

Parental Leave Survey 2025

1. Introduction

On 1 July 2025, the government launched a consultation as part of its *Make Work Pay* agenda, seeking views on proposed objectives for reforming the parental leave and pay system. A key aim of the plan is to support working parents in balancing their work and home responsibilities - an area where parental leave and pay entitlements play a vital role. This review is a key step in delivering the broader *Plan for Change*.

To inform UNISON's response to the consultation, we conducted a survey to gather insights from our members about their experiences with parental leave and pay. The survey received 14,724 responses from UNISON members of childbearing age, representing a wide range of sectors and regions. Of these, 7,796 respondents were eligible to complete the full survey, having taken maternity, paternity, adoption, parental, shared parental, or neonatal leave between January 2020 and the present.

This report presents the key findings from the survey and highlights the lived experiences of our members, helping to shape UNISON's position on the proposed reforms.

2. Summary of key findings with quotes from respondents

- **Uptake of leave:** Maternity leave is widely used, most respondents took 9 to 12 months leave on average; paternity leave is short and often insufficient.
- **Financial hardship:** Financial strain is a major barrier to taking full leave entitlements. A significant proportion of respondents reported experiencing financial difficulties during periods of parental leave, particularly due to low statutory pay rates and limited employer enhancements. 50% of respondents felt pressured to return to work due to financial worries and 93% would have taken more leave if it had been available or better paid.

Quotes from respondents:

"I had to return to work earlier than planned because statutory maternity pay wasn't enough to cover basic living costs."

"We had to rely on credit cards to get through my maternity leave."

- **Inequality in access:** Access to enhanced parental leave and pay varied widely across sectors and employers, with many members in lower-paid or insecure roles receiving only the statutory minimum. 52% of respondents only received the Statutory Maternity Pay.

Quotes from respondents:

"Colleagues in other departments got full pay for months, while I was on the bare minimum. It felt unfair."

“Agency workers like me are completely left out of enhanced benefits.”

- **Shared parental leave uptake:** Uptake of shared parental leave remains low, with many citing financial constraints, lack of awareness, and workplace culture as barriers. Only 8.1% of respondents reported taking shared parental leave.

Quotes from respondents:

“We wanted to share the leave, but my partner couldn’t afford to take time off.”

“My manager didn’t even know how shared parental leave worked.”

- **Neonatal leave gaps:** Respondents who experienced premature births or extended neonatal care highlighted the lack of dedicated neonatal leave and pay as a major concern. Although dedicated neonatal care leave and pay was only introduced in the UK from 6 April 2025, under the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023, it marks a significant step forward in supporting parents whose babies require extended medical care after birth.

Quotes from respondents:

“My baby was in hospital for weeks, and I had to use up my maternity leave just sitting by her side.”

“There should be separate leave for neonatal care—it’s not the same as regular parental leave.”

- **Return-to-work challenges:** A significant number of respondents reported difficulties in returning to work after leave. 73% did not feel emotionally prepared, 20% were denied flexible working options, and 17% felt their employers provided inadequate support during their transition back to work.

Quotes from respondents:

“I was sidelined after returning—no opportunities, no support.”

“Flexible working was promised but never delivered.”

- **Adoption leave experiences:** Members who took adoption leave noted inconsistencies in support and information provided, with some facing delays or confusion around entitlements.

Quotes from respondents:

“The process was confusing and HR didn’t seem to know what I was entitled to.”

“I felt like adoption leave was treated as less important than maternity leave.”

3. Key statistics

- 86.3% of respondents reported taking Maternity Leave
- 31.8% of respondents reported taking Paternity Leave
- 70% of respondents whose partners took paternity leave reported that it significantly affected their recovery and wellbeing and 90% stated that a more generous paternity leave would have improved their experience
- Financial stress during maternity leave was a significant concern for many respondents: 75% reported that it negatively impacted their mental wellbeing, while 55.1% stated that the maternity leave pay, they received was inadequate and contributed to their financial strain
- 57% of respondents reported feeling pressured to return to work earlier than they would have preferred
- 42% did not feel supported by their employer during their leave and upon return to work

4. Key insights

- Maternity leave was the most commonly taken leave type, with 86.3% of respondents indicating usage.
- Paternity leave was taken by significantly fewer respondents (31.8%), highlighting a gap in uptake and support.
- Parental leave was taken by fewer respondents (26.8%), also highlighting a gap in uptake and support.
- Shared parental leave was utilised by only a small fraction (8.1%), suggesting limited awareness or feasibility.
- Financial stress during maternity leave negatively impacted mental wellbeing for 75% of respondents.
- Mental health challenges were reported by 52% of participants during or after their leave.
- 36% felt their employer was very supportive upon return to work.
- 71.3% of respondents couldn't afford unpaid leave

5. Conclusion

The parental leave survey reveals several critical challenges faced by respondents. Among the 7,796 respondents who took maternity, paternity, adoption, parental, shared parental or neonatal leave:

- Financial strain was a recurring theme, with 34.6% of participants reporting that the pay received during leave was insufficient to cover essential living expenses.

- Mental health challenges were prevalent, including emotional unpreparedness and postnatal issues, often exacerbated by financial stress and lack of support. 52% experienced mental health challenges, including postnatal depression and emotional unpreparedness to return to work.
- 30.2% of respondents felt pressured to return to work earlier than desired, primarily due to financial constraints or lack of support.
- Notably, 49.4% indicated they would have taken more leave if it had been better paid or more flexible, suggesting that current policies may not adequately support family needs.

These figures highlight systemic gaps in current parental leave policies, particularly around financial support, mental health care, and equitable access to leave.

6. Recommendations

- Improve financial support during leave to reduce stress and promote recovery. Statutory pay should be increased so taking parental leave is financially viable.
- Enhance maternity, paternity, adoption, parental, shared parental and neonatal duration and pay to support equitable caregiving. Both parents should have equitable access to paid leave. Support for fathers should be enhanced. Ensure policies are inclusive of single parents, LGBT+ families, and adoptive parents.
- Increase awareness and accessibility of Shared Parental Leave. Provide a clearer simpler system, better communication and simplicity.
- Strengthen employer policies around mental health and flexible working arrangements.
- Recognise the importance of addressing childcare costs as part of the approach to reform.

These findings underscore the need for policy reform and greater support for working parents to ensure a healthier and more equitable parental leave experience.

7. Personal stories

We invited respondents to share their views on whether longer or better-paid leave would have improved their ability to care for their child. They were also asked whether the length and pay of their leave allowed them to recover physically and emotionally after childbirth. In addition, respondents were encouraged to suggest changes to current policies and entitlements relating to maternity, paternity, parental, adoption, shared parental, and neonatal leave.

A. Would longer or better-paid leave have improved your ability to care for your child?

“Being able to buy food, pay bills and heat the house shouldn't be seen as luxuries and yet we give families on maternity leave less than a living wage. Lived off savings and credit cards.”

“Better pay during leave would have made a huge difference. We had to cut back on essentials just to get through those months.”

“Stress due to financial restrictions. A difficult decision to make in regards to returning to work early as maternity pay is not liveable and enduring childcare costs or staying with baby to ensure bonding. Maternity pay didn't cover basic bills.”

“SMP left me feeling very stressed which affected my mental health. I often worried if I'd make it financially through the month and had to rely heavily on my husband for money and it had an impact on our finances.”

“I had to return to work earlier than planned because statutory maternity pay wasn't enough to cover basic living costs.”

“Taking up to a year would have allowed me to continue my breastfeeding journey longer”

“I had twins so having to care for 2 babies on the one maternity pay has been extremely difficult, especially as my husband only was entitled to 2 weeks statutory paternity pay “

“Better paid leave would have enabled me peace of mind while on maternity leave.”

“I returned while breast feeding and it was difficult and ultimately meant I had to cut my breastfeeding journey short.”

“Would have been able to spend more time with child before putting them in private nursery at great expense”

“I had sufficient time off to bond and rear my baby. Unfortunately my husband did not, and two weeks was pretty brutal on him. He is very hands on and supportive, and he must have felt completely pulled in two directions. Leaving me crying at a kitchen table feeling helpless to stay and help cause he had to get to work and pretend his life hadn't changed.”

“The UK has the worst/shortest maternity/paternity leave in Europe. As a single mum I couldn't afford to keep on maternity leave, I had to go back to work after 8 weeks.”

“One week is just not enough for fathers. It allows next to no time to bond with your new born and to be supporting a new mum.”

“Had a traumatic birth which greatly hindered my bonding with my baby moreover handing over care of 9-12months old is just way too young”

“Two weeks paternity leave is inadequate. My daughter stayed in hospital after her birth for 3 days so I had even less time with her.”

“I had financial worries whilst off due to only receiving SMP”

“I took 9 months with first child and 1 year with second due to financial stress! I felt more ready to come back to work after the year as opposed to the 9months”

“Less stress if maternity leave was better paid. Found it a struggle at times”

“Living on £600 a month just covered my bills, we haven’t been able to do half as much as we wanted to unfortunately. “

“I was paid 100% of my wage for the first 6 weeks. Then it dropped to 50%, then only statutory and then 3 months of no pay. This is very difficult financially.”

“I wanted to take the whole year off which I did but it was very tight financially which added extra unnecessary stress and worry.”

“Due to the massive impact on finances I was unable to take enough time off to spend with my children. I have had 2 maternity leaves from 2022 - 2024. Each time my husband could only take 2 weeks off and this wasn’t enough time to help me and the babies. When I had my twins we were in hospital for a week and that ate into his leave. Going down to smp made a big impact to us as a family.”

“I would have taken the full year to spend with my daughter if the last 3 months were not unpaid. The pressure of having a family to provide for with no income is unmanageable.”

“I had to recover from an assisted delivery and significant blood loss, my partner had one week at SMP rate (police officer). I thought I was going to die for those first few weeks, 1 week at SMP is disgusting and men need to bond with their baby just like mums do. I feel this lack of bonding time ahs affecting him greatly”

“Due to needing to go back to work, I had to put my child in nursery, which she was not ready for. This affected her ability to cope with long day without me, she was constantly upset at drop off and during the day. In turn, this also affected my mental health and stress levels due to she was not able to settle for a few months, and I felt guilty having to leave her in nursery.”

“If I had had longer I would have been able to support my wife more”

“A longer paternity would have given more time to aid with my partners recovery after giving birth and having to parent a new born alone just 2 weeks after giving birth”

"If I had been paid full or nearly full for a year and offered a second year of maternity with reduced or statutory pay it would have been great."

"I have had to go back to work part time and have had to put my baby in to nursery at just 9 months old. Longer paid or better paid would have meant delaying this and spending more quality time with baby."

"I had to reduce my hours to return to work as I couldn't afford to put my little bit into a nursery, I am a PSA and I get £989 a month and pay out £760 got childcare 4 days a week."

"My partner would have been able to work less overtime to make up the difference in wage therefore being at home with us more."

"I feel I have missed a lot of development and bonding with my child"

"Better pay wouldn't have had me worried especially in the last 3 months off"

"My daughter had to start nursery at 8/9 months as I had to return to work, I feel I lost out on so much of her growing and developing in that time but I couldn't afford to not work"

"Two weeks off as a dad is too short, especially when my wife was so poorly after giving birth and was in hospital for ten days with sepsis."

"More time to bond with my wife and offer her more support during what can be a very difficult time for both parents."

*"If I had longer maternity leave I would have cared for him rather than sending him to nursery at 10m
Financial security whilst be able to bond with my daughter and assist my partner."*

"The pay I was giving matched my wage. I wanted more time with my new baby, two weeks is not long enough at all. My partner hadn't even recovered from delivery when I went back to work."

"My partner suffered severe post natal depression, she had to give up work. I only receive 1 full week paternity pay and 1 week minimum pay. I took 1 week paternity and 1 week Annual leave as I could not afford to take the second week paternity"

"Unable to afford to take a full year off work, maternity pay is less than minimum wage by a long way and doesn't cover enough to be able to take time off work and not worry financially. 2 weeks paternity leave is not enough, dads deserve more time with their babies and mums need support for more than 2 weeks!"

"husband only had two weeks and I have a bad birthing experience. The recovery from the caesarean took a lot longer. It would have been great if more paternity leave was offered to assist with the baby and my recovery."

B. Did the length and pay of your leave allow you to adequately recover physically and emotionally after childbirth?

"I was still recovering physically when my leave ended. I had no choice but to return to work while struggling with exhaustion and pain."

"There was no time to heal properly. Emotional recovery takes longer than people think."

- *"I had severe post natal depression which meant I was on a lot of medication, I also had complications after my emergency csection which has left me in pain even now. The first 6 months after giving birth I was in a horrible place mentally and just when I started to enjoy being a mother I had to return to work"*
- *"I had post natal depression and had no time to bond with child as I had to return to work after 8 weeks."*
- *"I was scared of losing my job because I am on sponsorship, I didn't even heal at all."*
- *"The financial burden added on stress to me as a new mum with a new born which was not needed and therefore I am going back to work not fully recovered emotionally/mentally."*
- *"It was too quick, I felt I had no time with my baby daughter before it was time to leave her everyday. I felt I was missing out."*
- *"I wasn't looking forward to my return to work, it came around to quickly and mentally I wasn't ready."*
- *"I suffered financial stress when it should have been a happy time having a new baby."*
- *"Stressed about how I'm going to pay bills month to month did not allow me to fully be immersed with my baby."*
- *"I was later diagnosed with PPD and PTSD due to birth trauma after returning to work."*
- *"As I stated before, the time allowed was insufficient for any sort of wellbeing. Taking on the responsibility of a newborn baby is the single most exhausting thing I have endured in my life and a 2-week leave to get a*

handle on it is laughably inadequate. It was awful and worse for my then wife, who had surgery to get the baby out."

- *"I had postnatal depression."*
- *"The length of leave was not enough to adapt to this massive change and to help further support my wife"*
- *"2 weeks is not long enough."*
- *"I'm a man I didn't have the baby, my wife hadn't recovered at all before I returned to work"*
- *"Maternity pay is not enough to live on, financial worry being on may leave so pressed to go back to work sooner."*
- *"my 9 months maternity was also the same amount of time I was fighting cancer"*
- *"The length of time did but the thought of moving from full pay to SMP was a concern."*
- *"The amount of paternity leave wasn't enough when my twins were in NICU and I was still recovering from a c section."*
- *"needed longer to deal with fatigue and tiredness"*
- *"Partner was still in recovery and supposed to be on as much rest as possible when I returned to work"*
- *"I suffered physically after childbirth and longer leave would have given me more time to recover, as well as suffering from Post-natal depression and ended up having to visit the GP who advised me to go sick and provided me with anti-depressants."*
- *"I wasn't aware that I had post natal depression, I don't know if this is related to length or pay during the leave. However, the post natal depression became aware on returning to work."*
- *"Mentally I had not recovered"*
- *"I had significant mental health difficulties following a traumatic birth and subsequent readmission to hospital"*

- *“The stress of finances and having no to return to work sooner had a massive impact of my personal life and mental health. I wasn’t able to fund for things I needed to recover.”*
- *“I struggled mentally after the birth of my fourth child”*
- *“I was very unwell and also suffered with anxiety during this period”*
- *“Had to return to work earlier than I was ready too due to maternity pay.”*
- *“Suffered from depression for entire time off and then this continued into work”*
- *“I had complications with my second child which meant my healing took longer.”*
- *“As before, stressing about money doesn't help with any physical or emotional recovery.”*
- *“2 weeks paternity leave is not long enough to do any of the things that need doing for your partner and child.”*
- *“My first maternity leave I was back after 6 months and mentally I struggled adjusting to being a first time mum and then to go back to work full time and miss all the milestones really took a toll on me”*
- *“Currently I am still struggling with pgp almost 6 months postpartum”*
- *“I have hyper mobility which caused significant pain and mobility problems during and after pregnancy. My daughter was born with a medical condition which was distressing and my husband only had two weeks paternity leave. I also had two other young children to look after I felt physically drained and mentally overwhelmed.”*
- *“My first labour was horrendous, I had a traumatic birth and suffered from post natal depression.”*
- *“I have recently just given birth to my second child and my partner is due back to work on Monday, which is going to be a strain on my emotional wellbeing.”*
- *“I had postpartum depression and my husband was signed off work with PTSD so by the time I was starting to feel better I had to return to work and*

did not have the quality time to bond with my baby which has left me with guilt and increased feelings of anxiety.”

- *“I felt under pressure to return to work as I couldn't financially afford to take more time off. My partner only got two weeks paternity which was unpaid also due to being self employed.”*
- *“Emotionally no, with very little sleep causing anxiety and poor mental health, along side breast feeding and having to return to work causes excessive mental and emotional strain.”*
- *“I had a difficult labour and felt rushed to try to be physically recovered as I knew I would have to return to work as soon as my maternity pay dropped.”*
- *“I had a very traumatic birth and my husbands leave was not long enough for me to recover. I was unable to even lift my child or look after her on my own when he had to return“*

C. Did you experience any mental health challenges during or after your leave? If yes, would you like to tell us more about it?

- *“I suffered with PPD after the birth of my second child - steals your time and wellbeing*
- *Having a baby adjusts your life completely. Anyone that says they didn't change as a person mentally is kidding themselves.”*
- *“I wasn't mentally prepared to return to work. This was my 2nd child and I panicked about the thought of having to go to work and care for 2 children. I was thinking about my return to work throughout my maternity leave”*
- *“My mental health was poor due to baby not settling in nursery, and she was constantly crying.”*
- *“wife had post natal depression which caused stress for myself*
- *I was diagnosed with Post-natal depression and was prescribed anti-depressants to be able to cope.”*
- *“as mentioned I had post-natal depression but this was not diagnosed until returning to work.”*
- *“It was my first child and I was struggling to adapt particularly because I was worried about finances “*

- *“PTSD”*
- *“Mental health due to complications at childbirth”*
- *“Post Natal Depression”*
- *“My mental health deteriorated during pregnancy and after birth. One of the stressors impacting this was the financial strain to save money prior to maternity leave to ensure my bills were sufficiently paid whilst on maternity leave and to ensure my maternity leave money lasted for the time I was on leave.”*
- *“I had post natal depression”*
- *“Anxiety”*
- *“Post-natal depression, exacerbated by national lockdown in 2020”*
- *“I struggled mentally and was on antidepressants for around a year*
- *Anxiety about returning to work”*
- *“Post natal depression involved with mental health and gp through out leave.*
- *Post natal depression and anxiety with both my children.”*
- *“It was challenging being alone most days as my partner had to work to make us for us financially”*
- *“Mental health lows during pregnancy and after birth”*
- *“The whole process was traumatic. I have had lots of therapy since but I still have serious issues around babies and childbirth. I am aware people like babies, but I have not repeated the experience, never will and would never, ever, advise anyone to reproduce. It was the worst experience of my life thus far. It was torture.”*
- *“I struggled post partum both times with my mental health due to hormone shifts and huge life changes becoming a parent. I would be really low in mood a lot of the time with no motivation due to putting my all into being a mum and looking after a house etc.*
- *Post natal depression”*

- *“Hated leaving my child at such a young age. Really affected work, we had a lot of time off sick as she was young and caught everything too which I was penalised for*
- *Post natal depression with my first child.”*
- *“Postpartum depression. Anxiety. Unable to sleep.”*
- *“with very little sleep causing anxiety and poor mental health, along side breast feeding and having to return to work causes excessive mental and emotional strain.”*
- *“I had a lot of anxiety and was concerned I might end up with post natal depression.*
- *I experienced post-natal depression”*
- *“I experienced PTSD from a difficult birth that threatened the life of our baby. I was required to return to work before I had adequately had time to process this and later had to access wellbeing support and therapy.”*

D. Support for Fathers and Partners

“There needs to be more support for fathers. My partner wanted to be more involved but couldn’t afford to take time off.”

“Shared parental leave sounds good in theory, but financially it’s just not viable for most families.”

E. Neonatal Leave Needs

“My baby was in hospital for weeks, and I had to use up my maternity leave just sitting by her side.”

“Neonatal leave should be separate—it’s not the same as regular maternity leave.”

F. Adoption Leave Experiences

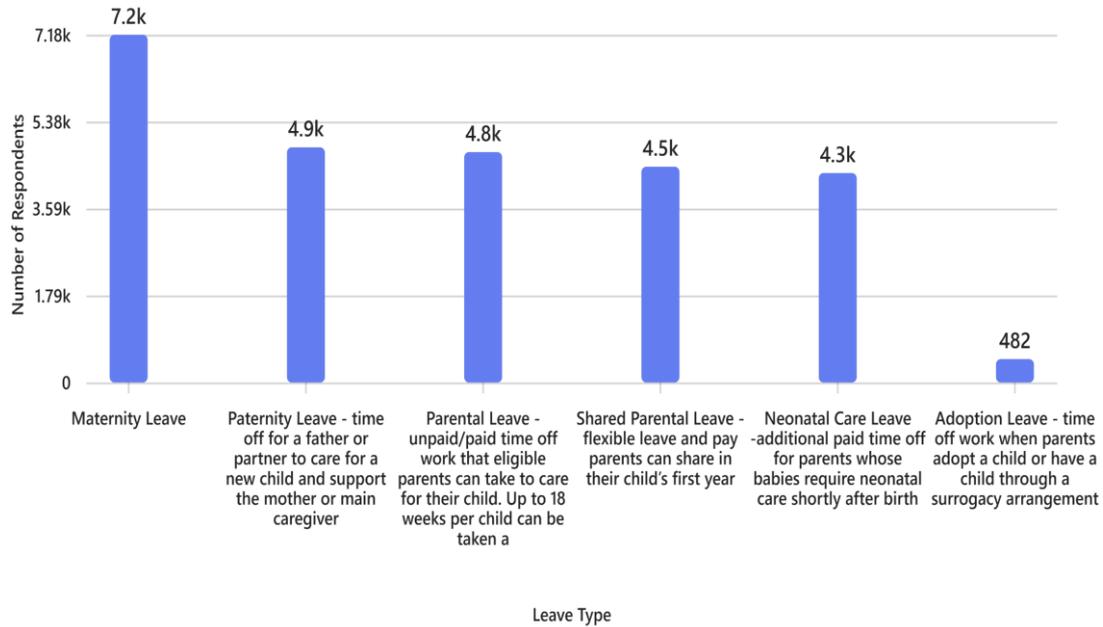
“Adoption leave was confusing. HR didn’t know what I was entitled to, and I had to fight for basic support.”

“I felt like adoption leave was treated as less important than maternity leave.”

8. Survey result

A. Distribution of leave types taken

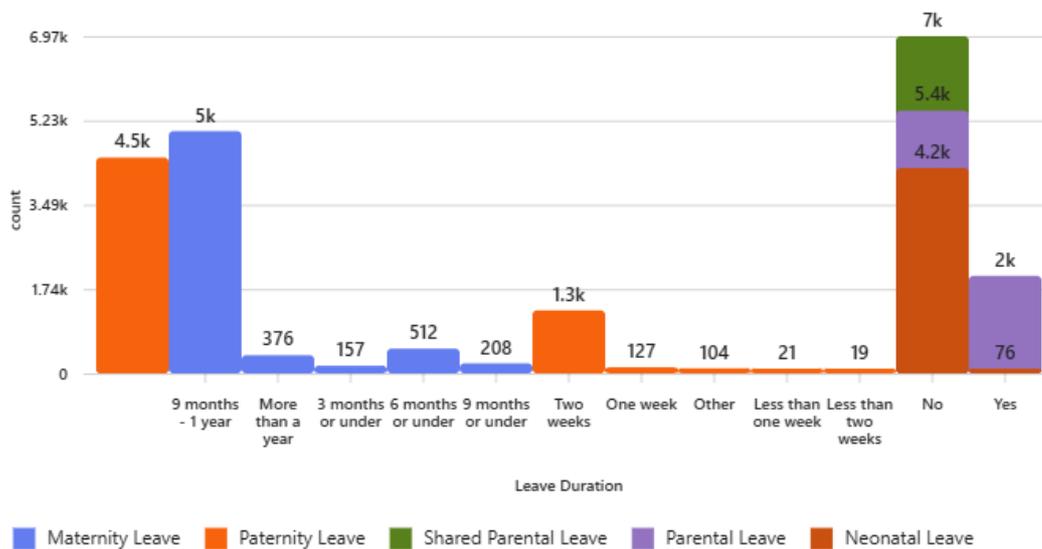
This chart shows how many respondents took each type of leave:



- Maternity leave was the most commonly taken.
- Paternity leave followed, but with significantly fewer responses.
- Shared parental, parental, and adoption leave were less frequently used.

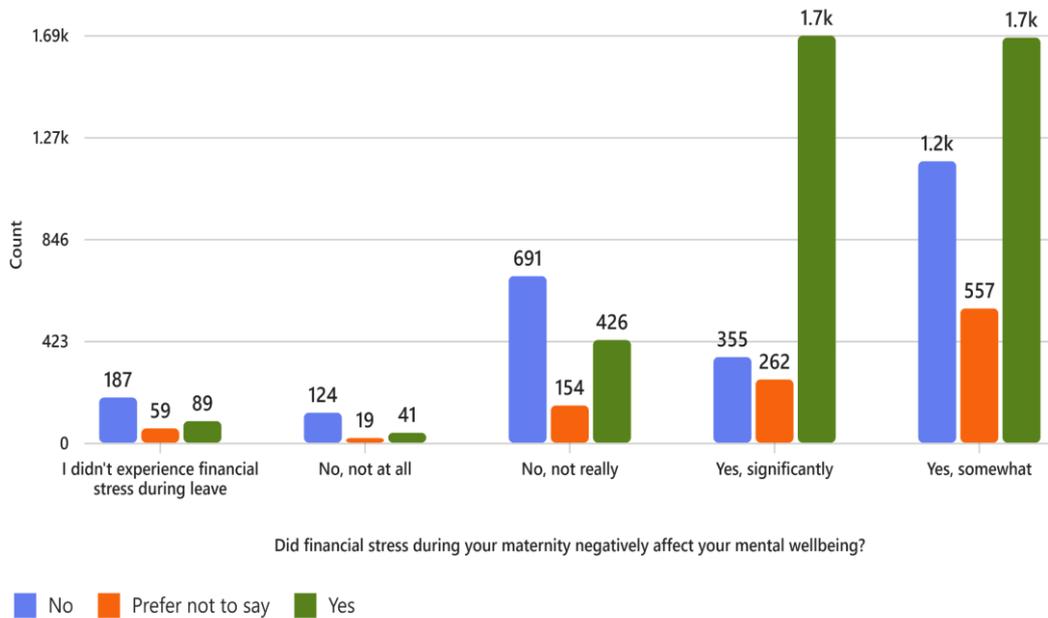
B. Duration of leave by type

This histogram illustrates how long respondents took leave, segmented by type:



- Maternity/Adoption leave durations clustered around 9–12 months.
- Paternity leave was mostly 1–2 weeks, highlighting a major disparity.
- Other leave types like shared parental and adoption leave show varied but generally shorter durations.

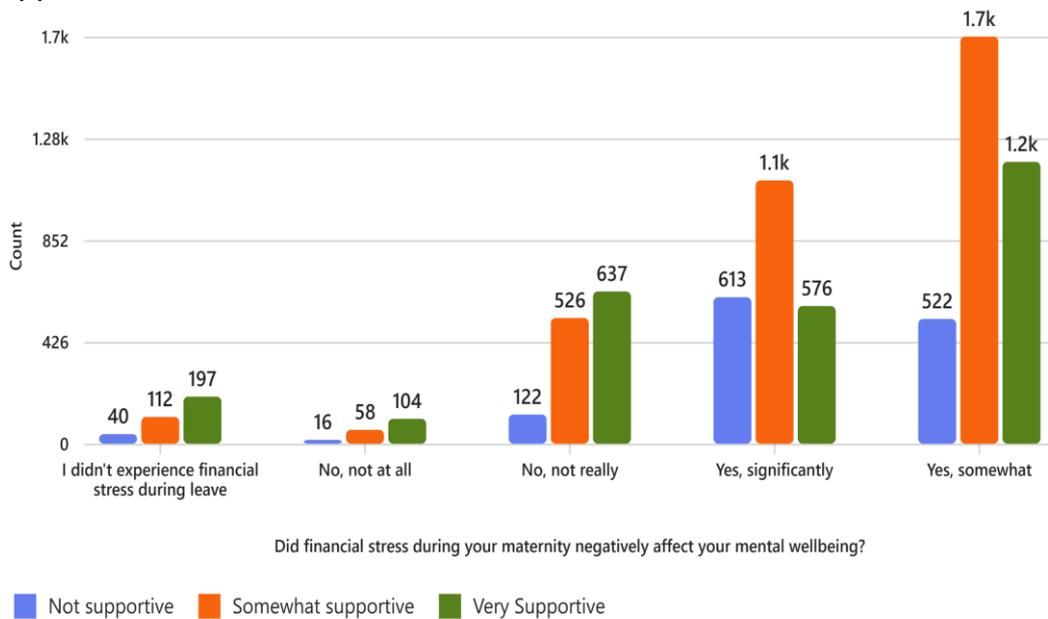
C. Impact of financial stress on mental wellbeing



- Respondents who experienced financial stress were more likely to report mental health challenges during or after their leave.

F. Correlation Between Financial Stress and Employer Support

This chart shows how financial stress intersects with perceived employer support:



- Those who felt unsupported by their employer were more likely to report financial stress.

G. Top Themes Suggested by Respondents

1. Longer Paid Leave – 4017 mentions

- Many respondents advocated for extending maternity and paternity leave durations.
- Suggestions included up to 12 months of paid leave, or 2 years with partial pay.

2. Support for Fathers – 2971 mentions

- Strong demand for longer paternity leave, often suggesting 4 - 6 weeks minimum.
- Emphasis on fathers being more involved in early childcare and recovery support.

3. Full Pay During Leave – 1664 mentions

- Calls for statutory maternity pay (SMP) to be increased to match minimum wage or full salary.
- Many noted financial strain due to inadequate pay, especially in the final months.

4. Mental Health Support – 1094 mentions

- Requests for better access to mental health services during and after leave.
- Highlighted the impact of postnatal depression, anxiety, and stress.

5. Flexible Return to Work – 538 mentions

- Desire for part-time, remote, or phased return options.
- Some reported being denied flexible arrangements despite requesting them.

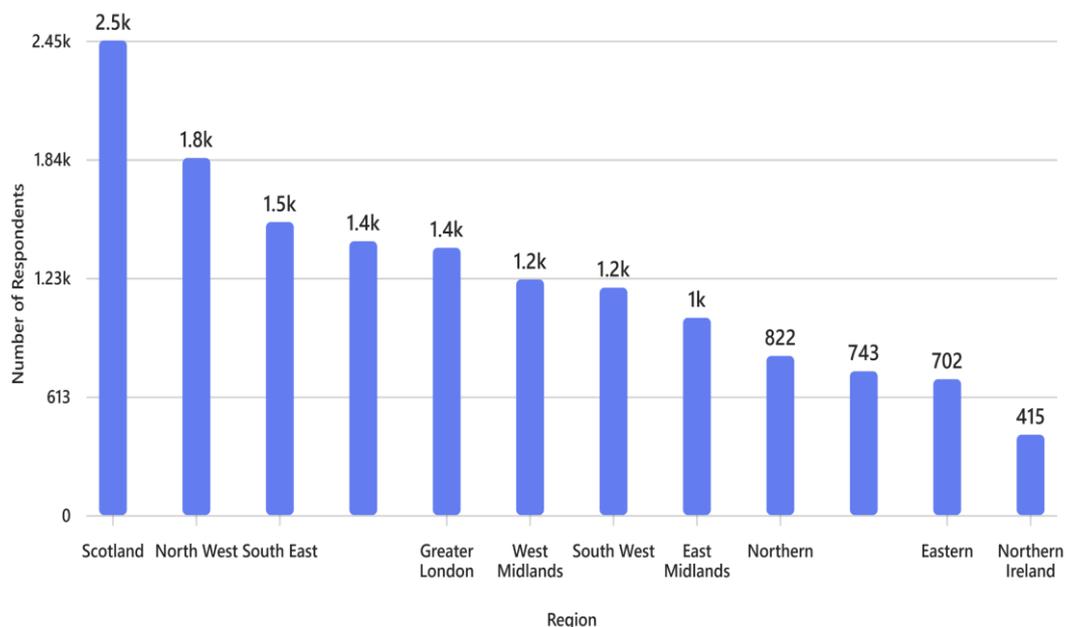
6. Clear Communication of Entitlements – 104 mentions

- Need for better guidance on leave options, pay breakdowns, and shared parental leave.
- Some felt uninformed or misled about their rights.

H. Regional and sectoral patterns

By Region:

Highest responses were received from North West, Scotland, and South East.



By Sector:

Most responses came from Health, Education, and Local Government.

