

UNISON response to the government's call for evidence on parental leave

Introduction

UNISON is the UK's largest public service trade union with 1.3 million members, 1 million of them women. Our members are people working in the public services and private contractors providing public services, including essential utilities. They include frontline staff and managers working full or part time in local authorities, the NHS, the police service, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas and water industries, transport and the voluntary sector. Many of them are part time and low paid, working in traditionally low paid sectors like care, catering, security and cleaning.

UNISON is committed to achieving equality in workplaces, in the union, and across society. Equality is a high priority for UNISON in our negotiating and campaigning work.

We welcome this government's commitment to equality as set out in its Make Work Pay plan, the Employment Rights Bill and the forthcoming Race and Disability (equalities) Bill. We are pleased to respond to the call for evidence on parental leave.

Questions

Question 5a: Do you think that the current parental leave and pay entitlements supports the objectives below (Yes or No):

- ***Providing sufficient time off work with adequate pay to support maternal health*** No
- ***Supporting economic growth through labour market participation by enabling more parents to stay in work and advance in their careers, including reducing the gender pay gap*** No
- ***Ensuring adequate resources and leave for parents to facilitate the best start in life by supporting the healthy development of young children*** No
- ***Providing parents the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting*** No

Improvement is required and is long overdue in relation to all these objectives.

Question 5b: For each objective, briefly explain the reasons for your selection above. Please provide any evidence (including links) to support your view.

Because most of UNISON's 1.3 million members are women and are low-paid, we are particularly interested in the impact of being pregnant on low-paid workers.

UNISON research highlights both physical and mental health issues for pregnant workers and new parents, challenges for economic participation, problems providing the best start in life and lack of flexibility regarding childcare.

UNISON worked with Maternity Action in 2020 to produce a report, *Insecure Labour: the realities of insecure work for pregnant women and new mothers*¹.

Our report explored the impact of insecure work on the rights of pregnant women and new mothers at work. Based on interviews with ten women in precarious work, it examined the lived experience of pregnant women seeking to negotiate a safe working environment, a secure income and fair treatment. It also shone a light on how the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and made life significantly more difficult for pregnant women in insecure work.

UNISON has continued to work with Maternity Action in tracking the impact of the post-pandemic cost of living crisis on pregnant women and new mothers. The work has revealed that for this group the cost of living is still a reality and a contributor to pregnancy poverty. The third annual survey conducted in 2024² found that the proportion of women who said that they worried a lot about money while they were pregnant or on maternity leave had risen considerably from 64% in the 2022 survey to 71% in 2023 and 73% in 2024.

Other key findings from the 2024 survey were that:

- Over two-thirds (69%) were forced to reduce the number of hours they had their heating switched on, 63% had turned down their thermostat and 52% had turned the heating off in some rooms.
- Women also told us about the steps they had taken to cut food costs with half buying less healthy food and a quarter going without food themselves to prioritise feeding their children. Nearly two in five (38%) mothers were having smaller meals or skipping meals altogether.
- The percentage of women relying on their credit card or having to borrow money had also risen from 51% in 2022 to 60% in 2023 and 62% in 2024. The percentage telling us this was more than £4,000 had risen from 17% in 2023 to 23% in 2024.
- We asked about the cost of formula food for the first time. This is clearly a problem with 13% of women saying they struggled to afford to buy formula feed and 27% that they had cut down on buying food for themselves or their family because of the cost of formula.

¹ [Insecure Labour: the realities of insecure work for pregnant women and new mothers - Maternity Action](#)

² [Cost-of-Living-on-Maternity-Leave-Survey-2024-report-FINAL.pdf](#)

- The percentage of women who said that money worries had affected their health or wellbeing while pregnant or on maternity leave also continues to increase from 56% in 2022 to 57% in 2023 and 65% in 2024.
- The financial situation negatively impacts the amount of parental leave that can be taken by the father/co-parent. Twenty-eight per cent said the amount to be taken had to be reduced (up from 27% in 2023) and 20% that they could not afford to take any parental leave (up from 17% in 2023). This is particularly a problem for women who struggle to cope physically on their own especially if they have other young children.
- The number having to return to work earlier than they wanted to because of money worries increased again from 42% in 2022 to 58% in 2023 and 59% in 2024.

In February 2025 the organisation Pregnant then Screwed published new research³ which found that up to 74,000 women lose their job every year for getting pregnant or taking maternity leave. The figure has increased from 54,000 a decade ago.

The survey of 35,800 parents found that 12% of women are sacked, constructively dismissed or made redundant whilst pregnant, on maternity leave or within a year of returning from maternity leave. The report estimated that this could mean as many as 74,000 women are forced to leave their job every year.

Half of pregnant women, those on maternity leave, and those returning from maternity leave said they had a negative experience at work, leading one in five to quit their job, according to the research.

A third of women said they were side-lined or demoted whilst pregnant, on maternity leave, or when they return from maternity leave, but only 2% of women who experience discrimination took a claim to a tribunal, said the report.

In July 2025, UNISON carried out a survey asking our members about their experience of parental leave and pay to inform our response to this consultation. The survey received 7,796 responses from UNISON members of childbearing age across various sectors and regions who have taken maternity, paternity, adoption, parental, shared parental or neonatal leave between January 2020 and now.

The full survey report is attached as appendix A.

Responses to the survey indicate that time off work is insufficient to support maternal health, and that pay is inadequate.

³ [74,000 women a year lose their jobs for getting pregnant or for taking maternity leave - Pregnant Then Screwed](#)

- The duration and level of pay during leave are inadequate for many mothers to fully recover physically and emotionally after childbirth. 55.1% of the 86.3% who took maternity leave, and 24.5% of the 31.8% who took paternity leave reported that the duration and level of pay were inadequate. This gap undermines the intended purpose of parental leave as a health-supportive measure.
- Mental health challenges and financial stress were commonly reported, with 52% of respondents experiencing anxiety, depression, and 45% experiencing economic hardship during their leave. These factors directly impact maternal wellbeing and can have long-term consequences for both parent and child.

To better support maternal health, UNISON considers that the following should be considered:

- Extending the duration of paid family leave to reflect medical and psychological recovery timelines.
- Improving the rate of pay to reduce financial stress and allow parents to focus on recovery and bonding.
- Integrating mental health support into parental leave frameworks, ensuring access to services during and after leave.

Investing in more robust paid parental leave policies for both parents is not only a matter of health equity, but it also contributes to better long-term outcomes in public health, workforce retention, and child development. It also enables both parents to maintain strong links with the labour market and therefore contributes to the fundamental labour government principle of growing the economy.

The survey results also suggest that the current parental leave and pay entitlements fall short of effectively supporting economic growth through sustained labour market participation and career progression, particularly for women.

Evidence from our survey highlights two key concerns:

1. Pressure to return early due to financial constraints: 50% of parents reported feeling compelled to return to work sooner than desired, primarily due to inadequate financial support. This undermines the purpose of parental leave and can lead to burnout, reduced productivity, and long-term disengagement from the workforce.
2. Barriers to career progression and gender pay equity: 34% of respondents indicated that current policies hinder long-term career advancement. The lack of adequate leave and pay contributes to interrupted career paths, disproportionately affecting women and widening the gender pay gap.

These findings suggest that:

- Improving parental leave pay and duration can help retain skilled workers, reduce turnover, and support parents in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities.
- More equitable and flexible leave policies, including well paid shared parental leave and support for fathers, can help redistribute caregiving responsibilities and reduce gender disparities in career progression.
- Addressing financial barriers to taking leave is essential for enabling all parents - not just those with higher incomes - to benefit from time off without sacrificing long-term economic security.

Investing in more inclusive and supportive parental leave policies is not only a matter of fairness but would also be a strategic move strengthening workforce participation, it would close the gender pay gap and help drive sustainable economic growth.

The current parental leave and pay entitlements do not sufficiently support the best start in life for children.

Evidence from respondents to our survey indicates:

- While 57% of parents felt they were able to bond with their child, a substantial number (86%) reported that longer or better-paid leave would have significantly improved their ability to care for their child during the critical early months.
- Financial pressures and limited leave entitlements often forced parents to return to work earlier than desired, potentially disrupting the continuity of care and emotional stability that young children need. 93% of respondents said they would have taken additional leave if it had been either more readily available or better paid.

This has important implications:

- Early childhood development is profoundly influenced by the quality and consistency of parental care. Inadequate leave and financial support can compromise this, particularly for families with lower incomes.
- Bonding and caregiving in the first year of life are essential for emotional regulation, cognitive development, and secure attachment. Policies that fall short in supporting this period risk undermining long-term outcomes for children.
- Equity concerns arise when only higher-income families can afford to take extended leave, exacerbating disparities in child development and wellbeing.

Our research suggests that to support the best start in life for children, the government should:

1. Extend the duration of paid parental leave to reflect the developmental needs of infants and the recovery needs of parents.

2. Increase the rate of pay during leave to reduce financial stress and enable all parents to take full advantage of their entitlements.
3. Ensure inclusive access to leave policies for each individual parent across all employment types, including part-time and self-employed workers.
4. Integrate early years support into parental leave frameworks, including mental health services, and parenting resources.

Strengthening parental leave and pay entitlements is a strategic investment in child development, public health, and long-term social and economic outcomes.

Responses to the survey also suggest that current parental leave and pay entitlements do not adequately support balanced childcare choices or enable effective co-parenting.

Evidence from respondents to the UNISON survey indicates:

- 76% of partners took minimal or no paternity leave, often due to low pay rates. This limits their ability to participate meaningfully in early caregiving and reinforces traditional gender roles.
- 91% of parents believed that more generous and accessible paternity leave would have significantly improved their experience, allowing for a more equitable division of care and stronger family bonds.

Policy Implications for this includes the following:

- Co-parenting and shared caregiving are essential for gender equality, child development, and parental wellbeing. When leave entitlements are financially impractical for one parent - typically fathers or non-birthing partners - it undermines these goals.
- Low uptake of paternity leave contributes to the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, which in turn affects women's participation in the labour market and thereby increasing the gender pay gap.
- Cultural and structural barriers which includes low statutory pay and lack of encouragement from employers must be addressed to normalise and support shared parenting.

These points can be illustrated by the extremely low take up rates of the shared parental leave scheme that was introduced in 2015. Maternity Action in their first 2023 report⁴ set out that that of approximately 400,000 new mothers who started statutory

⁴ Towards a new system of statutory maternity, paternity and parenting leave (Part 1) March 2021 by Lida Roscoe

maternity leave each year, only 2% use the scheme to transfer some of that paid leave to the child's father. In their second report⁵, Maternity Action go on to state that "a system that relies on mothers who are recovering from pregnancy and childbirth transferring their 'unwanted' paid leave to the father cannot deliver the goal of more equal parenting".

To encourage co-parenting and shared caregiving, UNISON believes it is necessary to:

1. Increase statutory paternity leave pay to a level that makes it financially viable for more families.
2. Extend the duration of paternity leave to encourage uptake.
3. Ensure flexibility in how leave is taken, allowing parents to share caregiving responsibilities in a way that suits their family's needs.

To enable truly balanced childcare choices and support co-parenting, parental leave policies must be designed with equity, flexibility, and financial sustainability in mind. Reforming paternity leave is a critical step toward achieving these outcomes.

Question 6: Are there further or other objectives that you would like to see included as part of the parental leave and pay review? (Yes or No)

Yes

Question 6b: Please list and briefly explain each one, including providing links to any relevant evidence.

See UNISON's research evidence in 5b above.

1. **Promote gender equality in caregiving**
This will ensure both parents have equitable access to paid leave. It will also encourage shared parenting and reduce the gender pay gap.
2. **Enhance support for fathers**
Some of the findings from the UNISON survey suggests a strong demand for longer paternity leave, often suggesting at least 4 weeks. 91% of respondents said that more generous paternity leave would have positively impacted their experience. Also, the recognition of the need for co-parenting time, especially in cases of multiple births or complicated recoveries.

One respondent to the UNISON survey remarked, "Fairer leave for fathers. You should have longer to support the baby and mother." Another respondent said

⁵ Maternity Action – Towards a new system of statutory maternity, paternity and parenting leave (Part 2) 28 March 2023 by Lisa Roscoe

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

3. Improve statutory pay so taking parental leave is financially viable

- Review statutory pay levels to ensure they reflect the cost of living and do not force early return to work. 55.1% of respondents who took the UNISON survey said that the pay they received during maternity leave was inadequate to meet their financial needs.
- Consider income-based scaling or minimum thresholds to support low-income families.
- Review Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) to reflect minimum wage levels.
- Requests for full pay during leave, especially for those without partner income.

One person who took part in the UNISON survey said “SMP should be at least enough to cover basic bills. If I didn’t have my partner’s wage, I’d be homeless.” Another respondent said “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. 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.”

4. Provide better communication and transparency, clarity and simplicity

There is need for clearer guidance on entitlements and shared parental leave. One of the respondents to the UNISON survey commented that “My work didn’t sit me down and go through all my options or how much I would get each month.”

5. Recognise Childcare Costs

There is concern over rising childcare expenses forcing early return to work. Suggestions for childcare subsidies or extended paid leave to delay nursery start.

One of the respondents to the UNISON survey commented that “The cost of childcare is crazy. My husband took 2 weeks... would have loved to have him at home longer but we couldn’t afford it.” Another respondent said “I had to reduce my hours to return to work as I couldn’t afford to put my little (one) into a nursery. I am a PSA and I get £989 a month and pay out £760 for childcare 4 days a week.”

6. Consider strengthening support for single parents and diverse families

- Ensure policies are inclusive of single parents, LGBT+ families, and adoptive parents.
- Provide tailored support where caregiving responsibilities fall disproportionately on one parent.

One respondent to the UNISON survey said, “As a single mum, I couldn’t afford to keep on maternity leave, I had to go back to work after 8 weeks.”

7. Enhance Employer Engagement and Compliance

- Encourage employers to go beyond statutory minimums through incentives or recognition schemes.
- Improve enforcement and awareness of parental leave rights in the workplace.

Question 7: Please prioritise the objectives, including any additional objectives, in order of importance (for example with 1 being most important).

The objectives, including the additional ones set out in 6b attached are interlinked and need to be viewed as a package.

UNISON recognises that this means that reforming the parental leave system will require an incremental, long-term approach. However, the new system must be simple to understand and as flexible as possible, providing each parent with their own freestanding rights to family leave and no sharing or transferring of entitlements.

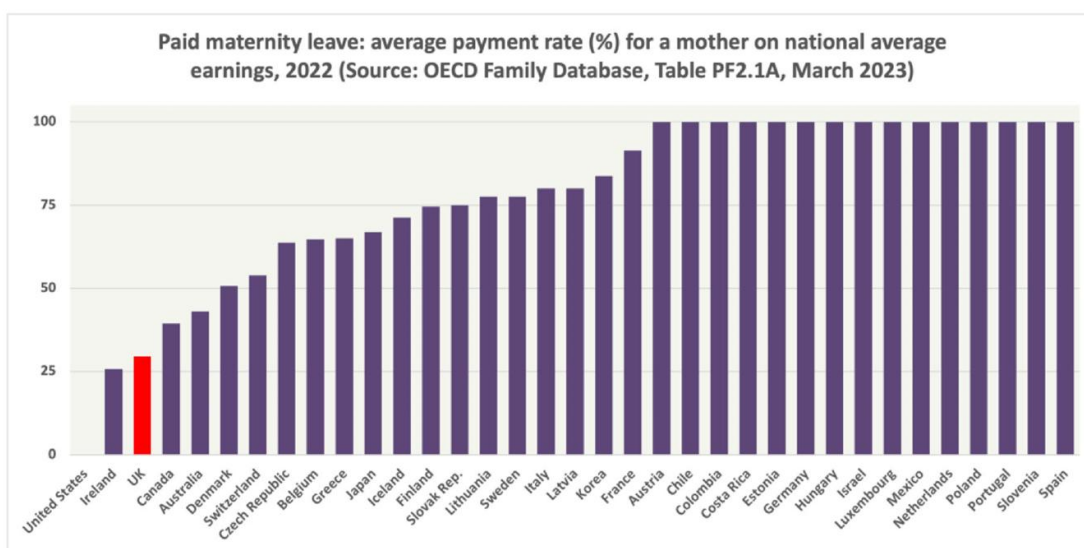
Question 8: If you have any additional comments, evidence or suggestions that you have not had the opportunity to provide elsewhere, please do so here.

The most successful approaches to parental leave, such as those in Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Finland – are based on individual, *non-transferable* rights to leave for each parent, and on that leave being moderately well paid.

For example, the parental leave policy in Sweden entitles parents to 480 days of paid parental leave with an additional 180 days if there are multiple births, 90 days are exclusively for each parent and then the 300 days can be split between them in whichever proportion they choose. It can be taken as a continuous period or split into parts until the child turns 12. Parents also have the option to reduce their working hours instead, taking partial leave. Parents can take 60 days simultaneously and pay is 80% of the parents' salary up to a certain threshold. At least two months of notice is required before leave.

By contrast in the UK, mothers are required to sacrifice maternity leave to obtain shared parental leave. They must give at least 8 weeks' notice, and the mother cannot return until 2 weeks after birth, 4 weeks if they work in a factory. The mother must also not take more than the 39 weeks on maternity pay to get statutory parental leave pay. Uptake is unsurprisingly low.

In their report, "In Time of Need", the Fabian Society has highlighted how the UK's average income replacement rate for maternity leave is the third lowest in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). This is illustrated in the graph below and shows that "Almost every other European country pays an earnings-related maternity (or parental) payment for most or all of the duration of statutory leave [and] replacement rates are high, almost always falling between 75% and 100% of earnings." Regrettably, the UK's earnings replacement is just 29.5%.



UNISON believes that any new system of parental leave should be simpler and fairer. The guiding principles set out by Maternity Action⁶ (2022) proposed the following:

- The new system must consist of individual and *non-transferable* – that is, ‘use it or lose it’ – rights to leave *for each parent*. There should be no *sharing* or transferring of leave, which we know does not work well in the UK.
- The system must *significantly* enhance the paid leave entitlement of fathers (and other second parents) while protecting the *existing* statutory rights of mothers to 52 weeks of leave, including 39 weeks of *paid* leave, and the associated legal protections.
- It must reflect the very different purposes of maternity, paternity and parental leave. Mothers’ and fathers’/partners’ experience of childbirth are not the same. Mothers need a period of paid *maternity* leave to recover from the often severe physical and mental impacts of pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. It is a health and safety measure that is not needed by fathers and other second parents.
- *Parental* leave, however, is about *parenting*. And both the research evidence and the experience of other countries indicate that providing lengthy periods of paid *parental* leave for fathers – as opposed to more *paternity* leave tied to the period immediately after the child’s birth, when of course the birth mother is also off work – is more likely to incentivise men to take periods of solo leave for *childcare* reasons, and then to take a more equal part in parenting over the lifetime of the child. Furthermore, sharing the care of the child in the first 12 or 18 months enables *both* parents to retain a strong link with the labour market.
- All maternity, paternity and parental leave needs to be better paid than it is now. The current flat rate of just £187.18 per week per is less than half the

⁶ [Reform Shared Parental Leave - Maternity Action](#)

legal national living wage (calculated on a standard 35 hours week). This is unquestionably a key factor in the low rate of take-up of Shared Parental Leave

- Everyone should be able to access parental rights regardless of employment status.
- There is parity between families using maternity and parental leave and families using adoption and parental leave.

UNISON's recommendations that parental leave should:

- promote gender equality in caregiving
- enhance support for fathers
- improve statutory pay so taking parental leave is financially viable
- provide better communication and transparency, clarity and simplicity
- recognise childcare costs
- consider strengthening support for single parents and diverse families
- enhance employer engagement and compliance

build on Maternity Action's proposals and are underpinned by our research survey evidence.

UNISON strongly supports the key policy ambitions set out by the TUC as follows:

- Maternity and adoption pay should be increased to 90% of salary for 14 weeks
- New standalone, individual entitlement to parental leave should be paid at 90% of salary for a fixed period.
- Following this statutory pay should be raised to at least the level of the real living wage.

UNISON also believes that parental leave reform must be part of a package of wider reforms including:

- Subsidised, affordable childcare from as soon as maternity and paternity paid leave finishes
- Strengthening flexible working rights.
- Meaningful steps to promote equal pay and narrow the gender pay gap.

And that we also need:

- Rapid implementation of new statutory rights for equality reps.
- Amendments to relevant legislation to mirror the facility time provisions in Section 4 of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 for equality reps. Health and safety reps are entitled to paid time off "as shall be necessary" to discharge their functions and other reps, including equality reps, should be entitled to equivalent provision of paid facility time.

UNISON is also concerned that new mothers are denied basic employment rights because of taking maternity leave. UNISON has identified a series of cases where term time only mothers are denied paid holiday leave that accumulates during their maternity leave period. Employers (including large public sector organisations) insist that paid annual leave is taken during maternity leave. This is simply not possible and

has resulted in cases being brought on behalf of members that have resulted in successful outcomes. UNISON believes this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to maternity related discrimination cases.

Finally, UNISON would like to highlight an increasing number of cases where employers seem to be using the UK's visa sponsorship system to sack pregnant women and/or new mothers. UNISON is seeing more cases of pregnant women whose employers are not renewing visas leading to women having to start looking for a new job when they are 8/9 months pregnant or when they have just had a baby. The need to find a new employer when a woman might be having complications or visibly pregnant is a real challenge for the members who contact us when they find themselves in this situation.

The Home Office have advised that in these circumstances a further leave to remain application is submitted on compassionate/humanitarian grounds – this safeguards the visa status of UNISON's member and enables them to access a degree of protection while on maternity leave or in the period when they are about to give birth. However, the new rule changes to the visa system mean that these workers will then be disadvantaged in the future. When their maternity leave is over and they look for a new employer in the social care sector, they will be treated as a new applicant/entrant. They will have lost the right they once had to have dependants on their visa. Their family and the new child will be immediately impacted by the new rule changes which occurred after they were granted Final Leave to Remain (FLR).

In conclusion, tackling the problems with parental leave on a piecemeal basis won't work and is likely to make them worse. UNISON recognises that this means that reforming the parental leave system will require an incremental, long-term approach.