to keep them on payroll. Whilst it has provided a lifeline to employees in industries that have faced widespread closures due to the lockdown, it also allows organisations to furlough employees who are not currently needed, or who are unable to work, even if the business is still open. This include those who are shielding, or on long term sick-leave.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Furlough as an option at the end of maternity leave*

25. In the Government's written response to the petition, they stated that women could be furloughed as a means of extending their maternity leave and delaying their return to work. However, when we asked petitioners what options they had been offered by their employers, only 4.4% of respondents had been given this option.<sup>33</sup> Using the scheme to extend maternity leave was also not suggested in the Government's guidance for the scheme.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the Government's guidance made no explicit reference to those coming to the end of parental leave until June, when the planned closure of the CJRS scheme led to calls for an exemption for those returning from parental leave. While the extension and clarification are welcome, many women have already had to return to work due to financial pressures, or worse had to quit their jobs. This could have been averted for some new parents had there been clear guidance for employers and new parents from the outset of the scheme.

**26. The Government has suggested that women can be furloughed as a means of extending their maternity leave and delaying their return to work. However, access to the scheme is reliant on employers' consent, rather than parents having a right to it, and there are strict limitations to whom it can apply. Many new mothers are not**

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32 HMRC, [Check which employees you can put on furlough to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), accessed 22 June 2020

33 Annex 2

34 HMRC, [Check which employees you can put on furlough to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), accessed 22 June 2020. Updated to include information about employees returning from leave added on 12 June 2020 [See [Page history](#)].

eligible, if their employer has not yet furloughed others, if they work in the public sector, or if their employer needs people back at work. We heard from teachers, police officers and NHS workers who simply did not have the option of being furloughed. For these reasons we do not think it is fair to suggest that it is realistic for many new parents.

27. For those new parents on maternity leave for whom furlough was already possible, the Government failed to make it clear either to them or their employers that it was an option. *The Government should publish clear new guidance for employees and employers, including dedicated pages on GOV.UK, on supporting employees returning from parental leave that explains clearly their options and responsibilities.*

## Health and safety for pregnant women and new mothers

28. New and expectant mothers are offered specific protection under the health and safety legislation to which all employers must adhere, although we have heard evidence that this has not been followed by many employers or made clear enough by the Government during the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> The law requires employers to carry out risk assessments, and the Government's guidance on the rights of pregnant workers states that:

Where there are risks, the employer should take reasonable steps to remove them. For example, offering the employee different work or changing their hours.

The employer should suspend the employee on full pay if they cannot remove any risks. For example, offering suitable alternative work.<sup>36</sup>

We have heard many examples of it not being applied correctly, and when the Government has been pressed to clarify advice during the crisis, they have often fallen short. For example, no specific reference to this law was made on the GOV.UK Covid-19 advice pages, which employers and employees alike have been relying on heavily throughout.

29. On 16 March the Prime Minister and the Chief Medical Officer announced that, as Covid-19 was a new virus, pregnant women were one of several clinically vulnerable groups. People in these groups were told that they should be particularly careful to practice social distancing, work from home wherever possible and avoid public transport.<sup>37</sup> We heard that many pregnant women were swiftly sent home as a result, in some cases being forced onto sick pay, annual leave, unpaid leave or asked to start their maternity leave early. One respondent to our survey said:

My employer has offered me zero help, I'm a support worker who is 30 weeks pregnant and started my maternity at 29 weeks because no help or alternative was offered to me and we have had 7 COVID deaths within the home. I'm so gutted it means missing time when my baby arrives!<sup>38</sup>

35 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#)) and Annex 1

36 GOV.UK, [Pregnant employees' rights](#), accessed 22 June 2020

37 GOV.UK, [\[Withdrawn\] Guidance on social distancing for everyone in the UK](#), accessed 23 June 2020

38 Annex 2

30. This approach has consequences for expectant mothers, including prematurely using up annual or maternity leave entitlements. Maternity Action told us of more profound impacts:

Caller B works as a bank nurse in the NHS and has worked regular shifts at the same hospital for the last three years. The day after the Prime Minister and CMO's announcement on 16 March, she was told by the nurse in charge that it was not safe for her to work on a ward with COVID-19 patients, and was (unlawfully) sent home without pay (she should have been offered suitable alternative work or suspension on full pay for as long as her assignment would have been expected to continue).

By the time she called our advice line in April, she was 25 weeks pregnant, and had had no income for nine weeks, despite having applied for Universal Credit.<sup>39</sup>

31. Despite the availability of the CJRS to employers, we have heard from pregnant women who were forced to take maternity leave early, or were put on Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), when colleagues in the same jobs were furloughed. One respondent to our survey told us that:

I have had to stop work early, due to being pregnant. I got told I can't be on furlough therefore I had no choice but to start my maternity leave early. It's completely unfair, I am losing weeks with my newborn, on a low income and my colleagues are sat at home on 80% of their salary.<sup>40</sup>

32. While pregnant women were not excluded from the CJRS, they are not referred to explicitly in the guidance for employers. Maternity Action highlighted this oversight to the Government repeatedly, after receiving numerous calls from women who had been refused furlough. They told us that:

There is no mention of pregnant employees in the CJRS guidance and, after their statements were challenged in written Parliament[ary] Questions in both the Commons and the Lords, BEIS ministers now say only that the CJRS guidance does not say that pregnant employees *cannot* be furloughed. Which, of course, is of no help to those women whose employers are refusing to furlough them.<sup>41</sup>

**33. The Government's work to ensure premises are safe for workers during the pandemic is welcome. As an at-risk group, there is more that can be done to ensure that employers are aware of their responsibilities for the safety of pregnant women in the workplace, including the need for them to be suspended on full pay if it is not safe for them to work. We recommend that the Government publish clear guidance for employers on their obligations in respect of pregnant women who cannot safely socially distance at work, including making clear that pregnant women have a right to be suspended on full pay if they cannot work safely. We also recommend that the Government extend the furlough scheme to include all pregnant women, so that an additional safety net is available to both pregnant women and their employers.**

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39 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#))

40 Annex 1

41 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#))



### **Issues with Statutory Maternity Pay entitlements due to Covid-19**

34. In addition to the immediate consequences of employers failing to meet their statutory obligations in respect of pregnant workers, being put on Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) or unpaid leave—in many cases when they should have been suspended on full pay—also has implications for entitlements to Statutory Maternity Pay. As SMP has both a qualifying period and a minimum earnings limit of an average £120 week during this period, being placed on SSP or unpaid leave can have serious implications for these women. As SSP is only £95.80 per week, this can push women below the minimum earnings criteria and onto Maternity Allowance instead. Being placed on unpaid leave will have the same effect, and may even prevent new mothers from being entitled to the full rate of Maternity Allowance, if their earnings are low enough. Universal Credit claimants will, as identified in the previous chapter, lose out further when claiming Maternity Allowance as opposed to receiving SMP, highlighting again the problem caused by the unequal treatment of SMP and Maternity Allowance in these calculations.

35. Whilst many women were frustrated that their employers were unwilling to furlough them in order to avoid high risk environments, these situations should never have happened. There are health and safety protections in place for pregnant women and if no safe alternative can be found, they should be suspended on full pay, a fact reiterated to us by the Minister.<sup>42</sup> Whilst this information is available on GOV.UK, it was not included anywhere in the Covid-19 guidance pages for vulnerable groups, which individuals and employers have relied on during this unprecedented situation. **In addition to the immediate financial consequences for pregnant women of being put on Statutory Sick Pay or unpaid leave—often when they should have been suspended on full pay—in many cases the loss of income that results can also mean women lose their rights to Statutory Maternity Pay. This is unacceptable. Nor should anyone having to spend a period on Statutory Sick Pay or unpaid leave due to following guidelines to isolate, including the new track and trace policy, be penalised for their compliance. The Government was able to amend the Statutory Maternity Pay calculations to disregard the lower income of periods on furlough. We recommend the Government should also do so for women whose incomes have fallen through no fault of their own because their employers have failed to follow the Government’s guidance on how pregnant women should be treated.**

### **The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme**

36. Shortly after the creation of the CJRS, the Government announced the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), which provides grants to self-employed workers who meet certain criteria. Whilst this scheme provided some welcome relief to many, there were also significant gaps in provision which have led to a number of petitions calling for changes to the scheme.<sup>43</sup> One gap which has received little attention is the effect that periods of maternity leave have on the amount people are able to claim. As the grant is based on the last three years of reported income, a woman who has taken time off for

42 [Q80](#)

43 [e-petition 303345, Pay self employed workers a wage due to lack or earnings caused by COVID-19](#), [e-petition 310471, Provide COVID19 income support for the newly self-employed, without HMRC records](#), [e-petition 310455, Remove the £50k earnings limit for self-employed to access government funding](#), [e-petition 310515, Coronavirus Support Package for Directors / Shareholders of small Limited Co’s](#), [e-petition 304995, Get HMRC to refund the Self-Employed their Jan 2020 1st Tax Payment on Account](#), [e-petition 310898, Bring forward COVID-19 Self-employment grants to April 2020](#), [e-petition 309231, Pay self-employed workers 80% of gross income during Covid-19](#)

maternity leave and incurred a loss of earnings will receive a smaller grant. Campaign group Pregnant then Screwed explained that this is likely to increase the gender pay gap among the self-employed, which is already at 43%; and increase the likelihood of women's businesses failing due to lack of financial support. They said:

Women who have taken a year of maternity leave in this time, will see their average profits calculated one third lower than their normal trading profits, resulting in up to one third less income support. Women who have had two periods of maternity leave in the eligible period will be even worse off.<sup>44</sup>

A petition about this issue calls on the Government to omit the year when maternity leave was taken from the calculation, which would give a fairer representation of usual earnings.<sup>45</sup>

**37. The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme uses three years of tax returns to assess the average income of claimants. Claimants who have undertaken periods of parental leave in these years will not receive support at a level representative of their usual earnings. We recommend that the Government amend the terms of the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme to take into account periods of maternity and parental leave, to avoid discriminating against new parents.**

## Extending parental leave and pay for three months

38. We have identified above a number of issues with how pregnant women and new parents are being treated by employers during the pandemic, and are able to access Covid-19 support schemes. The remaining chapters in this report set out some of the challenges faced by new parents in light of the Covid-19 outbreak, and recommends changes that the Government could make to support them. However, the petition that triggered this inquiry had a simple request to Government—extend paid parental leave for three months.

39. On a per person basis the total maximum cost per parent to extend maternity leave for three months with pay would be £1,966.<sup>46</sup> For furloughed or self-employed people, the Government is offering the equivalent of up to £7,500 per person for the same period.<sup>47</sup> We have estimated that extending SMP would cost around £850 million, based on figures supplied by the Department for Work and Pensions.<sup>48</sup> Extending Maternity Allowance for three months would cost a further £108m. A further £8m would allow the extension of Adoption Pay.<sup>49</sup> Shared Parental Leave could be included at no additional cost, as uptake of this would be offset by a reduced SMP bill. Extending parental leave with pay for all eligible groups by three months would therefore cost approximately £966 million, assuming full take-up. By comparison, the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that the CJRS will cost £60 billion for March-October. The SEISS is expected to cost £15 billion across the same period.<sup>50</sup>

44 Pregnant then Screwed ([GRC0022](#))

45 e-petition 310461, [For self employed new mums to not be discriminated against in the 80% gov help](#)

46 13 weeks at the maximum rate of £151.20 per week of SMP, MA, ShPP or Adoption pay.

47 Both schemes have a maximum monthly cap of £2500.

48 This figure is based on the DWP forecasts for SMP in 2020/21 and increasing it by a third. See Table 2 (p12).

49 Based on the 2016/17 figures. See Table 2 (p12).

50 Office for Budget Responsibility, [Coronavirus policy monitoring database](#), 4 June 2020



40. The Government has said that it does not plan to extend maternity leave, saying in its written response to the petition that the offering was already generous and women could be furloughed where needed.<sup>51</sup> The Minister repeated these claims in oral evidence to us, despite hearing how many people are unable to access this option and are facing real hardship as a result.<sup>52</sup> Many parents were incredulous that after hearing about the experiences of so many, the Minister tweeted to say he still disagreed.<sup>53</sup> **The Government's decision to reject the request to extend maternity leave has been hugely disappointing to the hundreds of thousands of people who have signed this petition. In these extraordinary circumstances, where the Government has taken exceptional action to support different groups of people, we believe that extending maternity leave would be a proportionate action to take, in line with the support provided through the CJRS and SEISS. We support the call of more than 226,000 petitioners and urge the Government to reconsider its decision not to extend parental leave and pay for families during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

## Conclusion

41. Given the Government's refusal to extend parental leave and during Covid-19, we have also considered other ways the Government can ensure that new and expecting parents are supported by current schemes, and are not unfairly disadvantaged as a result of Covid-19. We have heard a number of examples of pregnant employees or those on maternity leave not having been properly taken into account by those writing the guidance and those designing support systems.<sup>54</sup>

42. The Government's guidance to employers has not been sufficiently clear that the CJRS can be used as a means of ensuring expectant mothers are not required to work when it is not safe to do so, and enabling new parents to extend parental leave. This is an oversight that has resulted in financial hardship and a huge amount of stress for many expectant mothers and new parents, at what is obviously already an extraordinarily challenging time.

43. We welcome the announcement of the extension of the furlough scheme for returning parents whose colleagues are already furloughed, however the scheme is no longer available to other new parents or pregnant women, and has significant limitations including whether the employer has already furloughed anyone. It is also down to the choice of the employer and is not a right for employees. The Government must take urgent action and issue clear guidance for employers to ensure that pregnant women and those returning from parental leave are not unfairly disadvantaged.

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51 Government response to e-petition 306691, [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

52 [Q75](#)

53 Twitter, Paul Scully MP, [Tweet 11 June 2020](#)

54 For example, the advice on furlough for employers: HMRC, [Check which employees you can put on furlough to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), accessed 22 June 2020. Updated to include information about employees returning from leave added on 12 June 2020 [see [Page history](#)]. Pregnant women are not mentioned.

## 4 Becoming a new parent during the pandemic

44. Becoming a new parent is challenging at the best of times. Although it is also a wonderful time, nothing can fully prepare someone for how difficult it can be and the impact the experience can have on parental mental health. The evidence we've heard demonstrates the serious and unprecedented impact that the pandemic has had on all new parents and, most importantly, their children—our future generation.<sup>55</sup>

45. In response to our public engagement, those who had become new parents during the pandemic overwhelmingly expressed a sense of loss for both their babies and themselves, as they missed key opportunities for bonding with extended family and development activities outside of the home.<sup>56</sup> Many expressed how the situation had exacerbated or caused depression and anxiety, which impacted on their enjoyment of parenthood and ability to bond with their baby.<sup>57</sup> For some, the pandemic had adversely affected their pregnancy with increased anxiety and restrictions surrounding antenatal appointments and their birth experiences.<sup>58</sup>

### Giving birth during the lockdown

46. Restrictions have been put in place on visitors in most hospitals and maternity units. This has meant that many partners or other supportive people were not able to attend routine antenatal appointments, including scans. Where birth partners were self-isolating or unable to travel, some women were not able to have their chosen birth partner with them and we heard from some mothers who had given birth alone. We heard that these experiences had understandably impacted their mental health early on. The Birth Trauma Association told us that increased antenatal anxiety as a result of Covid-19 was likely to lead to a spike in birth trauma.<sup>59</sup> We have also heard that stress and anxiety during pregnancy can negatively affect the development of the unborn child.<sup>60</sup>

One mother told us:

The stress of the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdown, having to give birth alone, no visitors after having a c-section etc has ruined the beginning of what is meant to be a memorable happy time and has led to severe anxiety.<sup>61</sup>

Another mother told us:

Rather than having a relaxing, exciting build up to my maternity leave my final weeks were filled with anxiety and worry. [...] Giving birth in a pandemic was an experience I unfortunately have been left traumatised by; lack of staffing and the restrictions on birth partners affected me.<sup>62</sup>

55 See, for example, The Institute for Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#)) and oral evidence from Dr Alain Gregoire and Dr Trudi Seneviratne

56 Annex 1

57 Annex 1

58 Annex 1; also see, for example, The Birth Trauma Association ([GRC0012](#)); The Fatherhood Institute ([GRC0007](#)).

59 Birth Trauma Association ([GRC0012](#))

60 [Q48](#) and [Q49](#). Also see written evidence, for example from the First 1001 Days Movement ([GRC0006](#)).

61 Annex 1

62 Annex 1

A pregnant woman told us:

I have not had my baby yet I'm due this month. It has been very stressful and worrying especially with all the ongoing changes that have been happening with antenatal care and birth [...]<sup>63</sup>

Combined with some of the other issues faced by pregnant women within the workplace and limitations on government guidance as to their rights, which we discussed in Chapter 3, it's clear that pregnant women have been seriously impacted by the pandemic and experienced great stress and anxiety which may negatively impact their pregnancy and birth experience.

### Isolation and support

47. In response to our public engagement, new parents overwhelmingly spoke of their isolation and lack of support which new parents often rely on.<sup>64</sup> There is some great support available within the UK, and we've heard about the fantastic work of health visitors; professional and volunteer-led support groups and baby groups which all play a crucial role in supporting new parents. Like many essential services, however, this support has not been available during the pandemic. This is not through want of trying: Health visitors and other medical professionals have done their best using technology and many support groups have been able to take place online—but we have been told that this has not been enough.<sup>65</sup> We heard compelling evidence that action needs to be urgently considered to 'catch up' on the support that this cohort of new parents have missed out on and to provide additional support for those who have experienced extreme trauma and hardship as a result of the pandemic. The Institute for Health Visiting told us:

The easing of some COVID-19 restrictions in early June will be welcome but continue to diminish what mothers would have expected in maternity leave and cannot restore lost opportunities that are foundational for parenting, family life and early infant development.<sup>66</sup>

The Birth Trauma Association said:

For us, the main concern is not that maternity leave should be extended but the quite alarming cut-off of postnatal care services—this is what is going to create greater problems for these women down the line.<sup>67</sup>

New mother Bethany Power told us:

Covid-19 has affected me massively [...]. I have worked really hard to secure maternity leave in order to have a job to go back to. I have planned and prepared what I would like to do in my maternity leave and that has been disrupted. I have been unable to get the support I need, like breastfeeding support and weaning support. I am unable to weigh my baby. I am unable to get the support in terms of how to bond with my baby. For me, my baby is

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63 Annex 1

64 Annex 1

65 [Q10](#)

66 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

67 Birth Trauma Association ([GRC0012](#))

the first baby I have ever looked after, so not to get the support from parent and baby groups and professionals has been really hard.<sup>68</sup>

Another new mother told us:

With lockdown in place it has been difficult to enjoy being a new mum without the support of family and friends. Access to my health visitor for weight and health checks hasn't been available which would normally provide me with reassurance of my baby's development. My daughter has also missed her hospital appointments to review her health after her admission to NICU at birth. My husband is an NHS anaesthetist, the added demands of his job during the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the periods I am completely isolated at home without support and affected bonding time as a family. I feel that it has been difficult to maintain a positive outlook at times because of the lack of socialisation and a feeling that I am missing out on many important experiences with my daughter.<sup>69</sup>

### Health visitors

48. Health visitors—nurses or midwives who have undertaken additional public health training—play a crucial role in supporting new parents and identifying vulnerable and at-risk families. In the words of the Institute for Health Visiting:

Their training equips Health Visitors to use their understanding of public health, the wider determinants of health and impact of health inequalities in their skilful work, recognising and responding to individual needs with the aim of improving health outcomes for every child and family.<sup>70</sup>

49. The lockdown has seriously impacted the ability of health visitors to build the relationships with new parents that are so crucial for identifying and supporting those who are seriously struggling or at risk.<sup>71</sup> Health visitors report that it's difficult for mothers to admit they are struggling to a near stranger, which means they may wait longer to seek help.<sup>72</sup> Research shows that 7 in 10 women will hide or underplay the severity of their perinatal mental illness.<sup>73</sup> The Institute for Health Visiting told us that the prioritisation of community services due to Covid-19 has reduced the health visitor-led Healthy Child Programme to just two of the normal five minimum mandated contacts, with more limited targeted support for some families. To comply with social distancing rules, most contacts are largely taking place remotely. They told us that this made it very difficult to identify serious problems such as domestic violence and abuse; mental health; or substance misuse which may be placing them and their children at risk. They also told us that breastfeeding support and physical assessments of the baby are difficult to do without face-to-face contact.<sup>74</sup> The number of health visitors has fallen in England over the last five years from 12,094 in March 2015 to 9,164 in March 2019.<sup>75</sup> The Institute for Health Visiting

68 [Q6](#)

69 Annex 1

70 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

71 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

72 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

73 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

74 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

75 NHS, [NHS Nurses and Health Visitors by level in Trusts and CCGs, March 2010 to March 2019, HC AH2769](#), accessed 23 June 2020

told us that numbers have continued to fall since March 2019 and that the redeployment of health visitors to assist with the pandemic has reduced the service further in many locations. It told us that prior to the pandemic, 29% of health visitors who were surveyed were responsible for 500–1000+ children when the recommended maximum number of children per health visitor is 250.<sup>76</sup>

**50. It is difficult to see how health visitors will be able to ‘catch-up’ with their important contact visits to provide the much-needed support for new parents and to help identify those who are vulnerable and most in need. This risks more vulnerable children and families becoming hidden. The Government should review the provision of health visitor services in light of Covid-19 and consider funding increased numbers of health visitors and other allied professionals to ensure that vulnerable families are identified and given the support they need.**

### **Isolation**

51. We heard from many mothers who were experiencing severe isolation as a result of the lockdown with their new babies, with often serious consequences for their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>77</sup> Dr Cheryll Adams, Executive Director of the Institute of Health Visiting, told us:

When mums are alone, loneliness is a really difficult thing with a new baby [...] You have many moments of the day when it is helpful to talk to somebody and get information. You are just wondering what is going on and you would like to pass it by somebody. Imagine if that goes on into days and weeks, and you do not have good access to support. Many families are Skyping or Zooming grandparents and friends. That helps a lot. They are using online forums and they help enormously, but the days are long. Anybody who has been a mum at home knows just how long the days can be, particularly in the early days when you are not terribly sure about what you are doing.<sup>78</sup>

Although we heard from many mothers who have experienced serious isolation during the lockdown, single mothers have been particularly affected by the Covid-19 restrictions. One single mother told us:

I’m a single mother of four children and I haven’t had any one to one time to bond with my baby or take him out and get him socialised, I suffer with depression and anxiety and I’ve had no time to get help and I feel this could impact on our relationship.<sup>79</sup>

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76 Institute for Health Visiting, ([GRC0024](#)), para 3.3

77 Annex 1

78 [Q11](#)

79 Annex 1

Another single mother told us:

I wasn't able to have anyone in theatre when my son was born which was a horrendous time. Also being a single mother I have to rely on people to drop essential items I need for my baby at my front door. None of my family or friends have met my son and this is time wasted being stuck in the house with him.<sup>80</sup>

### **Baby classes and groups**

52. The petition that triggered this inquiry highlighted the inability for new parents to attend baby groups.<sup>81</sup> There are a huge range of classes and groups that are usually available for new parents, from free support groups provided by local councils and volunteers; play clubs and groups organised by local churches and community groups; to the huge array of classes from baby sensory to swimming and sign language. It became very apparent that these classes and groups, which were talked about fondly, were not just a bit of fun where parents could take their babies swimming or enjoy a cup of tea and a chat. These classes can be lifelines for new parents. We heard that they provide struggling new parents with a reason to leave the house, they provide a space where they can make friends with other parents adding to an informal network of support. We heard how parents rely on these groups and classes for professional and informal parenting advice. For example, we heard from new mothers who had struggled to breastfeed without being able to attend their local support group. We also heard how parents value these classes as an opportunity for their babies to interact with other people and experience new things outside of the home.<sup>82</sup>

53. In our first survey to petitioners, we asked what the most important benefits for attending baby groups and classes were.

**Table 3: What people told us they thought the main benefits of attending baby groups and classes were**

Ranking	Reason
1	The baby's development
2	Professional parenting support
3	Peer parenting support
4	Making friends with other parents

Source: Survey to petitioners, Annex 18<sup>3</sup>

54. Many parents were concerned that their babies were missing out on developmental opportunities through these classes and groups. We were reassured by both the Institute for Health Visiting and Professor Elizabeth Meins, a developmental psychologist and professor of psychology from the University of York, that it was nurturing interactions with their caregivers that contributed the most to baby development.<sup>84</sup> However, the groups are still valuable, not least because of the support and interaction they provide for parents. Parents taking part in our public engagement told us:

80 Annex 1

81 e-petition 306691, [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

82 Annex 1, Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#)), Emily Tredget, Co-Founder of Happiness ([GRC0017](#))

83 Annex 1

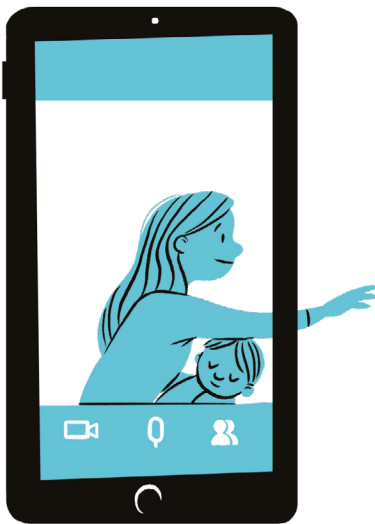
84 [Q13](#)



“I was so scared to even leave the house when I first became a mum, I attended baby massage when my baby was 5 weeks old and instantly felt less alone, more supported, a weight off my shoulders. The confidence gained can’t be quantified or underestimated.”

“Attending parent and baby groups provides a safe space away from family members where it is a safe space to seek support be it weaning, breastfeeding, mental health support that we wouldn’t reach out to a partner or family member in the same way. The groups also provide great reassurance about baby’s development and give tips and ideas that can be shared.”<sup>85</sup>

55. Some providers of baby classes and groups have gone online to provide interactive classes for parents; however, we heard that many of the free classes, such as those provided by local authorities, had simply stopped and had been replaced with non-interactive classes that didn’t provide the same level of support.<sup>86</sup> Petitioner Jessie Zammit told us:



“[...] you have to pay for a lot of these interactive baby groups, especially in the area I live. That is absolutely fine if you are able to put yourself in that sort of position, but I know the council often runs baby groups that are free and get a lot of use. For those people who are not able to support themselves financially to do these Zoom meetings and stuff, how are they going to be able to do stuff like that at home?”<sup>87</sup>

We heard from representatives of the baby class industry and entrepreneurial mothers who have set up businesses to help parents find baby groups and connect with other parents following their experiences of postnatal depression. This sector, like most others, has been hit hard financially due to the pandemic, with classes and groups having to

close their doors or move online with reduced numbers.<sup>88</sup>

Emily Tredget told us:

“Baby classes have small margins, so this [social distancing] 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 [...] still won’t be able to attend. These class providers are likely to be struggling at the moment, with no access to government help due to being sole directors of Ltd companies [...]. 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.”<sup>89</sup>

**56. While baby classes may not be directly vital to baby development, they provide important support to new parents, which will benefit the care they can provide. From**

85 Annex 1

86 [Q12](#)

87 [Q12](#)

88 Emily Tredget, Co-Founder of Happity ([GRC0021](#))

89 Emily Tredget, Co-Founder of Happity ([GRC0021](#))

our discussions with the sector and with the Minister, there has not been sufficient engagement with these groups or appropriate consideration of the contribution that they make to the lives of new parents. The Government should engage fully with this important sector and consider how it can be better supported. We were pleased that the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, Paul Scully MP, has committed to Government engagement with the baby class sector. *The Government should provide an update on its discussions with the baby group sector as part of its response to this report.*

57. New parents have missed out on vital support from professionals such as health visitors and baby classes and groups. We've heard how important this support is for parental mental health and for helping to lay the foundation for parenting, family life and early infant development. The Government has announced a £1 billion catch-up fund for older children who have missed out on valuable education. These new parents have also missed out at a crucial time for both them and their children. *The Government should fund and provide additional catch-up support targeted at this cohort of parents to enable them to access both the professional and more informal support that plays such an important role during the first few months of parenting.*

### Dental care

58. All pregnant women and new mothers are entitled to free dental treatment up to 12 months after giving birth. However, many new mothers have told us that they have been unable to use their free dental care as a result of the lockdown.<sup>90</sup> One mother told us:

I have lost the benefit of my NHS exemption certificate when it comes to dental care as I am unable to visit the dentist. As we know pregnancy takes its toll on a woman's body in all aspects and I will now potentially have to pay for any remedial dental work as a result of not being able to visit the dentist due to the lockdown prior to my exemption expiring.<sup>91</sup>



59. This is an important benefit for new and expectant mothers as increased hormone levels can leave them more vulnerable to dental problems including gum disease and increased risk of tooth decay.<sup>92</sup> This entitlement is particularly important for those with low incomes or struggling on Statutory Maternity Pay, Maternity Allowance or unpaid portions of their leave entitlement. **Free dental care is an important benefit that most pregnant and new mothers have been unable to access as the result of the pandemic.** *The Government should extend maternity dentist provision for new and expectant mothers affected by the pandemic for at least six months, so new mothers have the opportunity to access this important benefit.*

90 Annex 1

91 Annex 1

92 Oral Health Foundation, [Oral health and pregnancy: six things every mum needs to know](#), accessed 23 June 2020



## 5 Parental mental health

60. In the previous chapter we looked at the experience of becoming a new parent during the pandemic, and the loss of much of the support which is available to new parents. While becoming a parent should be a wonderful experience, it is also an enormously challenging one. The added complications of becoming a new parent under the current exceptional circumstances inevitably has consequences for parental mental health. We consider these issues, and what the Government can do to better support new parents, below.

### *Postnatal depression*

61. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych), around 10–15 in every 100 women are affected by depression and anxiety during pregnancy, with the same prevalence of women experiencing postnatal depression.<sup>93</sup> Suicide is the leading cause of death for new mothers in the year after birth.<sup>94</sup> Around 1 in every 1,000 women experiences postpartum psychosis, the most serious type of mental illness experienced after childbirth.<sup>95</sup> Postnatal depression can also affect partners. At least 1 in 20 fathers suffered significant psychological distress at some point in their baby's first year.<sup>96</sup> Among the causes of postnatal depression listed by the NHS are having no close family or friends to support you and recent stressful life events.<sup>97</sup>



93 National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, [The Perinatal Mental Health Care Pathways. Full implementation guidance](#), 2018

94 Maternal Mental Health Alliance, [Maternal suicide still the leading cause of death in first postnatal year](#), accessed 23 June 2020

95 Royal College of Psychiatrists, [Postnatal depression](#), accessed 23 June 2020

96 Fatherhood Institute ([GRC0007](#))

97 NHS, [Overview Postnatal depression](#), accessed 23 June 2020

62. The perinatal period can be extremely important for mothers and babies. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states that:

Poorly managed perinatal mental health problems can have lasting effects on maternal self-esteem, partner and family relationships, and the mental health and social adjustment of the child. [...] Perinatal psychiatric disorder is also associated with an increased risk to both mortality and morbidity in mother and child.<sup>98</sup>

Health services to support mothers with postnatal depression include specialised inpatient mother and baby units, specialised perinatal Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs), maternity liaison services, adult mental health services including admission wards, community and crisis services, and clinical psychology services linked to maternity services.<sup>99</sup>

### **Financial concerns and parental mental health**

63. Among the thousands of new parents from whom we heard, many spoke about the increased financial pressures that they found themselves in as a result of Covid-19.<sup>100</sup> New parents plan their parental leave carefully to ensure that they can afford to take time off with their new child. In Chapter 2 we discussed the difficulties that parents can face affording to live on their statutory pay and the unpaid portion of their leave entitlement. Many parents have found this now impossible with some losing household income because of partners being placed on furlough or losing their jobs all together.<sup>101</sup> Many also no longer have job security at the end of their leave. Dr Trudi Seneviratne, of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' Faculty of Perinatal Psychiatry, told us that these concerns "feed into developing depression and anxiety", but that mothers experiencing these problems are managed by primary care providers rather than engaging with dedicated mental health professionals.<sup>102</sup> While improving mental health provision is one tool that could be used to support those who face this challenge, securing and improving the financial security of parents would, to Dr Seneviratne, be "welcome".<sup>103</sup> We appreciate that Covid-19 has hit many people financially, but the added stress for new parents at what is already a challenging time is clearly exacerbating mental health problems among new parents. One new mother told us:

I'm a first time Mum on maternity leave. My husband was made redundant 3 weeks ago, which whilst it's lovely to spend quality time together as a new little family; the impact of Coronavirus and his future job outlook will mean that I may have to cut my maternity leave short, getting even less time to spend and bond with my son. The quality time together that I had envisioned going to baby groups and my son enjoying time with our family also hasn't been possible as a result of the lockdown.<sup>104</sup>

98 Royal College of Psychiatrists, [Perinatal mental health services: Recommendations for the provision of services for childbearing women CR197](#), page 10

99 House of Commons Library, [Perinatal mental illness debate pack](#), 18 July 2018

100 Annex 2

101 Annex 2

102 [Q48](#)

103 [Q48](#)

104 Annex 1

Another mother told us:

My maternity leave has been completely robbed off me and now to make things worse I'm also being told I could have no job to return to due to being made redundant. Worrying how I'm going to afford rent and bills.<sup>105</sup>

### **Parents with multiple children**

64. We've heard from many parents who feel that the important one-to-one bonding time with their newborns or new child has been seriously affected due to the lack of childcare, formal or informal, for their other children.<sup>106</sup> We've also heard from many struggling to adjust to life with a newborn or newly adopted child and all the challenges that come with that, as well as trying to home school others.<sup>107</sup> Dr Alain Gregoire told us that mothers with more than three children were already at higher risk of mental health problems.<sup>108</sup> One mother told us:

I'm having to home school my other two who are 12 and 7, this is taking the time away from my baby. In order for me to be able to home school I have had to give up breastfeeding. It was impossible to establish breastfeeding at the start as my other two children needed me to help them with work and other activities in the day meaning I didn't have time to sit and cluster feed my baby, so he could establish my milk supply. This has made me deal with high anxiety and low moods as I feel I was forced to put him on formula so I could make sure my children are getting the support they needed.[...]. I feel like my maternity has been ruined and the one to one time I should have had with my baby is gone. This makes it very hard to bond with my baby as I feel I have let him down already.<sup>109</sup>

Teaching children is a full-time job. Trying to do this on top of caring for a newborn is clearly putting a huge strain on many of the parents we heard from.<sup>110</sup>

### **The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on parental mental health**

65. We heard how many of the important mental health services for pregnant and new mothers had not been available in the usual way during the lockdown. Dr Seneviratne also told us that even though services were trying very hard, women did not have the right level of support from both antenatal and postnatal services.<sup>111</sup> The Institute for Health Visiting told us how the lockdown had imposed a level of isolation from sources of support and therefore exacerbated the 'normal' challenges of parenting.<sup>112</sup> Dr Alain Gregoire told us:

[Becoming a new parent] is a time when we mentally struggle more than at any other time; it is also a time when the impact of those mental health difficulties is greater than at any other time in our lives, not just on us as

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105 Annex 1

106 Annex 1

107 Annex 1

108 [Q52](#)

109 Annex 1

110 Annex 1

111 [Q48](#)

112 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))

individuals, but on the next generation. The level of support that is available is great, from all sectors—from healthcare, social care and the charitable sector—but all of those, particularly with Covid, are suffering enormously. Face-to-face support and sensitive, timely support is really important, and that has been seriously affected at the same time as the need has more than doubled.<sup>113</sup>

A mother told us:

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.<sup>114</sup>

Another new mother told us:

I am isolated with my baby. I am not able to attend any baby groups and classes [...] [or] make [friends] with other parents which is important for support. My mental health has suffered, and I have not been able to seek support for postnatal depression as I would have done if there was not a lockdown. As a result, my mental health has got worse and I am concerned about going back to work without the time to fully recover with the support I need.<sup>115</sup>

66. We've heard extremely concerning evidence that a tsunami of mental health referrals could be on their way as a result of Covid-19.<sup>116</sup> The very specific challenges and isolation that new parents have experienced as a result of Covid-19 have very likely had a very serious impact on parental mental health. It is too soon to have empirical data to demonstrate the adverse effect on the mental health of new parents and their children, and we fear that it will come too late. We have however heard powerful evidence from those on the front line, and from the thousands of parents who contacted us, that the impact on the mental health of new parents is unprecedented. Dr Alain Gregoire told us that the Maternal Mental Health Alliance have reported "an enormous increase" in mental health problems among pregnant women and new mothers. In an unpublished survey of women using a pregnancy and post-natal app, he said that 60% of new mothers and 50% of pregnant women said that they were "a lot more anxious" than they would expect to be. Dr Gregoire said that this is more than double what they would normally expect.<sup>117</sup>

Dr Seneviratne told us that colleagues across the country were reporting an increase in anxiety in both pregnant mothers and new parents. She told us:

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113 [Q54](#)

114 [Annex 1](#)

115 [Annex 1](#)

116 [Q46](#)

117 [Q47](#)

We are worried that a tsunami of referrals for mental health difficulties may be on the way—that at the moment, people are perhaps in isolation and not presenting with their mental health problems, but more will be on the way.<sup>118</sup>

Dr Cheryll Adams also told us that health visitors were reporting more depression among new mothers. She told us:

“I had a case yesterday of a specialist perinatal health visitor who had contacted one of her mums, just as a catch-up. This mum had always coped very well but had had depression with the first child and was coping with the second one. She had hit a really black point and the call was very well timed. If there was time to ring every mum, I suspect we would be finding a lot more problems and a lot of families needing more support.”<sup>119</sup>

67. The negative impact of Covid-19 on the nation’s mental health has been widely acknowledged. However, becoming a new parent is already a vulnerable time for mental health. We have heard that the pandemic has seriously exacerbated mental health problems for new parents at a time when the health services and other support systems are unable to respond sufficiently. We’ve heard that the need for these services among new parents has probably doubled. Simply resuming services after lockdown is not going to help these parents ‘catch up’ with the support that they have so desperately needed.

### ***The impact on children***

68. Over the last generation the Government and Parliament have had clear scientific knowledge on the impact that poor parental mental health can have on the child. The First 1001 Days Movement, an alliance of over 120 charities and professional bodies spanning the children, family, mental health, maternity and baby sectors, told us how lockdown affected babies at a critical time in their development, when they are particularly vulnerable to family stress and anxiety. It said:

There is an urgent need to support babies and their families to prevent immediate and long-term harm. A wealth of evidence shows that exposure to significant stress in the womb or early life can have pervasive and lasting impacts on multiple domains of development. But importantly, the research also shows us that the risks of early trauma and adversity can be mitigated with the right support.<sup>120</sup>

The NSPCC said:

Undetected and unsupported mental health problems can affect a parent’s ability to provide the responsive and sensitive support necessary for scaffolding their child and jeopardise the formation of a secure parent-infant bond.<sup>121</sup>

Dr Alain Gregoire said:

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118 [Q46](#)

119 [Q11](#)

120 First 1001 Days Movement ([GRC0006](#))

121 NSPCC ([GRC0012](#))

The effect is not invariable, not unavoidable, not irreversible, but large. So you see a doubling overall of mental health problems in the offspring of women who are anxious or have increased anxiety during pregnancy. For those with a lot more anxiety, that is the sort of figure that we will expect to see in the next generation.

You are the first generation of legislators who have this scientific knowledge; [...] So, there is a huge potential for acting and acting now, to prevent effects in 20- or 30-years' time, as well as effects tomorrow.<sup>122</sup>

69. The impact of parental mental health on young children is striking. The Government has been unable to protect everyone from the impact of this pandemic, and it is difficult to see how any Government could. However, there is clear scientific evidence that shows if new parents can be effectively supported through this crisis, this will also help protect the next generation from the impact of the pandemic.

### **The economic cost of poor parental mental health**

70. A 2014 study by LSE on the costs of perinatal mental health problems attempted to quantify the economic costs of existing levels of mental health problems in new parents, including both the costs associated with the parent and the effects on children, examining the costs per case of depression, anxiety and postnatal psychosis. It put the total known cost of mental health problems per year's births in the UK at £8.1 billion and a per-case cost of nearly £10,000 to the public sector alone.<sup>123</sup>

**Table 4: Total costs per case, in £ (of which public sector costs in £)**

	Total cost - mother	Total cost - child	Total cost - mother + child
Perinatal depression	22,630 (1,688)	51,462 (7,971)	74,092 (9,659)
Perinatal anxiety	20,794 (4,320)	14,017 (5,362)	34,811 (9,682)
Perinatal psychosis	47,489 (24,302)	5,122 (354)	52,611 (24,656)

Source: Centre for Mental Health and London School of Economics, [https://www.nwscnsenate.nhs.uk/files/3914/7030/1256/Costs\\_of\\_perinatal\\_mh.pdf](https://www.nwscnsenate.nhs.uk/files/3914/7030/1256/Costs_of_perinatal_mh.pdf), (2014) p 20 Table 7

An extra 13 weeks of Statutory Maternity Pay would cost £1,966 per person.<sup>124</sup> When we put to the Minister, Paul Scully MP, the economic benefits of investing now, he responded:

What we are trying to do—which is why we are not looking at extending the provision of maternity pay at the moment—is to get the balance right between supporting as many parents as we can and supporting employers. [...]

Employers are worrying about cash flow, which is everything to them at the moment, and we have to get the balance right on whether we want to have those jobs for the mothers and fathers to go back to.<sup>125</sup>

122 Q47 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/408/default/>

123 Centre for Mental Health and London School of Economics, [The costs of perinatal mental health problems](#), 2014, p4 and p20, Table 7

124 13 X £151.20 per week.

125 [Q104](#)

71. We appreciate the importance of new parents having jobs to go back to. Indeed, financial pressures and concerns about job security in light of Covid-19 have added to the anxiety and stress of new and expectant parents. We also fully understand the gravity of the situation that businesses find themselves in. However, without robustly supporting new parents and dealing with a potential crisis in mental health, they won't be fit to work, or at best won't be as productive, which will also cost businesses.

72. On 22 May 2020, the Government announced a total of £4.2 million to be awarded to mental health charities, such as Samaritans, Young Minds and Bipolar UK, in addition to £5 million already made available to Mind and the Mental Health Consortia.<sup>126</sup> While funding for mental health charities is welcome, the Minister was unable to confirm that any money will be directly targeted at new parents and whether it will meet their specific needs. **Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of the whole nation. New and expectant parents have especially been put under tremendous strain during what is already an incredibly challenging time in their lives. It is extremely likely that there will be a significant increase in mental health referrals from new parents which the Government must ensure that the Health Service is fully prepared for. We are the first generation of legislators with the scientific knowledge of the impact that parental mental health has on the development, health and future outcomes of some of the most vulnerable in society: babies and young children. We must act on this knowledge. The Government should fund and provide additional professional and mental health support especially targeted at this cohort of parents, and their children, in addition to its wider plans to significantly expand mental health services provided by the NHS.**

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126 Department of Health and Social Care, [£22 million awarded to life-saving health charities during virus outbreak](#), 22 May 2020



## 6 Adoption and special guardians

73. The petition that triggered this inquiry was specifically requesting an extension to maternity leave, but our inquiry has been about all new parents. Adoptive parents and special guardians who have welcomed their new children into their families during this pandemic must not be forgotten. Their children are often older and from difficult backgrounds which brings a unique set of challenges for these parents. Both adoptive parents and special guardians help ensure that some of our most vulnerable children have loving homes. They deserve special consideration at this unprecedented time.

### Adoption

74. Adoption is a difficult and complex process which can last up to three years, and Adoption UK has described how the process can take its toll both physically and mentally on new parents even before the challenges of the placement.<sup>127</sup> Sue Armstrong Brown from Adoption UK told us how the majority of adopted children are adopted out of care, unable to return home because of a history of instability, abuse, neglect and an inability for their birth families to parent them. We heard about the challenges that these parents face in “reparenting” whereby they identify the gaps that the child has experienced to try to rehabilitate and heal them as they parent their child.<sup>128</sup>

### Post adoption depression

75. Much like postnatal depression, the recognised condition of post-adoption depression (PAD) can affect new adoptive parents.<sup>129</sup> We heard how in severe cases, PAD can lead to the breakdown of the adoption which can have traumatic impacts on both the adoptive parents and the children.<sup>130</sup> The adoption support community and charity We Are Family (WAF), told us:

Adoption breakdown is not only caused by PADS but can also be the result of parents being unable to manage some of the most challenging behaviours of children, which can include aggression such as child-to-parent violence. These behaviours can be triggered by transitions, such as the move from foster care to adoptive placement, or external events, such as moving to a new house, starting a new school and other factors that lead to changes in routine—including COVID-19. [...] When adoption breakdowns do happen, they have major traumatic impacts on both the adoptive parents and the children. Children may have to go back into care, where finding a new placement may be very difficult due to the impacts of having their “forever family” break down.

We believe that by extending adoption leave in response to COVID-19 families will benefit from establishing normal routines and may help prevent adoption breakdown.

127 Adoption UK, [Factsheet 14 - Post-adoption depression](#), June 2013

128 [Q60](#)

129 Adoption UK, [Factsheet 14 - Post-adoption depression](#), June 2013

130 We Are Family (WAF) ([GRC0008](#))



We Are Family also highlighted the importance of support for adoptive parents, to avoid PAD and the breakdown of adoption, telling us: “Families experiencing these behaviours need strong external support, both from their family and friends as well as professionals, to cope and to find ways to reduce them.”<sup>131</sup>

### ***The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on adoption leave and newly adopted children***

76. Adoption UK told us that, based on a survey of adoptive families’ experiences during the first month of lockdown, over half of families reported that their children were exhibiting increased anxiety and emotional distress. Over half were finding an increase in challenging behaviour from their children, and a third were experiencing an increase in violence from their children towards the parents.<sup>132</sup> Sue Armstrong Brown from Adoption UK told us:

Those are all signs of an adopted child in trauma, dysregulated and unable to manage the situation, and we can easily understand how covid and the lockdown is having that impact. They have experienced a high level of disruption, the loss of all the external regulating activities they may have depended on, and a huge support gap opening up—quite understandably—as families struggle to access the professional support from schools, social services or medical services that they have been relying on.<sup>133</sup>

In response to our survey, one parent told us:

The planned one to one time with our adopted daughter (age 1) has disappeared which has had a huge effect on her attachment to us, our ability to work on specific areas that she needs additional care around, supporting her social opportunities etc. A lot of my time has had to go into supporting our adopted son’s (age 6) education [...] The stress and anxiety experienced due to the pandemic has not supported our ability to give her the best possible start in our family and that makes me incredibly sad and worried given the lifelong effects of insecure attachments.<sup>134</sup>

Another parent told us:

The period of adoption leave following a child moving in with their forever family is a crucial time [...] 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.<sup>135</sup>

77. Parents had been unable to access the usual professional and informal support which is so important for parental mental health and preventing adoption breakdown. Support

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131 We Are Family (WAF) ([GRC0008](#))

132 [Q60](#)

133 [Q60](#)

134 Annex 1

135 Annex 1

networks for adoptive parents are unique to those of other parents.<sup>136</sup> For parents on adoption leave during the lockdown, Adoption UK found that the most common issue raised by adoptive parents was the complete loss of their support network at a time when they potentially need them most. In some instances, this has been combined with a loss of professional support, as local authorities redeploy staff away from adoption teams and into frontline roles or face increased levels of staff absence.<sup>137</sup>

78. Social worker Al Coates, a member of the DfE adoption expert advisory group and himself an adoptive parent, told us that families were normally advised to have a period of isolation from others to promote the new relationships and routines. However, he said that many found this to be stressful as their normal support was reduced. Adoption UK believe that this advice needs to be re-examined.<sup>138</sup> Al Coates explained how adoptive parents' support networks are often more specific than for parents of similar aged children, as they can understand the unique circumstances of the situation. The lockdown restrictions have also impacted opportunities for adoptive parents to develop those networks. We heard how the inability for relationships to be built with those they were relying on for childcare once they returned to work, including family members, was leading to increased anxiety. As Al Coates explained:

children's vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the lack of relationship with new childcare givers that they have limited or no relationship with. [...] [Those who] need to return to work imminently due to the end of their Adoption Leave [...] have had no opportunity to have a paced and measured introduction to nursery or childcare providers.<sup>139</sup>

We also heard about the impact that lockdown has had on routines which are particularly important for children who have experienced trauma. We Are Family told us:

For parents currently on adoption leave [...] the routine that the children would only recently have established will have been changed by lockdown. These routines are very important for children who have experienced trauma (experiences of neglect, indirect and direct domestic abuse, parental substance abuse (including during pregnancy), sexual abuse) as they build predictability and therefore help to foster a sense of security and allow for the building of attachment to the adoptive parents. In other words, shortly after a major, unsettling shift in their lives, the children have to go through a second one in a short period of time – and one that brings with it a sense of insecurity around personal wellbeing and health, which can trigger past trauma in children.<sup>140</sup>

### ***Time for transitioning to school***

79. The average age of adoption in England is approximately three and a half, so many new adoptive parents use their leave to prepare and support their children as they start school.<sup>141</sup> School closures have made this impossible. Adoption UK told us:

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136 Al Coates ([GRC0011](#))

137 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

138 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

139 Al Coates ([GRC0011](#))

140 We Are Family (WAF) ([GRC0008](#))

141 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

Transition planning is essential, and adopters will often work closely with the school to ensure the child's transition into school is smooth and gradual. [...] For those newly placed adopters whose children are due to start school in September, there has been no opportunity to engage in proper transition planning as a result of the lockdown. These parents were particularly concerned about how their child would cope in school without this specific preparation, as well as the general lack of socialisation in lockdown.<sup>142</sup>

## Conclusion

**80. Adoptive parents and their children have faced uniquely challenging situations without the access to the professional and informal support that they need. These children are among the most vulnerable in society. In the most serious situations, we've heard that the negative impacts of Covid-19 could lead to an increase in adoption breakdown which would be devastating for parents and children. The extension of adoption leave with pay would give these new parents the opportunity to access some of the support they've missed out on as lockdown restrictions are eased. It will also give them valuable time to establish important routines and to bond with their children, as well as time to settle their children into new childcare or schools and introduce them to their wider adoptive families. *The Government should extend adoption leave and pay for adoptive parents who have been affected by the pandemic for three months.***

## Self-employed adoptive parents

**81. We discussed in Chapter 2 how self-employed adoptive parents are not entitled to parental leave pay. By leaving self-employed adoptive parents to entirely self-fund their adoption leave, it places another barrier to the adoption process. A prospective adopter will have a strengthened application if they can show how one parent can commit to adoption leave. We can see no good reason why self-employed adoptive parents are excluded from receiving support in line with that offered to other parents through Maternity Allowance and adoption leave. The Minister confirmed the Government was not ruling out additional support for self-employed parents and highlighted the forthcoming wider review of parental pay and leave.<sup>143</sup> **The Government's response to this inquiry so far has not addressed the immediate situation faced by self-employed adoptive parents as a result of Covid-19. A future review, although welcome, may not come in time for this cohort of parents and children who desperately need additional support. Adoptive parents spend a huge amount of time planning their leave period carefully so that their children and new families can have the very best start. No-one was able to plan for Covid-19. These parents are looking after some of the most vulnerable children in our society and need help as a matter of urgency. *The Government should consider equalising the benefits for self-employed adoptive parents to those of other self-employed parents. This could be a pilot scheme for those who became new parents during the pandemic, to inform the Government's wider review on parental leave.*****

142 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

143 [Q89](#)

## Special guardians

82. There are around 200,000 children in the UK who are looked after by kinship carers, some of whom are special guardians. They are family members or friends who take on the care of a child who cannot remain at home. This could be for a number of reasons including parental domestic abuse, mental ill-health, substance misuse, imprisonment or death. The Family Rights Group told us:

Children who move to live in kinship care have often experienced tragedy or trauma. They may have gone into unrelated care for a period or moved straight to the kinship carer. It may be a planned move but often, especially during the current crisis, the child may have moved in an emergency. The nature of kinship care does mean there is already a familial or relationship link between the carer and the child, however the transition for both the child, the carer and other members or the household, can be very demanding.<sup>144</sup>

83. As we discussed in Chapter 2, special guardians are not entitled to standard parental leave or pay when they take on this role. In some cases, they can be entitled to funding from their local council, in the same way that adoptive parents can. Whether or not a family or friend carer qualifies for support from a local authority will depend on the legal nature of the arrangement.<sup>145</sup> Other than in limited cases, local authorities are not obliged to provide support where care arrangements have been made without their involvement. Adoption UK, who have been campaigning for special guardians to have rights to parental leave and pay, have identified that around half of all special guardians have to give up work to care for children, since they are not entitled to paid leave to help them settle in.<sup>146</sup>

### *The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on special guardians*

84. More than half of special guardians are grandparents, many of whom will be over 70 and within the at-risk group for Covid-19.<sup>147</sup> In addition, across all age groups of kinship carers, they are more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions, with a quarter of respondents to a 2019 survey by the Family Rights Group identifying as having a limiting long-term illness or disability.<sup>148</sup> With over 50% of special guardians and kinship carers already having to give up work to look after children, it is unsurprising that the additional financial pressures resulting from Covid-19 have seriously impacted them. Research by the Family Rights Group shows that many special guardians and kinship carers are struggling to deal with the additional hardship of the crisis. The charity told us:

Carers who find themselves having to reduce their working hours, change their jobs, or in some cases leave employment entirely in order to care for a child, can be in financial hardship as a result. The Coronavirus crisis has exacerbated this financial hardship, with a quarter of kinship carers reporting they faced financial hardship that had worsened as a result of the

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144 The Family Rights Group ([GRC0025](#))

145 For a detailed explanation of the legal arrangements and financial support see House of Commons Library, [Support for family and friends carers looking after children](#) 11 September 2019

146 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))

147 The Family Rights Group ([GRC0025](#))

148 The Family Rights Group ([GRC0025](#))

current crisis, and a further 18% remained in a similar level of hardship than pre-crisis. This places huge pressure on kinship care placements and can be a deterring factor to families taken on the care of children.<sup>149</sup>

Most worryingly, we heard that these added pressures could risk the breakdown of these important placements. The Family Rights Group told us:

Not only are kinship carers at higher risk if they contract the virus, children in kinship care may have different or additional needs as a result of their experiences. Our 2020 survey identified that 54% of the kinship children of those who responded had special educational needs or disabilities. It is essential that these families receive adequate support in order to maintain these family placements. If kinship care placements break down, this will only exacerbate the challenges that the foster care sector is already facing. If kinship carers receive the short-term support they need now, then this will hopefully avoid the need for children to enter unrelated care.<sup>150</sup>

When asked about the support available for special guardians, the Minister committed to looking into the matter, but was not able to confirm any additional support would be available.<sup>151</sup>

**85. Special guardians need time and support to help their often highly vulnerable children to settle into their new kinship families in the same way that adoptive and other parents do. They should not be treated any differently to any other parent in this respect. A future review is welcome. As part of that review, *the Government should consider whether entitlements and benefits for parental leave and pay can be extended to special guardians.***

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149 The Family Rights Group ([GRC0025](#))

150 The Family Rights Group ([GRC0025](#))

151 [Q90](#)

## 7 The neonatal experience

86. Over 100,000 babies are cared for in a neonatal unit each year in the UK. Neonatal care is when a baby is admitted to a specialist unit for babies who are born sick or premature to receive care that ensures they have the best possible chance of survival and quality of life. Sometimes parents are unable to hold their babies for weeks and when they do eventually get to take them home, they often have ongoing medical needs. The charity for premature babies and their families, The Smallest Things, told us:

We passionately believe that time spent in a neonatal unit, helplessly watching your fragile baby in an incubator covered in wires and tubes and surrounded by beeping machinery, should not count as parental leave. Not only is precious time with a newborn replaced by fear and worry over health issues (or even survival), but the journey does not end when (and if) a baby leaves hospital.<sup>152</sup>

87. A 2017 report by The Smallest Things found that nearly half of premature babies were re-admitted to hospital following discharge with 46% of parents reporting ongoing medical difficulties following premature birth. These parents are subjected to huge amounts of stress as they worry about their fragile newborn baby. Parents can spend valuable months of their parental leave commuting between home and the hospital, often at great financial cost, instead of bonding with their baby at home. Research by the charity for babies born premature or sick, Bliss, shows that 80% of parents felt their mental health was worse following a neonatal experience. Bliss told us that parents with a neonatal experience have higher rates of postnatal depression.<sup>153</sup>

### Neonatal leave and pay

88. Parents are not currently entitled to take any extra leave when their baby receives neonatal care. However, the Government made a commitment in March 2020 to introduce neonatal leave and pay to give these parents more time to look after and bond with their babies.<sup>154</sup> This shows that the Government recognises the specific circumstances of these parents and the often incredibly challenging situations they can find themselves in. The introduction of this leave is planned for 2023. When we asked whether the Government would bring it forward in light of Covid-19, the Minister could only commit to its inclusion in a forthcoming Employment Bill for which he could not commit to a time scale.<sup>155</sup> This issue is clearly time-critical for parents of newborns who are in neonatal units.

### The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the neonatal experience

89. In light of Covid-19, hospitals have had to make difficult decisions to protect staff and patients, including the sick and premature babies within neonatal units. We've heard that hospitals have differently assessed the risk and some have restricted visits to no more than a couple of hours or only to one parent.<sup>156</sup> In some cases, we've heard that this had

152 The Smallest Things ([GRC0026](#))

153 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

154 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Good Work Plan: Proposals to support families](#), 2019

155 [Q92](#)

156 The Smallest Things ([GRC0026](#))



to be the same parent for the duration of their baby's neonatal care.<sup>157</sup> This has meant that mothers have gone unsupported within neonatal units and partners have been separated from their new-borns, sometimes for months. In the unfortunate situation where parents have had to self-isolate due to Covid-19 symptoms, mothers have been separated from their babies for two weeks.<sup>158</sup> The charity for parents of sick and premature babies, Bliss told us that "this is likely to have a significant impact on parental confidence, and anxiety levels."<sup>159</sup> Bliss also told us about the importance of direct care from parents for babies who experience neonatal care:

Numerous studies have identified the long-lasting impact of neonatal care on babies and their families, in terms of long-term attachment and developmental outcomes, when parents are able to provide direct hands-on care to their baby. Evidence has shown that long periods of direct care lead to increased weight-gain and improved breastfeeding rates, and skin-to-skin care has been linked to better infant reflexes at term and better gross motor development at 4–5 years.<sup>160</sup>

90. When we pressed the Minister on some of the really difficult challenges that many parents have faced, for example where only one parent has been able to go and visit the child during the period of hospitalisation, he said:

I know that a number of neonatal units have reduced visitors, but in some ways that can actually be a good thing because they can spend more time with both parents. It should not be the partner, or one parent or the other, who is considered a visitor. I want to make that clear, but I appreciate the evidence you are getting on that point.<sup>161</sup>

Suggesting that visitor restrictions can "actually be a good thing" highlights a serious lack of understanding of what the reality has been for many of these parents.

91. We can't imagine the toll that these restrictions have taken on parents who were already dealing with an extremely distressing situation. This of course has been exacerbated by the other impacts of Covid-19 and the lockdown. During their darkest times, these parents have struggled to access professional support that would normally be available and have been unable to see family and friends who would normally be rallying around and doing everything possible to support them. Many have also had additional financial pressures such as job losses, and the anxiety and stress that the pandemic has brought to everyone. Ongoing medical issues mean that these babies on release from hospital often have to be shielded to protect them from Covid-19. So even as the lockdown restrictions are being lifted, many will still be unable to receive valuable support from family and friends. Bliss told us:

While going home is always exciting, it can also be daunting. Parents often describe going home as the point in their journey where they begin to process what they have been through. Due to COVID-19, neonatal outreach and home visiting services are largely unavailable and due to ongoing

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157 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

158 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

159 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

160 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

161 [Q93](#)



societal wide social distancing measures, they will not have the support of their wider family and friends. As such, it is important that both parents are able to have the time away from work to adjust to life at home, and to form those important bonds with their baby in the home environment.

We also heard from many new mothers through our survey who had spent time with their babies in neonatal care.<sup>162</sup> One mother told us:

I had my baby 10 weeks prematurely in January, my baby came home 2 weeks after lockdown. Due to infection control in the NICU only parents are able to hold the baby [...] then after 70 days in the NICU he finally comes home and is [still] unable to see family. My mental health has definitely been affected and I feel alone and scared at a time when I need the most support. I feel like I've been deprived of time that we won't ever be able to get back.<sup>163</sup>

Through its helpline and engagement, Bliss hears directly from parents. It shared a case study of a mother who contacted them when her baby had already been in neonatal care for over a month:

She was going to have to end her maternity leave earlier than she wanted to, due to her partner being self-employed and unable to work because of Covid-19. The lack of available financial support means the household will be unable to cope on maternity pay alone, or during the final 13 weeks of unpaid leave. This will reduce drastically the time she has at home with her baby, once they have been discharged from the neonatal unit.<sup>164</sup>

There are also those parents who have had to shield due to underlying health problems who have been unable to visit their babies in hospital,<sup>165</sup> and those who have had to self-isolate after presenting with Covid-19 symptoms. Bliss have said that if these parents had access to rapid testing this could mean they don't need to wait the full two weeks to see their children.<sup>166</sup>

**92. We welcome the Government's recognition that special neonatal leave and pay should be introduced for all parents who find themselves in this situation. The Government plans to include provisions in its forthcoming Employment Bill to introduce this reform in 2023. *In advance of the planned delivery of neonatal leave and pay in 2023, the Government should pilot the introduction of these reforms for those affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. If a success, the date of the general introduction of these measures could be brought forward.***

**93. We welcome the Government's introduction of testing for members of the public. However, priority testing should be made available for parents of babies in neonatal care. No parent should be separated unnecessarily from their newborn for any longer that they need to. The Government should *prioritise rapid testing for parents of babies in neonatal care.***

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162 Annex 1

163 Annex 1

164 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

165 Informal discussion with The Smallest Things

166 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))

## 8 Childcare and returning to work

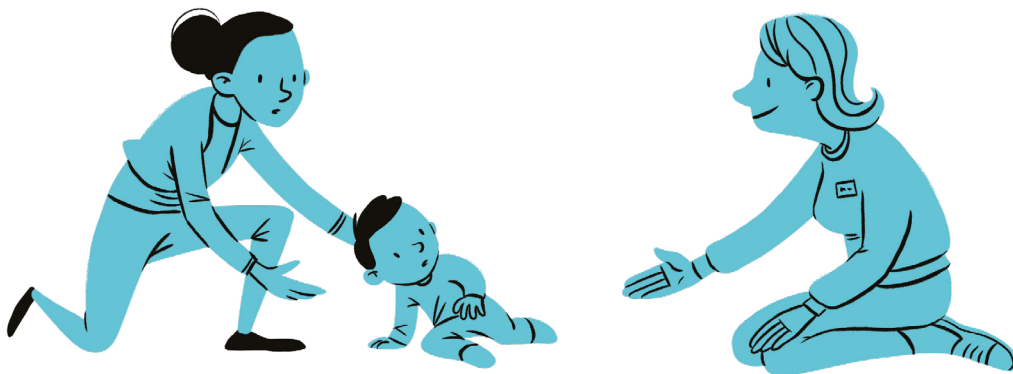
94. We heard from thousands of new parents through our public engagement on this inquiry, and they shared with us a huge number of different reasons for wanting to extend their maternity leave, many of which were interrelated. One thing that was apparent from the responses we received to our survey was that people hadn't signed this petition simply because they want to stay on leave longer—in many cases the childcare options were simply not there to allow women to return to work as they had planned, and that a return date was looming without any realistic solutions being available.<sup>167</sup>

### The importance of childcare

95. Quality, affordable childcare has many of the same economic benefits as generous parental benefits: helping keep parents in the workforce; contributing to GDP; reducing the gender pay gap; and reducing benefit spending. In 2014, the Institute for Public Policy Research found that a five percentage-point increase to the maternal employment rate could generate £750 million a year in benefit savings and tax revenue.<sup>168</sup> Enrolment in formal childcare and early education settings is also associated with better outcomes for children and can help to reduce educational inequalities in the longer term.<sup>169</sup> While it is clearly important for the economy and wider society, it is also vital to the individuals that use it, as demonstrated by this response to our survey:

I was an NHS employee so could not be furloughed, but my local nursery is closed and grandparents who were due to look after my daughter are currently unable to do so due to lockdown rules, so I had to resign.<sup>170</sup>

The importance of childcare has been acknowledged by the Government at the highest levels. At the Liaison Committee's evidence session with the Prime Minister on 27 May 2020, the Prime Minister recognised that "childcare is absolutely critical for the success of our economy" and said that "we will do whatever it takes to help women to get back into work."<sup>171</sup>



167 Annex 2

168 Institute for Public Policy Research, [No More Baby Steps](#), June 2014, p4

169 UNICEF, [Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU](#), June 2019, p15 Table 1

170 Annex 2

171 Oral evidence taken before the Liaison Committee on 27 May 2020, HC (2019–21) 322, [Q76](#)

96. Childcare is a personal choice for parents, and many use a combination of childcare options rather than simply relying on one, for reasons including availability and cost. When we asked petitioners which childcare options they were planning to use before the pandemic, the two most popular options were nurseries and relatives. Both options have been severely curtailed by the lockdown, and many said they were now considering other providers, such as childminders or au pairs. 78% of respondents told us they had not been able to arrange suitable childcare at the time of the survey, and 81% told us they were considering delaying their return to work.<sup>172</sup>

## Nurseries and childminders

### *Crisis in funding and availability*

97. Both local authority and privately-run nurseries were a popular choice for childcare before the lockdown. Many of the parents we spoke to would still like to use them, but have either already had to delay their return to work due to their closure, or expressed anxiety about the availability of nursery places.<sup>173</sup> This anxiety seems to be well founded, and is not solely linked to Covid-19. The Coram Group, which brings together charities that support children and young people from birth to independence, told us:

Even before the Covid 19 pandemic, there were persistent shortages in the availability of childcare. In Coram Family and Childcare's Childcare Survey 2020, it was reported that only just over half of local areas had enough childcare for parents working full time and the shortages were more acute for disabled children and parents working outside of the typical 9 to 5 day, where only a quarter of local areas had enough childcare to meet demand. There were fewer childcare places available in deprived areas, particularly settings providing full daycare that enabled parents to work.<sup>174</sup>

98. We scheduled a debate on a petition relating to childcare as the first petitions debate of this Parliament.<sup>175</sup> In the public engagement we conducted to inform the debate, we heard how waiting lists were up to six months for nursery places, with some parents saying that the waiting lists for baby rooms could be over one year.<sup>176</sup> Statistics from Ofsted show that between April 2018 and March 2019, more than 500 nurseries, pre-schools and childminders closed every month in England.<sup>177</sup> A survey from the Early Years Alliance in April this year found that:

25% of respondents felt that it was 'somewhat unlikely' or 'very unlikely' that they would be operating in 12 months' time; and

74% of respondents said that the government hasn't provided enough support for early years providers during the coronavirus crisis.<sup>178</sup>

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172 Annex 2

173 Annex 2

174 Coram ([GRC0005](#))

175 HC Deb, 9 March January 2020, [col 1WH](#) [Westminster Hall]

176 e-petition 255237, [Provide 15 hours free childcare to working parents for children over 9 months](#)

177 Early Years Alliance ([GRC0009](#)), [Correspondence from Ofsted to Tracy Babin MP regarding PQ 1118 and 1120](#), 23 October 2019

178 Early Years Alliance ([GRC0009](#))

Neil Leitch, the Chief Executive of the Early Years Alliance, warned:

they may well have closed where they are needed most, and by that I mean in the most disadvantaged areas.<sup>179</sup>

99. Funding for early years settings has been the subject of inquiries by the House of Commons Treasury and Education Committees, as well as the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Childcare and Early Education in recent years.<sup>180</sup> What we heard many times from respondents to our survey was that the existing problems have been compounded by the pandemic, and have pushed many providers to breaking point.<sup>181</sup> The challenges of operating under social distancing would make many financially unviable without Government intervention. Providers told us:

We tried to stay open for key workers but lost £1k per week and had to close. Our furlough costs aren't being met and our fixed costs are accruing debt with little income. We may struggle to reopen with the costs of preparing and reduced attendance.

Opening up and paying all bills with limited children will probably bankrupt us.

We were closed by the government with no notice. We had no LA support to stay open, there were no 'hubs' there was no PPE. Our insurance did not pay out. Our furlough was affected by early years funding (still fees, because childcare was never free.) Our funding was then taken from us. We received less than a third of what was due to us, despite the whole figure used against our furlough claim. I had to get a loan to survive. I may have to let staff go, and the business may not survive.<sup>182</sup>

100. Another e-petition calling for emergency funding for the nursery sector has also received over 100,000 signatures.<sup>183</sup> In its response to that petition, the Government noted the various existing schemes to which nurseries could apply or were eligible, such as the CJRS, business rates relief, and associated small business grant funding. We heard however, from many respondents to our survey that funding available for nurseries, and the guidance around it, appears to have been both patchy and complex, which has meant many childcare providers have found it difficult or impossible to access support. Many reported issues such as furloughing staff and then later finding out only a lower percentage of wages could be recovered, and confusion about the continuation of payments for funded places. We also heard that the extra funding available to schools for cleaning and PPE was not available to nurseries, and that finding this money would add to existing shortfalls.

### ***Reopening, health concerns and separation anxiety***

101. Since schools have begun to reopen, images of pupils obediently lining up in single file to march into their socially distanced classrooms and sit at their single desks have

179 [Q65](#)

180 Treasury Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Childcare](#), HC 757, Education Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2017–19, [Tackling disadvantage in the early years](#), HC 1006, All Party Parliamentary Group for Childcare and Early Education, [Steps to sustainability](#), 2019

181 Annex 2

182 Annex 2

183 e-petition 301836, [Give UK nurseries emergency funding if they have to close down amid COVID-19](#)

demonstrated the new reality of educational settings. However, these approaches are not feasible for early years settings. As one provider who responded to our survey on nurseries told us:

Babies and toddlers put everything in their mouths and that is a natural part of their development. Every day I come home from nursery covered in saliva and snot from the babies I care for in my room and that is usually fine, but not when that saliva and snot could be carrying coronavirus that could kill me or my family when I walk it through my front door.<sup>184</sup>

The Government's guidance for providers reopening from 1 June has sought to reflect this. Instead of striving to maintain distance at all times, providers have been encouraged to use 'bubbles' instead, with small groups of children in different areas where possible.<sup>185</sup> While some of the providers we spoke to welcomed this approach, it left many with few options.<sup>186</sup> Large nurseries might be expected to cope better, with more staff and multiple rooms in which to create these bubbles, but smaller settings and childminders reported that this simply wouldn't be possible. Some also noted that it would be achievable whilst numbers were low with many parents still at home, but in order to return to anything approaching normal capacity these measures could not be followed. On the small financial margins on which they already existed, most settings said they needed to return to full capacity in order to be financially viable.<sup>187</sup> Any loss of places from pre-pandemic figures will place extra strain on an already scarce resource.

102. In order to go back to work, new parents able to access childcare providers are having to leave their children in an unfamiliar setting, often for the first time. Parents reported to us that with the additional perceived health risks they were simply unwilling to do this. Some were worried their child may contract the virus in a nursery, whilst others said that their own jobs meant there was a chance their child could give it to others.<sup>188</sup> The risk to babies and younger children themselves is reported to be low, but as there is limited understanding of their roles as carriers of the virus, some parents worry that children's attendance at nurseries could increase transmission and put vulnerable relatives at risk. As one parent told us:

I will not be wanting my child to be attending nursery for two reasons, he will be mixing with other children who could be carriers, but also I will be working for the NHS and potentially be a carrier myself and would not want him to be taking it to the nursery either.<sup>189</sup>

103. When choosing a nursery or childminder, parents will understandably want to look at as many as they can and visit in person. Usually when a baby or toddler starts nursery or meets a new childminder, providers will arrange 'settling-in sessions', shorter periods with parents present, in order to familiarise children with new people and places. Neither

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184 Annex 2

185 Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings](#), accessed 23 June 2020

186 Annex 2

187 Annex 2

188 Annex 2

189 Annex 2

visits nor settling-in sessions have been available to most during lockdown. In our survey, 90% of childcare workers said these sessions were important or very important, both for babies and for their parents. One childminder reported that:

The first visits and settling sessions are crucial to the child-setting-parent relationship. Parents will naturally be more cautious about going to a new setting. Mine is a home from home childminding setting, so I don't think I am likely to have any new starters for a long time, due to the restrictions of social distancing.<sup>190</sup>

104. Separation anxiety was a concern for many of the parents we spoke to, who felt it would be more severe due to babies' limited interactions with others during lockdown, and not being able to gradually introduce them to settings as they usually would.<sup>191</sup> With the added health anxieties of the pandemic and the pressures a lot of parents are under at the moment, it is not surprising that the idea of leaving their babies with strangers is daunting for some, as demonstrated by this response to our survey of new mothers:

She has had no opportunity to socialise with other people and has never met another baby. I worry very much about her wellbeing thrust into this unfamiliar and busy environment being used to only being in our home with me. It would be noisy and terrifying for her. How could I leave her there? I won't be using childcare until I know she is confident.<sup>192</sup>

In written evidence to us, the First 1001 Days Movement told us:

Entering childcare for the first time can be a difficult and stressful time for children as a result of separation from their parents, and unfamiliar places, routines and people. This is particularly true for infants and toddlers who rely so heavily on their primary caregivers. The stress of separation might be exacerbated for babies after lockdown because they have spent an extended period with their parents. Families and providers must have time to support babies and toddlers through the transition into childcare, enabling children to adjust to new people and relationships, and allowing carers to spend time with parents to understand babies and their needs.<sup>193</sup>

105. The combination of the existing funding problems within the sector, and the acute challenges faced by early years settings due to several months of closure and reopening under reduced capacities all lead to one likely scenario—a crisis in the availability of childcare places, which will ultimately prevent many parents, in reality mostly mothers, from returning to work. On top of this, many are dreading having to make decisions about childcare settings without having been able to visit them in person, and may face increased separation anxiety, compounded by policies such as 'drop at the door'.<sup>194</sup>

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190 Annex 2

191 Annex 2

192 Annex 2

193 First 1001 Days Movement ([GRC0006](#))

194 Annex 2



## Grandparents and other childcare options

106. As well as formal and paid settings, many rely on family and friends for some or all of their childcare—68% of respondents to our survey said this was their main source of childcare—and whilst the financial pressures may not be the same, these options have still been impacted by the lockdown. Those who rely on grandparents or other relatives suddenly found this childcare option removed when following lockdown rules, and for many with health conditions that place them in the shielding category it remains unclear if or when they will be able to resume this care. Until revised guidance was announced on 23 June, those under 70 and without underlying health conditions were prevented from visiting inside the homes of others apart from in the limited ‘support bubble’ scenario, and there is no explicit exception from social distancing guidance on providing this childcare, despite formal settings such as nurseries being allowed to reopen.<sup>195</sup> This has had a huge impact on the ability of new babies to spend time with their wider family, as shown by this response to our survey:

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.<sup>196</sup>

Many parents expressed concerns that babies had missed vital socialisation during lockdown, and may have separation anxiety when family and friends could start or resume their childcare:

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 childcare. 3 extra months off would give me chance to find alternative childcare and socialise him when lockdown is eased.<sup>197</sup>

Professor Elizabeth Meins, a developmental psychologist and Professor of Psychology at the University of York, told us that babies were “highly adaptable”, and that the effects of this missed socialisation may not be as profound as some feared.<sup>198</sup> As lockdown is lifted and some limited outdoor family visiting can resume, some of these concerns should start to dissipate and parents may feel more comfortable in future about leaving their children in childcare to return to work.

107. Even when the legal restrictions are removed, many grandparents may have underlying health conditions and parents may be unwilling to put them at risk in this way for some time. As some parents choose family childcare as they find the cost of other settings prohibitive, this will remain a barrier to parents returning to work. Several parents reported looking at options such as nannies and au pairs, although the availability of these also remains unclear.

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195 Cabinet Office, [Staying alert and safe \(social distancing\)](#), accessed 23 June 2020

196 Annex 1

197 Annex 1

198 [Q13](#)



I am unable to use grandparents because of shielding. We may not be able to afford private nursery now. So we are looking into a nanny type option for both children because it will be cheaper.<sup>199</sup>

Some parents have reported no other options but to take unpaid leave that they cannot really afford or to leave their jobs entirely, in order to care for their children.<sup>200</sup> This would be a disaster for the progress made on the gender pay gap, which already increases after the arrival of children, as it will likely be women making this sacrifice in the majority of cases.<sup>201</sup> It will also deprive businesses of experienced workers as they strive to recover from the pandemic, and may set back parents in their careers for years to come. As one new mother told us:

You want to know that when you are at work that your baby is happy and safe. Being able to introduce different settings and different people to babies at a young age is a vital part of this reassurance to you the mother. Given the current situation I fear that I may have no other choice but to not to return to a career that I thoroughly enjoy and have worked so hard to achieve. Whilst I appreciate the government has done the furlough scheme, again women on maternity leave have been given the short straw. SMP is appalling especially compared to how much other people are currently being paid whilst also being at home at this current time.<sup>202</sup>

**108. We have heard about systemic problems in the funding of childcare before the pandemic. Just before the outbreak, we debated a petition which expressed concerns about how many parents struggled to afford childcare. Covid-19 has put a huge strain on the childcare sector at the same time as highlighting how crucial it is for the country and economy. A lot of parents have had to change childcare plans or are unable to access childcare given the reduced capacity of the sector. These parents need to be supported in the short term to allow them to keep their jobs, while doing the most important job of all: caring for their children. To meet these challenges, both immediate and systemic, the Government should:**

- i) *Conduct an urgent short-term review of funding for the childcare sector to ensure that it survives the current crisis, and if required, provide emergency funding to the childcare sector to ensure that there are sufficient childcare places for parents due to return to work.*
- ii) *Consider an independent review of childcare provision, including the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure that future Government funding is effective and that the sector is sustainable and works for all in the long term.*

## Returning to work

109. At Prime Minister's Questions on 13 May, responding to a question on parents with childcare difficulties who are being asked to return to work, the Prime Minister said

199 Annex 1

200 Annex 2

201 Institute for Fiscal Studies, [Wage progression and the gender wage gap: the causal impact of hours of work](#), IFS Briefing note BN223 (2018)

202 Annex 2

that “employers must be understanding.”<sup>203</sup> Paul Scully, the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets agreed in evidence to us that “a good employer will be flexible, will invest in people and will understand that people are right at the centre of what most businesses do”.<sup>204</sup> While many employers undoubtedly will be showing as much flexibility as they can to help parents navigate this period, many others will not.

110. Responding to our survey about delaying their return to work, 20% of new parents told us their employer had offered them some options, although these were mostly unpaid leave. The remaining 80% said they had been offered no assistance, and some even reported not being able to speak to anyone at their workplace, as managers were either furloughed themselves or simply not replying. One new mother told us:

I have tried to contact my employer several times regarding my maternity leave and have had no response. I have not heard from them since I started my maternity leave.<sup>205</sup>

### **Risk of redundancy**

111. In addition to statutory leave and pay, there are employment rights and protections associated with being a new parent. The Equality Act 2010 sets out a ‘protected period’ during which women who are pregnant or have recently given birth are explicitly protected from discrimination. During this period, a woman is protected against discrimination as a result of her pregnancy or entitlement to maternity leave, which covers any scenario where it could be judged she has been treated unfavourably as a result. This period currently ends when she finishes maternity leave and returns to work, although certain unfavourable treatment after this time may still constitute discrimination on the grounds of sex.<sup>206</sup>

112. Several parents who took part in our online engagement said they were already concerned about the possibility of being made redundant. One new mother told us:

There has been no discussion with my employer. I had always planned to take the maximum period of maternity leave. I do not want to take any unpaid leave on top of this as the last person who did that was made to work fewer days and made redundant upon their return (pre corona and as part of a wider consultation).<sup>207</sup>

113. In 2013, following the last UK recession, Maternity Action found that the number of women being forced out of their jobs since the onset of the recession had doubled.<sup>208</sup> There are concerns that this will happen again. Already data from the University of Cambridge is showing that women have been hit the hardest by the lockdown economically, and widespread redundancies of new parents carried out under the cover of mass layoffs would compound this, and potentially take years from which to recover.<sup>209</sup>

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203 HC Deb [col 242](#), 13 May 2020, [Commons Chamber]

204 [Q103](#)

205 Annex 2

206 Citizens advice, [Pregnancy and maternity discrimination](#), accessed 23 June 2020

207 Annex 2

208 Maternity Action, [Overdue: A plan of action to address pregnancy discrimination now](#), 2013, p5

209 University of Cambridge, [Research: Women bear brunt of coronavirus economic shutdown in UK and US](#), April 2020

114. Employees on parental leave have specific protections when it comes to redundancies. For example, they must first be offered any suitable alternative job if there is one available, and they can only be made redundant if there is clear justification, such as a whole section of a business closing.<sup>211</sup> As this protection ends along with their leave, there is a real risk to parents in the time immediately following their return to work. Research commissioned by the Government in 2015 found that 1 in 9 women said they had been fired or made redundant when they returned to work after having a child, or were treated so badly they felt forced out of their job.<sup>212</sup> In July 2019 the Government announced it would extend redundancy protection for six months after the return to work.<sup>213</sup> The extension to these protections will be most welcome, but we were disappointed to hear from the Minister that there is no timescale in place for its introduction, and once again it hinges on parliamentary time allowing for the introduction of an Employment Bill.<sup>214</sup> Without urgent legislation, this change will come much too late for the cohort of parents who will be returning to work during and in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

**115. The current crisis has put new parents, particularly mothers, at increased risk of redundancy and hardship. New and expectant mothers are already a group who are vulnerable to discrimination, and the Government needs to ensure that the current crisis doesn't widen this discrimination and inequality further. We recommend that the Government should prioritise the necessary legislation to extend redundancy protection as soon as possible and provide a timetable for its introduction and implementation.**

### **Challenging unfair dismissal**

116. Limits on how the CJRS can be used for returning parents<sup>215</sup> will mean that those parents coming to the end of their leave may be especially vulnerable to losing their job, returning at a time when the company is already looking to reduce headcount. Extending parental leave and pay by three months, a request we urge the Government to reconsider, would not only cost less per person than furloughing them, but it may in some cases buy them the extra time needed to arrange suitable childcare, and return to their jobs when lockdown has lifted to a greater degree and some sectors have started to reopen.

117. We have seen from the examples of employers failing to suspend on full pay or furlough pregnant women, that many employers fall short of their legal obligations, so expecting that all new parents are protected by best-practice and responsible behaviour by employers would be naïve.<sup>216</sup> Without an extension to maternity leave and before the extended protections promised in an as-yet-unpublished Employment Bill, new parents returning to work will have to rely on existing legal protections to challenge rogue employers who

210 <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

211 ACAS, [Managing redundancy for pregnant employees or those on maternity leave](#), May 2018, p6

212 Equality and Human Rights Commission, [Pregnancy and maternity discrimination research findings](#), May 2018

213 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Pregnant women and new parents to get enhanced redundancy protections](#), July 2019

214 [Q97](#)

215 See Furlough as an option at the end of maternity leave (p18).

216 See Health and Safety for pregnant women and new mothers (p19).

fire new parents, by bringing a claim of unfair or constructive dismissal.<sup>217</sup> While existing legal protections may be able to protect employees, we heard from Maternity Action of a concern that:

transition from the current lockdown will generate a new wave of pregnancy and maternity discrimination and unfair redundancies, as government support schemes fall away, and employers seek to adjust to the new economic circumstances.<sup>218</sup>

118. For an employee who has been unfairly dismissed, the onus is on them to bring a claim, and they must do so within 3 months of the termination of their employment.<sup>219</sup> In that period they must inform Acas of their intention to bring the claim, and may then enter an ‘early conciliation’ process to seek resolution.<sup>220</sup> The potential volume of people who may fall victim to unfair dismissal in the coming months, combined with the unique challenges that newly unemployed new parents face, makes it even more difficult for them to find support and bring forward a claim for unfair dismissal. Maternity Action have argued that pregnant women and new parents would benefit from having more time to prepare and submit legal challenges to discrimination and other forms of unfair dismissal in the employment tribunal.<sup>221</sup> **We recognise the concerns of Maternity Action that pregnant women and new mothers, who are at significant risk of discrimination and dismissal, may struggle to prepare and submit legal challenges within the 3-month time limit, at what is already an extraordinarily challenging time. We recommend that the Government considers extending the period in which pregnant women and new parents may bring claims before the employment tribunal to 6 months from dismissal on a temporary or permanent basis in light of current challenges posed by Covid-19.**

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217 GOV.UK, [Dismissal: your rights](#), accessed 23 June 2020

218 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#))

219 GOV.UK, [Dismissal: your rights](#), accessed 23 June 2020

220 This process must be started before the 3 month limitation period, but does not need to be concluded within that time. See: <https://www.acas.org.uk/early-conciliation>.

221 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#))

## Conclusion

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119. Many people have benefited from the Government's support schemes to help them through the pandemic, in what is the largest economic intervention in our country's history. But the evidence we've received has shown that many new parents still face a very difficult situation. The Government has said that it feels the current entitlement is sufficiently generous and does not see any reason to extend it. The reality is that the current system of support for new parents has problems which are causing hardship in some cases. We have identified a number of areas where we believe there is a case for reform.

120. We have heard compelling evidence of the importance of supporting new parents and the positive impact this can have on the future generation. To avoid a future crisis, investment in new parents, particularly those who became parents during the pandemic will be vital. We strongly urge the Government to follow the science and stay alert to how the Government supports new parents so that the effects of the pandemic, do not continue to impact families for years to come.

121. *The Government should extend parental leave and pay for all new parents affected by the pandemic. This includes maternity leave, shared parental leave and adoption leave. If it will not do so, then it must look at new ways—such as the introduction of a hardship grant—for those who are forced to take unpaid leave to care for children, particularly heavily affected groups including parents of premature and sick babies; adoptive parents; single parents; and those who have been identified as suffering from mental health problems as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak.*

122. The Government is announcing changes to the lockdown and the support schemes almost every day. Each day that new parents wait for further support from the Government is a day of anxiety. While the Government normally responds to Select Committee reports within two months of publication, new parents cannot wait this long for the help they so urgently need. *We urge the Government to respond as quickly as possible to the recommendations in this report and respond in full before the House of Commons rises for the summer.*

## Conclusions and recommendations

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### Current entitlements for new parents

1. The Government's response has argued that the UK's maternity leave offer is already amongst the most generous in the world. Although up to 52 weeks leave is generous compared to other countries, the amount of maternity pay is not the most generous in the world. While we accept that other more generous schemes are often not funded by the state, it remains the case that many new mothers in the UK can't afford to take their full leave entitlement. Successive governments have not examined systematically enough the scale of take-up of the full maternity leave available, and reasons for not taking their full entitlements. This would better enable us to consider the suitability of current arrangements. *The Government should capture data on the uptake of parental leave, as well as pay, so that any future review of parental leave arrangements can consider the extent to which parents from all groups are able to use their entitlements.* (Paragraph 15)
2. *As a matter of urgency the Government should consider whether Maternity Allowance should be considered as earnings in the same way as Statutory Maternity Pay and should not lead to deductions from Universal Credit.* (Paragraph 17)
3. Parental leave and pay are not unique in having different provisions for employed and self-employed people, and this is just one area of a complex benefit system. It is however apparent that many of the inequalities are not a reflection of differing circumstances, but more of an oversight by successive governments. In the case of self-employed adoptive parents, and all special guardians, they are getting less support than others. That the current entitlements have been added over a number of years may explain some of these disparities, but it does not remove the challenges posed. There are some discrepancies in the current provisions for parental leave that should be addressed: these include provisions for neonatal leave; self-employed adoptive parents and special guardians. *Benefits for self-employed adoptive parents should be equalised to those of other self-employed parents, and parental leave and pay provisions should be extended to special guardians.* (Paragraph 22)

### Support for new parents during Covid-19

4. The Government has suggested that women can be furloughed as a means of extending their maternity leave and delaying their return to work. However, access to the scheme is reliant on employers' consent, rather than parents having a right to it, and there are strict limitations to whom it can apply. Many new mothers are not eligible, if their employer has not yet furloughed others, if they work in the public sector, or if their employer needs people back at work. We heard from teachers, police officers and NHS workers who simply did not have the option of being furloughed. For these reasons we do not think it is fair for the Government to suggest that it is realistic for many new parents. (Paragraph 26)
5. For those new parents on maternity leave for whom furlough was already possible, the Government failed to make it clear either to them or their employers that it was an option. The Government should publish clear new guidance for employees



and employers, including dedicated pages on GOV.UK, on supporting employees returning from parental leave that explains clearly their options and responsibilities. (Paragraph 27)

6. The Government's work to ensure premises are safe for workers during the pandemic is welcome. As an at-risk group, there is more that can be done to ensure that employers are aware of their responsibilities for the safety of pregnant women in the workplace, including the need for them to be suspended on full pay if it is not safe for them to work. We recommend that the Government publish clear guidance for employers on their obligations in respect of pregnant woman who cannot safely socially distance at work, including making clear that pregnant women have a right to be suspended on full pay if they cannot work safely. We also recommend that the Government extend the furlough scheme to include all pregnant women, so that an additional safety net is available to both pregnant women and their employers. (Paragraph 33)
7. In addition to the immediate financial consequences for pregnant women of being put on Statutory Sick Pay or unpaid leave—often when they should have been suspended on full pay—in many cases the loss of income that results can also mean women lose their rights to Statutory Maternity Pay. This is unacceptable. Nor should anyone having to spend a period on Statutory Sick Pay or unpaid leave due to following guidelines to isolate, including the new track and trace policy, be penalised for their compliance. *The Government was able to amend the Statutory Maternity Pay calculations to disregard the lower income of periods on furlough. We recommend the Government should also do so for women whose incomes have fallen through no fault of their own because their employers have failed to follow the Government's guidance on how pregnant women should be treated.* (Paragraph 35)
8. The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme uses three years of tax returns to assess the average income of claimants. Claimants who have undertaken periods of parental leave in these years, will not receive support at a level representative of their usual earnings. *We recommend that the Government amend the terms of the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme to take into account periods of maternity and parental leave, to avoid discriminating against new parents.* (Paragraph 37)
9. The Government's decision to reject the request to extend maternity leave has been hugely disappointing to the hundreds of thousands of people who have signed this petition. In these extraordinary circumstances, where the Government has taken exceptional action to support different groups of people, we believe that extending maternity leave would be a proportionate action to take, in line with the support provided through the CJRS and SEISS. *We support the call of more than 226,000 petitions and urge the Government to reconsider its decision not to extend parental leave and pay for families during the Covid-19 pandemic.* (Paragraph 40)
10. It is difficult to see how health visitors will be able to 'catch-up' with their important contact visits to provide the much-needed support for new parents and to help identify those who are vulnerable and most in need. This risks more vulnerable children and families becoming hidden. The Government should review the provision of health visitor services in light of Covid-19 and consider funding increased numbers of health visitors and other allied professionals to ensure that vulnerable families are



identified and given the support they need. (Paragraph 50)

11. While baby classes may not be directly vital to baby development, they provide important support to new parents, which will benefit the care they can provide. From our discussions with the sector and with the Minister, there has not been sufficient engagement with these groups or appropriate consideration of the contribution that they make to the lives of new parents. The Government should engage fully with this important sector and consider how it can be better supported. We were pleased that the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, Paul Scully MP, has committed to Government engagement with the baby class sector. *The Government should provide an update on its discussions with the baby group sector as part of its response to this report.* (Paragraph 56)
12. New parents have missed out on vital support from professionals such as health visitors to baby classes and groups. We've heard how important this support is for parental mental health and for helping to lay the foundation for parenting, family life and early infant development. The Government has announced a £1 billion catch-up fund for older children who have missed out on valuable education. These new parents have also missed out at a crucial time for both them and their children. *The Government should fund and provide additional catch-up support targeted at this cohort of parents to enable them to access both the professional and more informal support that plays such an important role during the first few months of parenting.* (Paragraph 57)
13. Free dental care is an important benefit that most pregnant and new mothers have been unable to access as the result of the pandemic. *The Government should extend maternity dentist provision for new and expectant mothers affected by the pandemic for at least six months, so new mothers have the opportunity to access this important benefit.* (Paragraph 59)

### Parental mental health

14. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health of the whole nation. New and expectant parents have especially been put under tremendous strain during what is already an incredibly challenging time in their lives. It is extremely likely that there will be a significant increase in mental health referrals from new parents which the Government must ensure that the Health Service is fully prepared for. We are the first generation of legislators with the scientific knowledge of the impact that parental mental health has on the development, health and future outcomes of some of the most vulnerable in society: babies and young children. We must act on this knowledge. *The Government should fund and provide additional professional and mental health support especially targeted at this cohort of parents, and their children in addition to its wider plans to significantly expand mental health services provided by the NHS.* (Paragraph 72)
15. Adoptive parents and their children have faced uniquely challenging situations without the access to the professional and informal support that they need. These children are among the most vulnerable in society. In the most serious situations, we've heard that the negative impacts of Covid-19 could lead to an increase in adoption breakdown which would be devastating for parents and children. The

extension of adoption leave with pay would give these new parents the opportunity to access some of the support they've missed out on as lockdown restrictions are eased. It will also give them valuable time to establish important routines and to bond with their children, as well as time to settle their children into new childcare or schools and introduce them to their wider adoptive families. *The Government should extend adoption leave and pay for adoptive parents who have been affected by the pandemic for three months.* (Paragraph 80)

16. The Government's response to this inquiry so far has not addressed the immediate situation faced by self-employed adoptive parents as a result of Covid-19. A future review, although welcome, may not come in time for this cohort of parents and children who desperately need additional support. Adoptive parents spend a huge amount of time planning their leave period carefully so that their children and new families can have the very best start. No-one was able to plan for Covid-19. These parents are looking after some of the most vulnerable children in our society and need help as a matter of urgency. *The Government should consider equalising the benefits for self-employed adoptive parents to those of other self-employed parents. This could be a pilot scheme for those who became new parents during the pandemic to inform the Government's wider review on parental leave.* (Paragraph 81)
17. Special guardians need time and support to help their often highly vulnerable children to settle into their new kinship families in the same way that adoptive and other parents do. They should not be treated any differently to any other parent in this respect. A future review is welcome. *As part of that review, the Government should consider whether entitlements and benefits for parental leave and pay can be extended to special guardians.* (Paragraph 85)
18. We welcome the Government's recognition that special neonatal leave and pay should be introduced for all parents who find themselves in this situation. The Government plans to include provisions in its forthcoming Employment Bill to introduce this reform in 2023. *In advance of the planned delivery of neonatal leave and pay in 2023, the Government should pilot the introduction of these reforms for those affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. If a success, the date of the general introduction of these measures could be brought forward.* (Paragraph 92)
19. We welcome the Government's introduction of testing for members of the public. However, priority testing should be made available for parents of babies in neonatal care. No parent should be separated unnecessarily from their newborn for any longer than they need to. *The Government should prioritise rapid testing for parents of babies in neonatal care.* (Paragraph 93)

### Childcare and returning to work

20. We have heard about systemic problems in the funding of childcare before the pandemic. Just before the outbreak, we debated a petition which expressed concerns about how many parents struggled to afford childcare. Covid-19 has put a huge strain on the childcare sector at the same time as highlighting how crucial it is for the country and economy. A lot of parents have had to change childcare plans or are unable to access childcare given the reduced capacity of the sector. These parents

need to be supported in the short term to allow them to keep their jobs, while doing the most important job of all: caring for their children. *To meet these challenges, both immediate and systemic, the Government should:*

- i) *Conduct an urgent short-term review of funding for the childcare sector to ensure that it survives the current crisis, and if required, provide emergency funding to the childcare sector to ensure that there are sufficient childcare places for parents due to return to work.*
  - ii) *Consider an independent review of childcare provision, including the lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure that future Government funding is effective and that the sector is sustainable and works for all in the long term. (Paragraph 108)*
21. *The current crisis has put new parents, particularly mothers, at increased risk of redundancy and hardship. New and expectant mothers are already a group who are vulnerable to discrimination, and the Government needs to ensure that the current crisis doesn't widen this discrimination and inequality further. We recommend that the Government should prioritise the necessary legislation to extend redundancy protection as soon as possible and provide a timetable for its introduction and implementation. (Paragraph 115)*
  22. *We recognise the concerns of Maternity Action that pregnant women and new mothers, who are at significant risk of discrimination and dismissal, may struggle to prepare and submit legal challenges within the 3-month time limit, at what is already an extraordinarily challenging time. We recommend that the Government considers extending the period in which pregnant women and new parents may bring claims before the employment tribunal to 6 months from dismissal on a temporary or permanent basis in light of current challenges posed by Covid-19. (Paragraph 118)*

# Annex 1: Summary of initial public engagement

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Ahead of our first oral evidence session on for this inquiry, we sought the views of petitioners and the wider public and asked for people’s experiences of parental leave during the lockdown.

## What we did

We used a post on the House of Commons Facebook page to seek the views of the wider public.<sup>222</sup> We also sent an online survey to petitioners to ask for their experiences of maternity, adoption and parental leave during the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>223</sup>

## Response

We received a record 26,000<sup>224</sup> responses on the House of Commons Facebook and 27,000 responses to our survey.

## Methodology

We used Nvivo Pro 12 to identify and contextualise the most common words and phrases found in the entire set of responses from the survey and Facebook comments. This allowed us to group and summarise recurring themes which were threaded throughout much of the responses.

In addition to this analysis of the data, Committee staff manually reviewed hundreds of individual comments and answers, using both subject searches and randomised selection. Some of the survey questions which produced statistical results have been included in the summaries of key themes, or graphically where appropriate in the report.

## Key themes

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

### *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.

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222 House of Commons Facebook, [Post on the impact of coronavirus on parental leave](#) (posted on 30 April 2020)

223 The Petitions Committee can email people who sign petitions if they have given permission to receive emails related to the petition. The survey was sent to everyone who had signed the petition: [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

224 The post received 25,982 comments as of 24 June 2020

- 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

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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, aunties, 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.

Survey respondent:

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

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

With my first, classes and a routine out of the house were a saviour 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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

They help me bond with my baby through activities and help to normalise much of what I feel and am experiencing—I don't feel so alone.

Survey respondent:

As a first-time mum with no other friends with children, baby classes have given me the opportunity to meet other new mums and discuss our babies' developments, concerns and ideas for play time.

Survey respondent:

I was so scared to even leave the house when I first became a mum, I attended baby massage when my baby was 5 weeks old and instantly felt less alone, more supported, a weight off my shoulders. The confidence gained can't be quantified or underestimated!

Survey respondent:

Attending parent and baby groups provides a safe space away from family members where it is a safe space to seek support be it weaning, breastfeeding, mental health support that we wouldn't reach out to a partner or family member in the same way. The groups also provide great reassurance about baby's development and give tips and ideas that can be shared.

### **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**

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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**

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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 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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent (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.

Survey respondent:

It is incredibly challenging having a tiny baby and being isolated at home, mentally it's hard with not having other moms to talk to and not been able to go out and meet any. There has been no support from health visitors as you cannot go and get your baby weighed or see them for support. I am very concerned it will take a lot of time for myself and my baby to adjust back into the world when things become normal again. I am also having to home school 2 children whilst looking after a tiny baby with no sleep, I'm exhausted and feel I'm not giving my baby the 1 to 1 attention he would have had during my normal maternity leave. I had an awful pregnancy with my baby arriving prematurely and was so looking forward to maternity leave, and I am now very concerned I will get post natal depression with the stress of lockdown on top of having a tiny baby.

Survey respondent:

Rather than having a relaxing, exciting build up to my maternity leave my final weeks were filled with anxiety and worry. I was forced to work from home for approx. 4 weeks prior to lockdown to avoid contracting the virus in pregnancy and then I ended up starting my mat leave early due to anxiety bought on by the pandemic. I then had a number of weeks at home before my baby arrived but this was over shadowed by having to take my older child out of childcare and adjusting to lockdown life. I've not been able to meet any other mothers, not been able to even see my health visitor

or have my baby weighed. It's just been such a time of worry and my focus hasn't fully been on my new child which is such a shame. Also not being able to have family meet our new addition is so upsetting. Giving birth in a pandemic was an experience I unfortunately have been left traumatised by; lack of staffing and the restrictions on birth partners affected me.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

I am isolated with my baby. I am not able to attend any baby groups and classes which I feel is so important for his development. It has also affected the friendships I have been able to make with other parents which is important for support. My mental health has suffered and I have not been able to seek support for postnatal depression as I would have done if there was not a lockdown. As a result my mental health is got worse and I am concerned about going back to work without the time to fully recover with the support I need.

Survey respondent:

The stress of the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdown, having to give birth alone, no visitors after having c section etc has ruined the beginning of what is meant to be memorable happy time and has led to severe anxiety.

Survey respondent:

With lockdown in place it has been difficult to enjoy being a new mum without the support of family and friends. Access to my health visitor for weight and health checks hasn't been available which would normally provide me with reassurance of my baby's development. My daughter has also missed her hospital appointments to review her health after her admission to NICU at birth. My husband is an NHS anaesthetist, the added demands of his job during the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the periods I am completely isolated at home without support and affected bonding time as a family. I feel that it has been difficult to maintain a positive outlook at times because of the lack of socialisation and a feeling that I am missing out on many important experiences with my daughter.

### Single mothers

- We received several reports from single mothers that they were facing specific hardship, due to both the isolation where they were living alone with a baby, and also the financial pressures of surviving without a second income.
- Groups and classes, as well as more formal support such as doctors and Health Visitors, was especially important to this group.

### Quotes

Survey respondent:

Being a single mother with a newborn baby during the lockdown has been very mentally difficult. I was looking forward to meeting other new parents. Ask them for advice and support during the challenge of parenthood. Being in the house all the time is hard, he still hasn't even had his first injections yet, so no immune system to anything. It's scary. I've not been able to enjoy anything yet.

Survey respondent:

As a 1st time single mother it hasn't been easy, in fact it has been extremely difficult financially, mentally and physically. Not only has it taken time to adjust to the reality of becoming a mother but it has taken time for my son and I to get into somewhat of a routine. Part of that routine has included the wonderful baby group sessions which we attend every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. These sessions have been pivotal in keeping my mental state healthy as well as helping my son interact with people other than myself. Attending these sessions are now of course no longer possible which in turn has created a very clingy 6 month old.

Survey respondent:

I wasn't able to have anyone in theatre when my son was born which was a horrendous time. Also being a single mother I have to rely on people to drop essential items I need for my baby at my front door. None of my family or friends have met my son and this is time wasted being stuck in the house with him. Everyone is missing out on watching him grow already.

Survey respondent:

I have suffered with postnatal depression since the lockdown and it has deprived me of going out with my baby to enjoy our days. This is definitely having a negative affect on my babies development now that he is 4 months old. This is the only time I would have away from work to spend valuable time taking my son to different places to learn and play with other children in play groups etc and meeting up with other parents to give me some adult interaction too which would help with my depression but as a single mother with 3 children ( 1 being disabled ) I am home 24/7 with a short walk if the weather is ok and this is definitely impacting my mental health and

that has a knock on effect to my children. 3 extended months leave with pay would help me to make up to have enjoyable time with my son doing normal things that mums do when on leave.

Survey respondent:

I haven't been able to socialise and take my baby to any baby groups that I'd only just found and met a few new people who I now can't spend time with, I'm a single mother of four children and I haven't had any one to one time to bond with my baby or take him out and get him socialised, I suffer with depression and anxiety and I've had no time to get help and I feel this could impact on our relationship.

### **Pregnant women**

- Responses from pregnant women showed particular pressures. The strict rules in hospitals for visitors caused a lot of worry, with many women attending scans by themselves or having to spend nights in hospital alone.
- Some were particularly worried about working, or had to stop working early due to being classed as vulnerable to Covid-19.

### **Quotes**

Survey respondent:

I am 39 weeks pregnant with my first having already had 6 weeks off work due to the risks of being pregnant working as a sister in emergency department- at a financial deficit to myself. I face giving birth alone. Having no opportunity to attend any birthing classes. Once my child is born I face weeks of no family support and my husband as a key worker having to work more. I fear for bonding and 'normal' experiences which are encouraged for child's development. Not only will my child not meet family, they won't attend classes to develop their sensory and social skills. It is likely I will return to work feeling I have missed out on the vital processes maternity leave was actually put in place for. I'll cope with not having a baby shower, not parading my baby bump how I planned but I fear for the long term effect of PTSD and interrupted bonding with my child.

Survey respondent:

The lockdown has affected me in many ways.1) I have had to stop work early, due to being pregnant. I got told I can't be on furlough therefore I had no choice but to start my maternity leave early. It's completely unfair, I am losing weeks with my newborn, on a low income and my colleagues are sat at home on 80% of their salary. I feel completely ripped off by the system and truth is if I wasn't pregnant I would be better off financially. 2) I have had to manage a toddler at home, with nursery's closed. Having to handle him whilst heavily pregnant has been hard - he should have been at nursery in this period 3) I have had no help or support from my friends and family due to the lockdown. I have had to manage the whole process on my

own whilst pregnant 4) I have had the stress and worry of not being able to have a birthing partner. After having a previously poorly child who needed immediate surgery and placed into intensive care, I could have never of done that.5) I suffered with anxiety and postnatal depression preciously. Everyone assured me this time would be different and everyone would help me—due to the lockdown no one can be there for me, I face this all on my own.

Survey respondent:

I have not had my baby yet I'm due this month. It has been very stressful and worrying especially with all the ongoing changes that have been happening with antenatal care and birth. I have had my midwife taken away and seen a different person for each appointment which gets very confusing and may have to face giving birth alone if one of my birth partners are ill and not being able to share a special moment with 2 people.

### ***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 postponed. This deprived returning parents of both contact time and payment.

### ***Quotes***

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent

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.

Survey respondent:

My baby hasn't seen any relatives or friends for weeks and weeks now. He's 10months 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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

My concern is the separational anxiety for my baby (who will be 9 months when I have to return) being in the care of someone else, as we haven't been able to be separated at all due to the lockdown.

Survey respondent:

My baby now has separation anxiety and will struggle to be left with anyone else.

Survey respondent:

She appears less self-assured, and has developed separation anxiety from me, crying if i leave the room. She also received significantly less stimulation, and misses social contact, which is evident at how excited she becomes seeing other children out of the window. She also has lost bonds formed with grandparents, appearing unsure and nervous in video chats.

Survey respondent:

I worry my son will develop separation anxiety. He also will no longer recognise his grandparents who will look after him for part of the week when I return to work. I also worry he will struggle integrating at a nursery having been isolated for so long.

### *Financial pressures*

- Many parents expressed concern about the financial effects of the pandemic, and we heard from a number who had either lost their jobs themselves or had a spouse or partner who had.
- Some also mentioned money being tighter due to partners being furloughed, and needing to cut back as a result.
- The financial pressures in many cases were causing high levels of stress and anxiety.

Facebook respondent:

Unfortunately nothing the government do now will help me. My baby is 15 weeks. I plan to return to work in 4 weeks (I'm a teacher) as we can't afford for me to have such little income for much longer as my husband has lost his job which was a new position and is not entitled to any government help. I feel so upset that I've missed out on so many positive experiences with my boy.

Facebook respondent:

I have had my appointments all cancelled. My mat leave ended in January but I am still off sick due to PND. All my support sessions have been cancelled, i can't see a doc as they are only doing telephone calls and the help from my mum has also stopped. My little girl will be one in July. The chances of this lifting and getting a dental appointment and any work carried out in that time is looking impossible. My husband has lost his job so ££ will be tight and dental work will be at the bottom of the priority list money wise. I definitely think all these provisions should be extended.

Facebook respondent:

I'm a first time Mum on maternity leave. My husband was made redundant 3 weeks ago, which whilst it's lovely to spend quality time together as a new little family; the impact of Coronavirus and his future job outlook will mean that I may have to cut my maternity leave short, getting even less time to spend and bond with my son. The quality time together that I had envisioned going to baby groups and my son enjoying time with our family also hasn't been possible as a result of the lockdown.

Facebook respondent:

My maternity leave has been completely robbed off me and now to make things worse I'm also being told I could have no job to return to due to being made redundant. Worrying how I'm going to afford rent and bills.

Survey respondent:

I work for an agency so I am only entitled to maternity allowance of £595 a month. This isn't even equivalent to the national living wage. I have had to come off maternity leave early due to my husband being newly self employed and not able to get any government help. I've managed to get work that I can do from home for PHE. I am disappointed not to be able to have a full maternity period with my son.

Survey respondent:

Maternity allowance (MP) does the same job as statutory maternity pay (SMP) and yet is penalised more harshly through universal credit.

### **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.

## Quotes

Survey respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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

Survey respondent:

I haven't had the opportunity to bond with my baby on his own like I did with my other children. I'm having to home school my other two who are 12 and 7, this is taking the time away from my baby. In order for me to be able to home school I have had to give up breastfeeding. It was impossible to establish breastfeeding at the start as my other two children needed me to help them with work and other activities in the day meaning I didn't have time to sit and cluster feed my baby, so he could establish my milk supply. This has made me deal with high anxiety and low moods as I feel I was forced to put him on formula so I could make sure my children are getting the support they needed. I also haven't been able to go and do the baby massage classes I had planned, baby groups, swimming and just being able to go out with my baby and show him off to friends and family. I feel like my maternity has been ruined and the one to one time I should have had with my baby is gone. This makes it very hard to bond with my baby as I feel I have let him down already.

Survey respondent:

My other children are at home and I've been home schooling them and my baby is missing vital one to one time with me for bonding. Every one is worried, anxious, upset at times. This is impacting on my stress and my ability to enjoy this stage of being a new mother again. I worry about how to keep him safe and help him learn and grow in this limited environment. I can't go to the local baby groups for support. I can't go to my family for

support. It's so lonely and scary. Some days are better than others. But overall this has been very hard on us as a family with a new baby.

### ***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***

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

My dentist appt is cancelled and I'll have to pay by the time this lockdown ends and it's safe to go.

Facebook respondent:

I agree that Maternity leave should be extended, giving parents the opportunity to attend support groups and classes that enhance their child's development also giving them some time to bond with extended family. I also think the term of the maternity exemption certificates which grant access to free treatment such as the dentist should be extended, I am unable to go to the dentist at the moment and require some work which I will struggle to pay for.

Facebook respondent:

Finally given the current situation I have lost the benefit of my NHS exemption certificate when it comes to dental care as I am unable to visit the dentist. As we know pregnancy takes its toll on a woman's body in all aspects and I will now potentially have to pay for any remedial dental work as a result of not being able to visit the dentist due to the lockdown prior to my exemption expiring.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

### **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

Survey respondent:

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.

Facebook respondent:

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

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

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.

Survey respondent:

The planned one to one time with our adopted daughter (1) has disappeared which has had a huge effect on her attachment to us, our ability to work on specific areas that she needs additional care around, supporting her social opportunities etc. A lot of my time has had to go into supporting our adopted son's (6) education, as he needs high levels of support with his learning and

this has taken away from her dedicated time. We had to save money for some time to be able to afford to take extended adoption leave which we did happily as she deserved to have this focused and attentive period but we won't be able to extend my leave as savings run out. The stress and anxiety experienced due to the pandemic has not supported our ability to give her the best possible start in our family and that makes me incredibly sad and worried given the lifelong effects of insecure attachments.

Survey respondent:

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 enables 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.

Survey respondent:

I am about to go on adoption leave (although I don't receive any pay as I am self-employed) so I am going to try and work from home. This will be impossible really though.

### **Neonatal care**

- Parents who had babies born prematurely or sick also faced particular challenges during the pandemic, in addition to the stresses they would already face.
- Hospital policies about visitors often meant one or both parents could not visit as much as they would like.
- Some described the double loss of time, firstly spending time in NICU, and then feeling like they were losing more after coming home due to lockdown.

### **Quotes:**

Survey respondent:

I am currently on maternity leave. Due to Covid-19 I am unable to fully concentrate on my premature baby as I would be able to do if I was on mat leave and things were 'normal'. I have had to home school as well as factor other things in due to the virus. My premature baby has suffered and not put on weight efficiently due to the hectic daily schedule and not being able to give her the valuable time a prem baby needs to grow and thrive. Prem babies need a lot more care and attention, skin to skin, expressing regimes to build



milk supply after being in SCBU, lots of close contact with parents. This is possible to some extent but has been compromised due to the situation. We are finally on track and weight gain is slow but steady. This has also an impact on mental health and a lot more worry not only about the virus and the risks to my high risk baby and the rest of the family but trying to juggle as a lot of families home schooling and day to day life with a new prem baby. I believe that parents on maternity leave should be honoured extended mat leave because of the above points.

Survey respondent:

My baby was in neonatal ICU and had surgery so a lot of my maternity was already spent in hospital. As soon as that was over we went into lockdown. I have missed out on so many outdoor experiences with my baby and he now hates being outdoors. I would happily take a pay cut but so desperately need that bonding time with my baby especially as he was premature with a heart condition.

Survey respondent:

My daughter was born poorly which meant spending time in NICU, then I had to deal with the psychological effects that left me with which resulted in anxiety and depression. Just as I was managing to feel confident in leaving the home we went into lockdown. My daughter has now spent most of her life in isolation in NICU and lockdown and not had the opportunity to build relationships or experiences outside of our family unit.

Survey respondent:

I had my baby 10 weeks prematurely in January, my baby came home 2 weeks after lockdown. Due to infection control in the NICU only parents are able to hold the baby therefore family and friends have been unable to bond with our baby, then after 70 days in the NICU he finally comes home and is unable to see family. My mental health has definitely been affected and I feel alone and scared at a time when I need the most support. I feel like I've been deprived of time that we won't ever be able to get back.

Survey respondent:

I had premature baby who was 3 months early and sick. We left hospital having spent over 2 months in hospital. Going from constant time at hospital to lockdown has been challenging mentally for me, with a 3 year old at home too. No help from family due to social distancing.[...] My daughter is also in the high risk category and given a vaccine may not be available the thought of returning to work is very very difficult.

## Annex 2: Summary of follow-up public engagement

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To hear more about how the coronavirus outbreak had affected options for childcare, we sent out two surveys. One was focused on parents, how their options had changed due to the pandemic, what their concerns were about sending their children to different settings, and what arrangements their employers could offer if they had difficulties returning to work as expected as a result.<sup>225</sup>

The second survey asked childcare providers, both business operators and employees, to tell us how the sector had been affected, and how they viewed their ability to offer childcare options in both the short and longer term. We also asked them about the UK Government plans and guidance for early years settings to reopen to children on 1 June, and how these would affect their ability to operate. A separate petition that had also gathered over 100,000 signatures calling for the Government to “Give UK nurseries emergency funding if they have to close down amid COVID-19” had already indicated that those within the sector had significant concerns for the future.<sup>226</sup>

### Responses

We received over 12,000 responses from parents about returning to work, and more than 4,000 from those working in the childcare sector to our survey asking for their views.

### Methodology

As with the earlier survey, we used Nvivo Pro 12 to identify and contextualise the most common words and phrases found in the entire set of responses from the surveys. This allowed us to group and summarise recurring themes which were threaded throughout much of the responses.

In addition to this analysis of the data, Committee staff manually reviewed hundreds of individual comments and answers, using both subject searches and randomised selection. Some of the survey questions which produced statistical results have been included in the summaries of key themes, or graphically where appropriate in the report.

### Key themes

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

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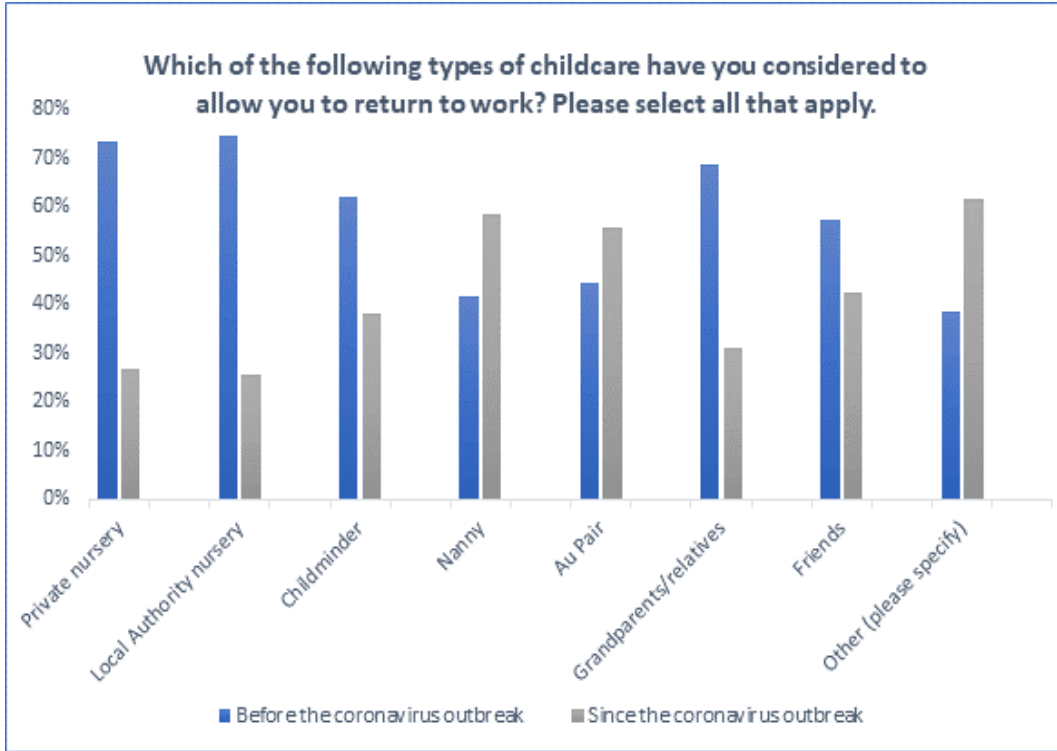
225 The Petitions Committee can email people who sign petitions if they have given permission to receive emails related to the petition. The survey was sent to everyone who had signed the petition: [Extend maternity leave by 3 months with pay in light of COVID-19](#)

226 This survey was sent to everyone who had signed the petitions: [Give UK nurseries emergency funding if they have to close down amid COVID-19](#) and [Make nurseries exempt from business rates to support the childcare sector](#).

## *Options for childcare*

### *Nurseries*

- In the survey for childcare providers, we asked about the extent to which they felt they would be able to reopen. Less than 3% felt they would be able to reopen to the same capacity as before, and nearly 7% said they would be unable to reopen at all. Most felt they would have a reduced capacity.
- We heard from both surveys that most providers had been closed, leaving parents unable to visit. Whilst many nurseries were able to continue talking to prospective parents, nearly 30% reported being unable to do this at all. Not being able to physically see the childcare environment was a major concern for parents, and over 90% of childcare workers felt physical visits and settling in days were either important or very important.
- Providers also noted that policies such as “drop at the door” to reduce contact would further compound the anxiety of both parents and children.
- The view of the importance of settling-in periods was also shared by parents, and this was a common response as to why they would be uncomfortable placing their child into a nursery in order to return to work, especially those who had reported few opportunities for their baby to get used to other adults. Many felt separation anxiety would be worse due to the experience of lockdown.
- As well as the availability of nursery places, we heard from respondents to both surveys that safety and concerns about transmission of the virus were prominent to both childcare providers and parents.
- When asked “Do you agree with UK Government that early years settings should be prepared to reopen from 1 June?”, over 70% of providers said they either disagreed or strongly disagreed, with many expressing their feeling that it was too early to return safely.
- The difficulty of social distancing with young children was noted widely, and some providers disagreed with the guidance which did not recommend they used PPE.
- Nurseries also noted that operating at a reduced capacity to try follow safety guidelines would make their businesses inviable.



- The number of parents planning to use nurseries showed a larger fall than other options—only a quarter since the outbreak, compared to three quarters before.

### Quotes

“I will not be wanting my child to be attending nursery for two reasons, he will be mixing with children who could be carriers, but also I will be working for the nhs and potentially be a carrier myself and would not want him to be taking it to the nursery either”

“I am worried that a nursery carer or another baby/child could pass the virus on to my baby.”

“I am afraid of my baby and my family’s health. Babies put everything in their mouths! It’s impossible to avoid risks of infection of coronavirus in this scenario.”

“I worry I will be limited to nurseries that are open rather than where I would want to send my child.”

“The first visits and settling sessions are crucial to the child-setting-parent relationship. Parents will naturally be more cautious about going to a new setting. Mine is a home from home childminding setting, so I don’t think I am likely to have any new starters for a long time, due to the restrictions of social distancing.”

“Our biggest concern is not the settling in for the babies, as babies in particular are often the easiest to settle, it’s the parents who tend to benefit from the settling in sessions. Whereas for toddlers over 1 years of age, as the child is more aware of their surroundings, yet have the added difficulty of

communicating, the settling in sessions tend to benefit both the child and parent equally.”

“She has had no opportunity to socialise with other people and has never met another baby. I worry very much about her wellbeing thrust into this unfamiliar and busy environment being used to only being in our home with me. It would be noisy and terrifying for her. How could I leave her there. I won’t be using childcare until I know she is confident.”

“I disagree about PPE. It says that childcare workers do not need it. We need it, we change nappies, help with feeding toilet training, cuddles etc.”

“Babies and toddlers put everything in their mouths and that is a natural part of their development. Everyday I come home from nursery covered in saliva and snot from the babies I care for in my room and that is usually fine but not when that saliva and snot could be carrying coronavirus that could kill me or my family when I walk it through my front door.”

“On paper it seems like it [the guidance] will be effective but when you think about putting it into practice with children so young that you realise it’s all a shambles - the people who wrote it have clearly never worked in a nursery, or they would know that babies and toddlers cannot social distance.”

“Small groups is the safest way, space will only allow 50% of our children to return but we will need the same staff which we simply can’t afford with current financial support.”

“you want to know that when you are at work that your baby is happy and safe. Being able to introduce different settings and different people to babies at a young age is a vital part of this reassurance to you the mother. Given the current situation I fear that I may have no other choice but to not to return to a career that I thoroughly enjoy and have worked so hard to achieve. Whilst I appreciate the government has done the furlough scheme, again women on maternity leave have been given the short straw. SMP is appalling especially compared to how much other people are currently being paid whilst also being at home at this current time.”

“Young children resetting in after being away for weeks, parents not allowed in building to settle child just being handed over at the door- this will be extremely stressful for child, parent & staff.”

“How is a prospective parent supposed to make an informed choice without visiting the setting looking around having a meeting! For the child’s settling having parent and child visits pre school can sometimes be scary for young children often the first time leaving a parent and you are expecting them just to be handed over at the door that is detrimental to their emotional development and in turn will delay further support we can offer the child and parent!”

“I have missed out on taking my baby out to play areas, groups and sensory due to being concerned for his health since Feb, he has missed seeing family

and friends too. This can have a negative effect on a baby and now I'm due back to work but unable to due to lack of childcare which leaves me with no pay. I would also like to mirror a comment from above regarding dental. I need to see a dentist and am currently unable to but as stated above it will be a nightmare to get an appointment now before he turns 1."

### *Grandparents and other relatives*

- Prior to the outbreak, 68% of respondents were relying on grandparents or other relatives for some or all of their childcare. This dropped to 31% after the outbreak, and the most common reason cited was health concerns and grandparents shielding for health or age-related reasons.
- As well as older grandparents being unable to see their families, some were also still working themselves and there were concerns about infection passing around the family via children.
- There was also a sense of confusion about future guidance for over 70s and whether they would be an option for care when further restrictions were lifted.
- Uncertainty over the extent to which grandparents would be able to help had a knock-on effect for many, as they could not make plans or approach their employers.

### *Quotes*

"Grandparents would have had our child once a week however as a midwife and my husband a police officer we are key workers and would be putting them at risk. My sister was going to have our baby one day a week but her daughter has had a heart transplant, she is extremely high risk, due to the nature of both our jobs we could not risk passing covid on to their family household via our child."

"I now do not feel comfortable asking my nan to look after my son 3 days a week when he is at childminders 2 days with other children and not socially distancing, putting her at risk when she is in the vulnerable category"

"My mother who was supposed to look after my daughter is a key worker for the NHS and hasn't been near my daughter for 8 weeks for fear of passing on the virus therefore I cannot leave her in her care to enable me to return to work"

"grandparents were to be main source of childcare with potentially 1 or 2 days a week at a private nursery. if baby is unable to go to grandparents, and currently baby does not know grandparents as she has not spent any time with them for 7+ weeks, this will obviously change my plans. Also i am not sure how easy it will be to find a nursery in the current situation. if this is still ongoing when i am due back at work i will consider requesting additional unpaid leave."

"Grandparents over 70, uncertain if they will still be isolating"

### *Other childcare options*

- Whilst many who were originally looking to use nurseries reported they either no longer could (due to opening or availability) or no longer wished to, there was an increase in those looking at nannies and au pairs.
- Where respondents were looking at these options instead, the main reasons stated were concerns about leaving children in settings with large numbers of children, changes to availability of nurseries, and family members now being unable to care for children.
- Parents were also considering nannies and childminders as potentially being more cost effective, as well as caring for fewer children than nurseries.
- Some others simply did not have any other options and had to return to work.

### *Quotes*

“I am unable to use grandparents because of shielding. We may not be able to afford private nursery now. So we are looking into a nanny type option for both children because it will be cheaper.”

“Childminders are cheaper and have less children, may suit my working hours better”

“Family and friends make up all of my child care. As we can no longer see these i have no options available to me. Private nurseys in my area which would not work as i have a 9 month and a 10 year old are not taking on new children”

“Considering nanny/au pair so only my child is being cared for as opposed to multiple children”

“Fear of picking up the virus at nursery and spreading it to grandparents who are all vulnerable. Mother is also asthmatic and considered in a danger group. Finding an au pair or nanny may minimise some of this risk”

“Concerned about impact of social distancing in nurseries and potential for increased costs. Am thinking more about alternative options such as childminder or au pair than I was before.”

### *Returning to work*

- 81% of respondents to our survey to parents told us they were now considering delaying their return to work. Of these, 15% had been offered the option to take further unpaid leave, and just over 4% could be furloughed. Nearly 80% had been offered no options at all to extend their leave by their employer.
- While some had chosen to take the unpaid 13 weeks of their maternity leave entitlement to extend their leave, we regularly heard that this was either never an option, or no longer an option due to financial pressures.



- Many reported using their annual leave allowance to delay their return, but noted this would prevent them taking any further holiday once lockdown conditions had been lifted.
- There was a variance in the levels of communication and helpfulness of employers. Some reported difficulty in contacting them, whilst others said their employer refused to discuss alternative arrangements until closer to the date they were due to return.
- Key workers, including teachers, NHS workers and those working for the police reported being unable to extend leave or be furloughed as they were needed at work.

### Quotes

“I was an NHS employee so could not be furloughed but my local nursery is closed and grandparents who were due to look after my daughter are currently unable to do so due to lockdown rules, so I had to resign.”

“I am a key worker, so work are keen to have me back asap. Financially I cannot afford not to work, we have used a lot of savings already”

“I am a teacher and work in a Reception class I am expected to be back as planned with no chance/ choice to extend my leave. The nursery I had chosen is closed and my parents have not seen my daughter since the start of lockdown so are basically strangers to her.”

“My only option is to take full maternity leave and be unpaid for the last 12 weeks. My partner has lost his job as a result of coronavirus so this might not be financially feasible for us.”

“Delayed returning to work (with absolutely no pay!) I need to find a suitable nursery for my little one before I return to work, i cannot do this due to lockdown. Leaving me extremely financially worse off and struggling to pay my mortgage and bills”

“My line manager is furloughed so I’ve heard nothing”

“I have tried to contact my employer several times regarding my maternity leave and have had no response. I have not heard from them since I started my maternity leave.”

“If I choose to extend my maternity, there is a strong possibility that my role will no longer be available for me to return into as it will exceed 12 months. I would see no option but to return to work, and my husband and I having to use a mixture of holiday and unpaid leave to care for our child until we can find a suitable alternative”

“My employer has offered me zero help, I’m a support worker who is 30 weeks pregnant and started my maternity at 29 weeks because no help or alternative was offered to me and we have had 7 COVID deaths within the home. I’m so gutted it means missing time when my baby arrives!”

### Unpaid leave

- While some parents said they would like to take unpaid leave to extend their maternity, many said they could not afford to do so.
- Some told us they would do it anyway, even though it may cause them financial problems, as they felt they had no other option.

### Quotes

“My current plan was to take 9 months off until stat pay was reduced to zero. This would mean I am due to return to work back in early October. I could extend my leave for an additional 3 months but I cannot afford to do this on zero pay.”

“...I opted for the 9 month maternity leave as can't afford 3 months unpaid as much as I'd 100% love to be off with my new born and even more so now with this coronavirus seeing as we've missed out introducing her to so much already and meeting people.”

“The only option to me at the moment is if I extend my current maternity leave...i only planned to take 39 weeks originally as this is paid...this can be extended to 52 weeks but is unpaid by the government. I couldn't afford to do this, without borrowing money. It is something I am now having to consider. Just don't think I can afford it. If I was being furloughed, like many others I'd be getting 80% of my wage, currently SMP only pays one 3rd of my usual wage. It's really tough to get by.”

“I can take more months off unpaid but we can't afford it as a family and I need to go back to work but don't feel comfortable putting my daughter in nursery as she has on been around me and my partner.”

“No option to extend leave other than taking it unpaid which I am unable to do as cannot afford to do this.”

“Only option is the 3 months unpaid which as a family we cannot afford”

“Could not afford unpaid leave if that was offered.”

“I am a teacher. Although understanding, my boss has not offered any more time off or financial support. We have not got childcare sorted due to nurseries not taking viewings and my husband has been furloughed”

“The unpaid leave, with a self employed husband, would also mean that we possibly wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage or childcare when I did return to work (we have no family with 70 miles to help with this). This would create even more stress. I am so very worried.”

“I work for the NHS front line.

I feel that I should go back to work ASAP but feel that i should protect my family as my baby was 10 weeks premature.

My husband also has been furloughed so money is tight. I am contemplating extending leave however due to hospital pressure I feel this will be rejected.”

“My husband and I are both key workers working for the police. We therefore cannot work from home. We cannot afford to be on unpaid leave so I have to return to work after nine months’ maternity leave. I could stay off work for a further three months to take the full twelve months maternity pay but as the final three months are completely unpaid we can’t afford for me to do this.”

“I have chosen to take 9 months maternity as this is paid leave. I have the option to extend my maternity leave by 3 months but this would be unpaid. We could not afford 3 months with no second income as my husbands’ income does not cover the bills. I am stuck between the choice of the safety of my family or being homeless. A choice I believe I shouldn’t have to make.”

### **Redundancy risks & financial challenges**

- Some respondents mentioned that they were at risk of redundancy, or feared that they may be when they returned.
- Others had partners who had either lost their jobs or were at risk, and so they felt they were under additional pressure financially.

### **Quotes**

“Nothing discussed with my employer, they are currently working through global redundancies so would likely be offered an unpaid extension if requested”

“My company have not offered me anything at the moment. However I work for an airline so I am now worried I will be [...] made redundant [...] My husband [...] is at risk of job loss. He is only earning 64% now and I am on unpaid maternity.”

“There has been no discussion with my employer. I had always planned to take the maximum period of maternity leave. I do not want to take any unpaid leave on top of this as the last person who did that was made to work fewer days and made redundant upon their return (pre corona and as part of a wider consultation)”

“My work is going through making people redundant due to coronavirus I’m awaiting to find out if my job is affected. Obviously this affects me and my family majorly as I would have had a job to go back to and bring in an income but now I would have to fight against a lot of people to find a new job and probably not at a wage of what I was on before whilst paying for 2 children to be put into childcare. This is probably not feasible as I would earn less than what I’m paying in fees. Therefore I would have to take a year out until my eldest is on free childcare which will not be good for my mental health or for my children’s development of not attending care.”

“My employer has currently offered no options to extend leave. The company made a late number of people redundant rather than furloughed, and my concern is if I go back to work too early I’ll lose my job entirely. I’m worried about asking for part time hours also, in case they can’t accommodate that and I lose my job. This would then leave our family down by one persons income, which puts a stress on all of us.”

“Due to the coronavirus we have now had a change in our organisational structure and redundancies meaning everyone kept on would have to take a 20% pay cut meaning less money for child care”

“No options offered, there is a lot of uncertainty as my husband is currently furloughed but likely to be made redundant”

“[...]I also can’t afford not to go back to work. I find myself in a real dilemma and worried this will affect my mental health. I am a key worker for the NHS mental health services and wondering how I will do my job properly if my mental health is affected due to childcare and money issues.”

“[...]I have no choice but to take the unpaid maternity leave to look after my family and keep them all safe and to do this we are going to really struggle financially.”

## **Challenges for early years settings**

### **Reopening – timing and guidance**

- In our survey to childcare providers we asked about the UK Government’s plans to reopen early years settings to all children from 1 June, and the guidance issued on doing this safely.
- Over 70% did not agree with the plans to reopen on 1 June, but the response to the guidance itself was more mixed, with roughly equal numbers feeling it was useful or not useful.
- Many noted that the guidance was predominantly focussed on schools, and not enough consideration had been given to the unique challenges presented by caring for very young children who could not understand even basic social distancing requirements, and needed direct physical assistance with feeding and toileting.
- Some expressed disagreement with statements in the guidance that staff did not need PPE, and noted they were unable to source it. Some felt the safety of the staff was not being given enough consideration.
- Several respondents disagreed with the Government’s assertion that demand would be low enough to allow some elements of distancing, and indicated that their own surveys to parents showed higher demand than they could safely manage, even if some parents kept their children at home as expected.

- Some providers accepted the idea of keeping children in small groups/bubbles was more workable than attempted social distancing, but the staff numbers required to make it work would make it financially unsustainable for them, and may not suit the physical layouts of some settings, especially for childminders.

### Quotes

“There has been little to no sufficient guidance for supporting staff and children classed as “clinically vulnerable” even though they can return to work and settings. They will be the most at risk going back but at these settings it is impossible to protect and distance them safely, why are they required to return to education settings where it cannot feasibly happen?”

Overall, it is apparent to Nursery settings that it is going to be a struggle, nigh on impossible, to offer full protection to the children and staff according to government guidelines.”

“I work in a preschool with 5 members of staff and 18 children no bigger than my living room! We can not social distance in there. My manager won’t allow us to wear face masks due to scaring the children. It’s a confined space so I think ppe is required at all times. I get that children are of low risk to covid but that doesn’t include the staff and their families!”

“95% of our families have requested care from June rather than delaying start so I disagree when they say demand will be lower. Small groups with no cross over goes against everything I believe in. I feel that this will have negative impacts on children’s well-being.”

“In principle some of it makes sense, but implementing sufficient changes just does not seem possible to me.”

### Financial impact

- In addition to the practical challenges of reopening fully, many respondents expressed concern about the financial impact and how they would be able to survive longer term.
- Those that had stayed open for key workers children reported significant financial pressure, as they were unable to save costs or access support to the same extent as those who closed.
- Several respondents noted that their insurance did not pay out for business interruption when they were forced to close.
- Many mentioned that funding was already insufficient prior to the outbreak and that they were making up for deficits from private income.
- Staffing costs were a big concern. Many had furloughed staff, and were now having to consider bringing some or all back, with little idea on expected demand. It was also noted that while mandatory ratios had not been changed by

the guidance, if the 'small groups/bubbles' were to be followed it would require more staff than usual to facilitate changing, feeding etc. as well as enhanced levels of cleaning.

- Longer term there was some feeling that demand would be lower, due to parents permanently changing their working arrangements, or being unable to afford nursery fees due to pay cuts or redundancies.
- Some expressed anxiety about the furlough scheme and how long it would remain funded, with many not expecting to return to full capacities for some time.

### Quotes

"We tried to stay open for key workers but lost £1k per week and had to close. Our furlough costs aren't being met and our fixed costs are accruing debt with little income. We may struggle to reopen with the costs of preparing and reduced attendance"

"It is safer to have less children and I am sure many of my parents won't want or need their children to return. We will have to see the response from our parents. However, this will mean more overheads and less fees. We may have to make staff redundant or they will have to live on less furlough money as we can't afford to pay them the full salary any longer"

"Schools are given extra funding to manage cleaning etc however nurseries are overlooked for such support."

"Early years providers are on their knees, listen to the sector / NDNA!!! We are under funded yet expected just to get on with it. The sector continues to not get the support or recognition it deserves and needs to remain sustainable"

"The funding rate does not cover the costs of delivering the early education and the shortfall has to be made up from somewhere, so the private fees will have to be increased as a result. If the policy were changed so funded hours could be offered as subsidised hours, then the shortfall could be met by a top up from the parents of funded children, rather than the whole burden being placed on the private fee payers."

"Opening up and paying all bills with limited children will probably bankrupt us"

"Our demand hasn't been lower but we've had to drop our spaces from 42 a day to 28 a day and because of the priority for 3 & 4 year olds this means we are losing a huge amount of income daily because it's my fee paying children I will have to turn away."

"A lot of parents have or are being made redundant so I think there will be less people returning or looking for childcare."

“Staff are nervous, parents are nervous. The new normal is very scary and we aren’t 100% sure how this is going to work- if we even survive this financially.”

“If necessary to reduce room numbers then economy of scale is lost. Additional costs due to PPE, the usual protective childcare materials increased in cost and more difficult to access. Additional cost (staff & material) to implement the necessary cleaning protocol. Additional staff to receive children and restrict carers entering the building. Additional 7% wages bill to recover due to revision of minimum wage in April.”

“There are increased costs associated with operating safely, including the deep cleaning of nurseries and the provision of PPE to workers who need it. Schools can claim back money for these costs, but childcare providers can’t. Indications are that occupancy will be much reduced and there are associated costs with cancelling contracts and redundancies. Some cost such as Insurance premiums will rise. We have fallen through the gaps on many of the schemes to support businesses. Therefore we need to consider all options for business viability”

“We were closed by the government with no notice. We had no LA support to stay open, there were no ‘hubs’ there was no PPE. Our insurance did not pay out. Our furlough was affected by early years funding (still fees, because childcare was never free.)

Our funding was then taken from us. We received less than a third of what was due to us, despite the whole figure used against our furlough claim. I had to get a loan to survive. I may have to let staff go, and the business may not survive.”

“The virus should not be used as a means of covering up the gross underfunding of nurseries. The virus has only exacerbated an already difficult situation. The Government needs to look seriously at how it fund nurseries and listen to what nursery experts are telling them just like they are listening to the scientists now! They say they believe in competition and then they stifle it in the nursery sector by them deciding how much they will pay per hour, what the children to staff ratios (these are arbitrary numbers and have no scientific basis) are and then pay the rate for 39 of the 52 weeks. Moving forward to help nurseries, there needs to be a big increase in the hourly rate, this should be paid for 52 weeks and the 3-year funding should begin in the start of the school year in which the child is 3 and not wait until the child is actually 3.”



## Formal minutes

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Tuesday 30 June 2020

Members present:

Catherine McKinnell, in the Chair

Tonia Antoniazzi	Nick Fletcher
Elliot Colburn	Mike Hill
Martyn Day	Tom Hunt
Katherine Fletcher	Theresa Villiers

Draft Report (*The impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 122 read and agreed to.

Annexes and Summary agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Thursday 07 May 2020

**James Zammit-Garcia**, Petition Creator; **Jessie Zammit**, Petition Creator; **Bethany Power**, Petition signatory; **Professor Elizabeth Meins**, Department of Psychology, University of York; **Emily Tredget**, Co-founder, Happity; **Dr Cheryll Adams CBE FRSPH D(Nurs) MSc**, Executive Director, Institute of Health Visiting

[Q1–26](#)

### Thursday 21 May 2020

**Alain Gregoire**, Chair, Maternal Mental Health Alliance; **Dr Trudi Seneviratne OBE**, Chair, Royal College of Psychiatrists Faculty of Perinatal Psychiatry; **Josie Anderson**, Campaigns and Policy Manager, Bliss; **Sue Armstrong Brown**, Chief Executive, Adoption UK; **Neil Leitch**, Chief Executive, Early Years Alliance

[Q45–73](#)

### Thursday 11 June 2020

**Paul Scully MP**, Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

[Q74–109](#)

## Published written evidence

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The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

GRC numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Adoption UK ([GRC0018](#))
- 2 Birth Trauma Association ([GRC0012](#))
- 3 Bliss ([GRC0010](#))
- 4 Coates, Al ([GRC0011](#))
- 5 Coram ([GRC0005](#))
- 6 Early Years Alliance ([GRC0009](#))
- 7 Family Rights Group ([GRC0025](#))
- 8 Fatherhood Institute ([GRC0007](#))
- 9 First 1001 Days Movement ([GRC0006](#))
- 10 Institute of Health Visiting ([GRC0024](#))
- 11 Maternity Action ([GRC0023](#))
- 12 National Day Nurseries Association ([GRC0019](#))
- 13 NSPCC ([GRC0013](#))
- 14 Power, Bethany ([GRC0015](#))
- 15 Pregnant then Screwed ([GRC0022](#))
- 16 The Smallest Things ([GRC0026](#))
- 17 Tredget, Emily ([GRC0021](#))
- 18 Tredget, Emily ([GRC0017](#))
- 19 We Are Family ([GRC0008](#))

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website. The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2019–21

First Special Report	Fireworks: Government response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019	HC 242
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