

Women and Equalities Committee

Equality at work: Paternity and shared parental leave

Sixth Report of Session 2024–25

HC 502

Women and Equalities Committee

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Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 4452; the Committee's email address is womeqcom@parliament.uk. You can follow the Committee on X (formerly Twitter) using [@CommonsWEC](https://twitter.com/CommonsWEC), and on Bluesky using [@commonsWEC.parliament.uk](https://bsky.app/profile/commonsWEC.parliament.uk).

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Summary

We agree with the Government that the statutory parental leave system does not support working families effectively. It is right to conduct a full review. The review should fully grasp the scale of the task and address fundamental flaws in the system. It must address priority areas during this Parliament and be the foundation for longer-term reform. Tinkering around the edges of a broken system will let down working parents. The direct fiscal costs of necessary reforms will be substantial but far outweighed by the wider societal and economic benefits.

Low rates of statutory pay are perhaps the most damaging problem across the board. At considerably less than half of the National Living Wage, rates are completely out of kilter with the cost of living, causing financial hardship in many households. Low pay particularly inhibits take up of the very limited amount of statutory leave available to fathers and other parents, many of whom are entirely reliant on the statutory minimum. Increasing statutory paternity pay must therefore be a priority. The Government must consider raising the rate to the same level as maternity pay in the first six weeks, i.e. 90% of average earnings, during this Parliament. Its review must also consider a feasible approach to phased introduction of increases to statutory pay across the system in the longer term.

The Government's review must have gender equality at its heart. Fathers and other parents are particularly poorly served by the system. This harms not only parents but also children and family life. It entrenches outdated gender stereotypes about caring and wider sharing of parental and domestic responsibilities. It contributes to the motherhood penalty in the labour market and our comparatively large gender pay gap.

The UK's parental leave system has fallen far behind most comparable countries, and we now have one of the worst statutory leave offers for fathers and other parents in the developed world. Two weeks of paternity leave is out of step with how most couples want to share their responsibilities and balance them with working life. Addressing the stark gendered disparity in our statutory leave periods should be considered fundamental to fixing a broken system and a key priority for the review. It must consider an incremental approach to extending the period of statutory paternity leave to six weeks over the course of this Parliament.

Lack of provision for self-employed fathers and other parents is a key flaw in the system. Their exclusion from the system is deeply unfair. It causes financial hardship and associated family problems. This must be addressed in the review. The Government's aim should be to include all self-employed and non-employee parents in the system. It should consider implementing a Paternity Allowance equivalent of Maternity Allowance. The needs of other excluded and poorly served groups must also be considered, including kinship carers, single parents and parents of multiple births.

While shared parental leave (SPL) has substantial benefits for those parents who can access it, it is a financial non-starter for most. The eligibility criteria exclude a wide range of working parents, including the self-employed and other non-employee workers, and those on low pay. The criteria are far too complicated for the average parent and employer to understand. The review's objective for reforms of SPL must be to widen access to as broad a range of working parents as possible, including the self-employed and those on lower incomes. It should consider financial incentives to promote take up, drawing on the experiences of systems in other countries.

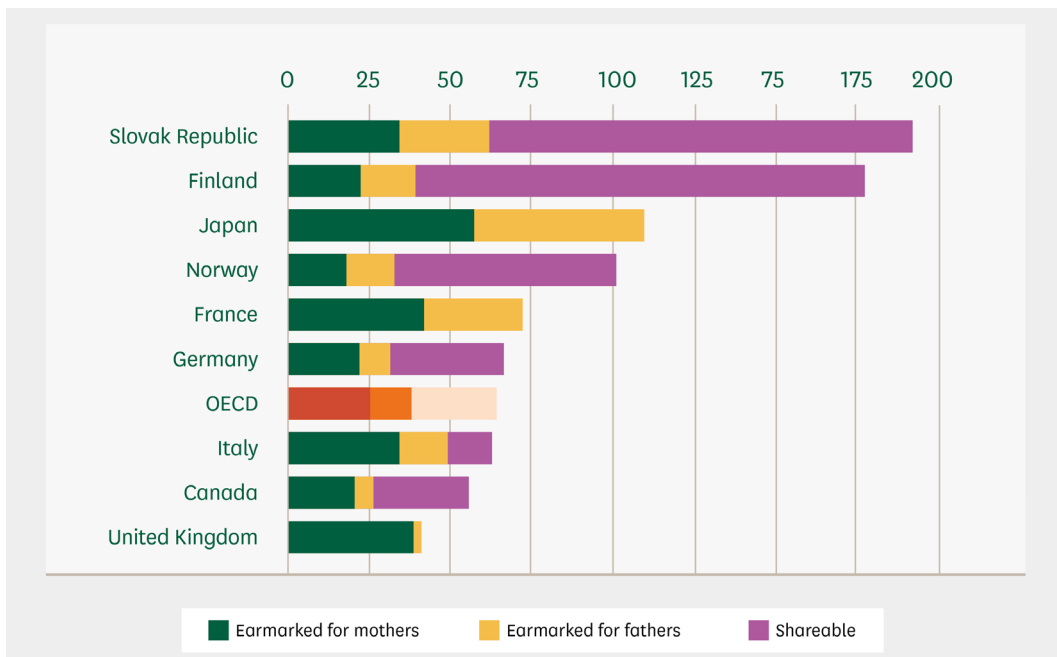
Alongside reform of statutory leave and pay entitlements, the review should consider steps to address wider cultural and societal barriers to fathers and other parents taking more leave, particularly in working class households and workplaces. It should also consider the evidence on tackling the marginalisation of fathers in often highly gendered local authority, third sector and NHS services for new parents.

1 Introduction

The UK's gender unequal leave system

1. The UK has one of the most gender unequal statutory parental leave systems in the developed world.¹ While statutory maternity leave is up to 52 weeks, statutory paternity leave is a maximum of two.² This is equal to the least generous paternity leave periods in European Union countries (where two weeks' paternity leave is the legal minimum and several member states have much more generous paternity entitlements) and among the lowest across the 38 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.³

Figure 1: Family leave entitlements: duration of earmarked leave and shareable leave entitlements in weeks, 2024



Source: OECD Family Database, indicator PF2.1

1 See, for example, OECD, [‘Paid parental leave: Big differences for mothers and fathers’](#) (January 2023), accessed 4 April 2025

2 GOV.UK, [‘Maternity pay and leave’](#); GOV.UK, [‘Paternity pay and leave’](#), accessed 11 April 2025

3 See, for example, European Parliament, [‘Maternity and paternity leave in the EU’](#), March 2023; [‘How paternity leave in the UK compares to other countries’](#), Sky News, 30 January 2025

2. In the UK, subject to employment status, time in service, and earnings requirements, mothers may receive six weeks of statutory maternity pay at 90% of their average earnings with no cap, followed by 33 weeks paid at whichever is lower of the statutory rate (£187.18 per week) or 90% of their average earnings before taking leave.⁴ A maximum of two weeks' statutory paternity pay is available only at the same statutory rate or 90% of average earnings, whichever is lower.⁵
3. It is widely recognised that this deeply gender unequal system reflects increasingly outdated gender norms around caring for babies and young children within two-parent families. The design of the system reflects and entrenches the norm that mothers overwhelmingly bear these responsibilities.⁶ This is a key factor in widespread pregnancy and maternity discrimination by employers and a key driver of the “motherhood penalty” for women in employment and the labour market.⁷ This in turn drives the UK's persistent and relatively large gender pay gap, which last year, by at least one measure, showed signs of increasing for the first time in a decade.⁸

A maternal transfer shared parental leave scheme

4. In 2015, the Government introduced a statutory shared parental leave (SPL) scheme. SPL allows parents to “share” up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay within the first year of their child's birth or placement with the family in the case of adoption and surrogacy. Given the huge disparity in leave entitlements between mothers and their partners, the scheme requires mothers to give up a portion of their maternity entitlement to “share” the remainder with her partner. This is known as a “maternal transfer model” of shared leave.⁹

4 GOV.UK, '[Maternity leave and pay](#)', accessed 4 April 2025

5 GOV.UK, '[Paternity pay and leave](#)', accessed 4 April 2025

6 See, for example, The Scottish Women's Convention ([SPL0004](#)); Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#)); NHS Employers ([SPL0014](#)); The National Children's Bureau – A Better Start ([SPL0016](#)); Dr Manisha Mathews, Birmingham Law School ([SPL0034](#)); Prospect ([SPL0040](#)); Drs Sara De Benedictis (Brunel University London), Tamsyn Dent (King's College London) and Natalie Wreyford (King's College London) ([SPL0042](#))

UK Music and Parents and Carers in Performing Arts ([SPL0047](#)); Dr Michelle Weldon-Johns, Abertay University ([SPL0048](#))

7 See, for example, The Fatherhood Institute, '[The motherhood penalty is holding the UK back - it's time to invest in dads](#)' (8 March 2025), accessed 22 April 2025

8 See, for example, Labour Research Department, '[Gender pay gap widens for first time in 12 years](#)' (29 November 2024), accessed 22 April 2025

9 See, Women and Equalities Committee, First Report of Session 2017–19, [Fathers and the workplace](#), HC 358, chapter 4

5. The policy was intended to allow couples more flexibility in how they share caring responsibilities in their child’s first year; encourage fathers to play a greater role; and “increase flexibility for employers and employees to reach agreement on how best to balance work and domestic needs without state interference.”¹⁰ The scheme has faced widespread criticism for its maternal transfer design, which numerous studies have shown can deter both mothers and their partners from using the scheme; the complexity of its eligibility criteria, which exclude many parents and are difficult to understand; burdensome administrative processes; and, ultimately, persistently low levels of take up, which to date have been insufficient to drive substantial change in the take up of leave by fathers.¹¹ The Government’s evaluation of SPL, published in 2023, found that take up was only 5% among eligible fathers.¹²

A low rate of statutory pay

6. The UK’s statutory rate of pay across maternity, adoption and surrogacy, paternity, and SPL is comparatively very low at £187.18 per week. Most European countries’ rates are set at more than 50% of the parents’ average earnings before taking leave, with many offering more generous rates of 80%, 90% and, in some countries, 100% of earnings for at least a portion of leave entitlement.¹³ The UK’s rate is set at less than half of the National Living Wage for workers over the age of 21 years.¹⁴ While many employers, particularly larger private and public sector organisations, pay their employees more than the statutory minimum while on leave, many working parents, particularly fathers and other partners, are entirely reliant on the statutory rate.¹⁵ There is clear evidence that this low rate of pay deters fathers and other partners from taking the limited amount of paternity and

10 Department for Business and Trade, [Shared Parental Leave Evaluation report](#), Research Paper Series Number 2023/010, June 2023, para 1.21

11 See, for example, Women and Equalities Committee, First Report of Session 2017–19, [Fathers and the workplace](#), HC 358, chapter 4; “[Shared Parental Leave fails to deliver for dads](#)”, University of Bath press release, 5 September 2024

12 Department for Business and Trade, [Shared Parental Leave: Evaluation report](#), June 2023

13 Euro Dev, ‘[Maternity Leave in Europe: Exploring Policies & Benefits by Countries](#)’ (5 June 2024), accessed 14 April 2025

14 GOV.UK, ‘[National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates](#)’, accessed 14 April 2025

15 See, for example, Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, [Employer Focus on Working Parents: Parental leave and pay and childcare policies](#), August 2022

SPL available to them, particularly those in lower income households, who do not have the financial wherewithal to absorb a substantial hit to their income to take a period of leave after the birth of their child.¹⁶

Excluded groups

7. The UK's system's eligibility rules exclude a range of working parents and guardians. Perhaps most notably, paternity leave excludes self-employed fathers and other parents.¹⁷ A complex set of employment status, earnings and time in service eligibility rules excludes many low-paid and part-time workers and others in various forms of more precarious work.¹⁸ While some self-employed mothers, and employed mothers who do not meet the earnings requirements for statutory maternity leave and pay, may qualify for up to 39 weeks of Maternity Allowance at the statutory rate of £187.18 per week, there is no equivalent entitlement for self-employed or lower-paid fathers.¹⁹ Kinship carers, typically extended family members or friends who step in to care for babies and children at times of crisis, including after a child's parents die, provide vital care but have no statutory provision at all.²⁰ Provision for single parents and parents of multiple births is parsimonious by international standards.²¹

The Government's proposed "full review" of parental leave

8. Before last year's general election, the Labour Party's Plan to Make Work Pay was clear that "the current parental leave system does not support working families".²² Its general election manifesto included a commitment to "review the parental leave system, so it best supports working families, within our first year in government."²³ The Government's October 2024 Next

16 See, for example, Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia, and Dr Charlotte Bendall, Birmingham Law School ([SPL0005](#)); The Fawcett Society ([SPL0045](#)); The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#)); see also, "[Shared parental leave skewed against lower earning families, analysis shows](#)", BBC News, 2 December 2024

17 See, for example, The National Children's Bureau – A Better Start ([SPL0016](#)); UK Women's Budget Group ([SPL0024](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

18 See, for example, The National Children's Bureau – A Better Start ([SPL0016](#)); UK Women's Budget Group ([SPL0024](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

19 GOV.UK, '[Maternity Allowance](#)', accessed 23 April 2025

20 See Kinship ([SPL0018](#))

21 Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University ([SPL0038](#))

22 Labour Party, [Labour's Plan to Make Work Pay: Delivering A New Deal for Working People](#), June 2024, p8

23 Labour Party, [Change: Labour Party manifesto 2024](#), June 2024, p81

Steps to Make Work Pay White Paper confirmed its intention to “conduct a full review of the parental leave system” as a first step towards long-term reform.²⁴

Our inquiry and this Report

9. The Government has so far published very little information about the scope and conduct of its proposed review. While the Government has acknowledged that the system “does not work” for working families, it has not yet set out what it sees as the key flaws, the scope of changes it will consider to fix them, or the timescale for necessary reforms. It is expected to launch its review no later than early July this year, to meet its commitment within a year of being elected.
10. Our starting point is that we agree with the Government that the system serves many working parents very poorly. Our predecessors examined SPL in 2018, as part of an inquiry into fathers in the workplace, and recommended the Government consider an alternative policy to substantially increase paid paternity leave to 12 weeks.²⁵ We recognise that reforms such as substantial increases in statutory entitlements for fathers are likely to require bold political decisions and, given that the costs of statutory pay are reimbursed from the Exchequer, very substantial financial investment in a challenging economic climate.²⁶ We want to ensure that the Government’s proposed “full review” genuinely grasps the scale of the task ahead and forms the foundation of a credible and sustainable approach to long-term reform of a policy area that is vital to promoting gender equality.
11. We issued a call for evidence in December 2024 and published 54 written submissions, largely from academics, charities, campaigners and research organisations, and trade unions. We launched a short survey aimed at parents who had used the SPL scheme and those who had considered SPL but had decided not to use it. More than 1,300 people responded to our survey. The results are referenced throughout this Report and included as an annex.
12. We heard oral evidence from campaign organisations The Dad Shift and Pregnant Then Screwed, a director of a National Children’s Bureau “A Better Start” programme in Nottingham and a participating father; academic researcher Dr Sarah Forbes of The Equal Parenting Project, Dr Gemma Mitchell of the University of East Anglia, Principal Policy Adviser Abby

24 UK Government, [Next Steps to Make Work Pay](#), October 2024

25 Women and Equalities Committee, First Report of Session 2017–19, [Fathers and the workplace](#), HC 358, chapter 4

26 See Politics Home, [‘Improving Paternity Leave Provisions ‘Could Boost The Economy By £2.6bn’](#) (29 January 2025), accessed 22 April 2025

Jitendra from the anti-poverty think tank Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Jemima Olchawski, Chief Executive of the women's rights charity The Fawcett Society. We also heard evidence from the multinational insurance company Aviva, which was among the first major UK employers to offer its employees gender equal parental leave and pay, the HR professionals' membership and accreditation organisation the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, and the Trades Union Congress.²⁷ A full list of witnesses is included at the end of this Report. We are grateful to everyone who contributed to our work.

13. Our Report begins by examining the case for substantially increasing the statutory rate of pay for parents, with a particular focus on fathers and other parents. We then consider approaches to extending entitlements to paid statutory paternity leave. In chapter 4, we look at the case for reform of SPL, including simplification, promotion and ways of boosting take up. Chapter 5 considers the needs of key groups currently excluded from the system or poorly catered for: kinship carers, single parents and parents of multiple births. In each of these areas, we consider lessons from the development of more generous, inclusive and effective parental leave systems overseas. An ambitious parental leave reform programme will undoubtedly come with substantial costs; chapter 6 begins by setting out an approach to modelling the likely direct fiscal costs of reform alongside likely wider social and economic benefits, in line with the Government's key growth mission, and concludes with recommendations about the key long-term objectives for reform and metrics by which to measure success through a gender equality lens.

27 See, Women and Equalities Committee, '[Equality at work: paternity and shared parental leave](#)', accessed 22 April 2025

2 Increasing statutory pay

14. All of our expert witnesses emphasised a similar range of key problems with the UK’s parental leave system, including: far too short a period of paid paternity leave; design flaws and unnecessary complexity in the SPL system, inhibiting take up; and inadequate statutory pay across the board, particularly affecting fathers’ and partners’ ability to take leave.²⁸ Several experts argued that, of these problems, low statutory pay was the most damaging and ought to be a top priority for consideration as part of the Government’s proposed review.²⁹

Impacts of low statutory pay

15. The UK’s rate of statutory pay is comparatively very low at £187.18 per week (see international comparisons, below).³⁰ This is less than half (44%) of the National Living Wage (NLW) for people aged 21 years and over of £12.21 per hour (which equates to £427.35 for a 35-hour working week).³¹
16. Anti-poverty research charity Joseph Rowntree Foundation noted that annual uprating of statutory parental pay has not kept pace with increases to the NLW. In April 2025, the NLW increased by 6.7%, while statutory maternity, paternity, adoption and surrogacy, and shared parental pay was uprated by a mere 1.7%, less than the CPI inflation rate of 2.6%.³²
17. Witnesses reported that low statutory pay has clear economic impacts on families and the ability of parents to take the amount of leave they would like to take to care for their babies.³³ For example, Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed emphasised that 76% of mothers are forced to take

28 See, for example, Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#)); Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development ([SPL0019](#)); UK Women’s Budget Group ([SPL0024](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

29 See, for example, [Q12](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q38](#) [Abby Jitendra]; [Q77](#) [Claire McCartney];

30 GOV.UK, ‘[Maternity pay and leave](#)’, accessed 23 April 2025

31 GOV.UK, ‘[National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates](#)’, accessed 23 April 2025

32 Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([SPL0049](#)); Office for National Statistics, ‘[Consumer price inflation, UK: March 2025](#)’, accessed 24 April 2025

33 See, for example, Union of Shop, Distribution and Allied Workers (USDAW) ([SPL0010](#)); [Q12](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]

on debt “to get through maternity leave”, and 40% take 12 weeks or fewer of maternity leave “because the pay is so poor.”³⁴ Nikki Pound, the Trades Union Congress’s (TUC) Policy Officer for women’s equality, told us:

Whenever we do research, whether that is speaking directly to our members or polling families, we find the financial struggle that the statutory rates place on families is very significant. More recent research that we have done has found that half of families struggle financially when dads or partners take paternity leave, and half felt that they were unable to take the leave that they needed to support their families.³⁵

18. A wide range of witnesses agreed that the low rate of statutory pay is a major factor in low take up of the comparatively very limited amount of paternity and SPL available to fathers and other parents, particularly by those in lower income households.³⁶ Take up of paternity leave is very heavily skewed towards higher earners. Joeli Brearley reported Pregnant Then Screwed survey evidence, which shows that dads earning under £150,000 per year tend to take two weeks or less leave, whereas those on higher incomes take up to nine weeks.³⁷ Research published in 2023 by the Centre for Progressive Policy for Pregnant Then Screwed showed that only 12% of fathers with a household income of £20–25,000 had access to, and had taken, their full entitlement of employer-enhanced parental leave and pay, compared to 51% of men with a household income of more than £200,000.³⁸

34 [Q27](#) [Joeli Brearley]

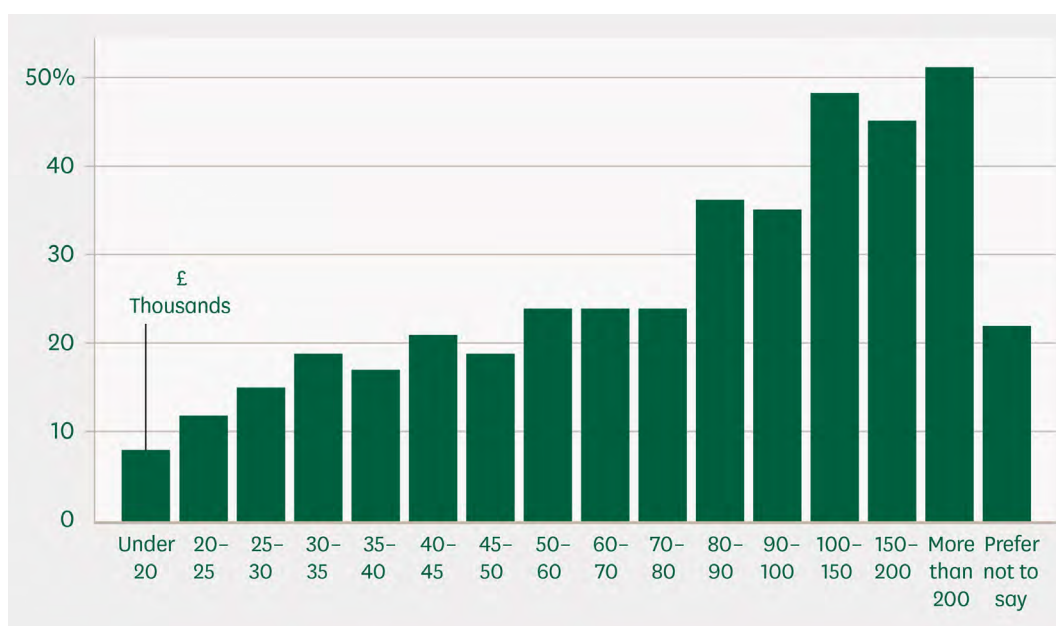
35 [Q59](#)

36 See, for example, Union of Shop, Distribution and Allied Workers (USDAW) ([SPL0010](#)); Dr Gemma Mitchell and Dr Charlotte Bendall ([SPL0005](#)); [Q12](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]

37 [Q13](#)

38 [“‘Measly’ paternity rights mean nearly a third of UK fathers take no leave – report”](#), *The Guardian*, 15 June 2023

Figure 2: Percentage of fathers by household income with access to enhanced parental leave and pay and had taken their full entitlement



Source: The Guardian, research by Centre for Progressive Policy, Pregnant Then Screwed and Women in Data

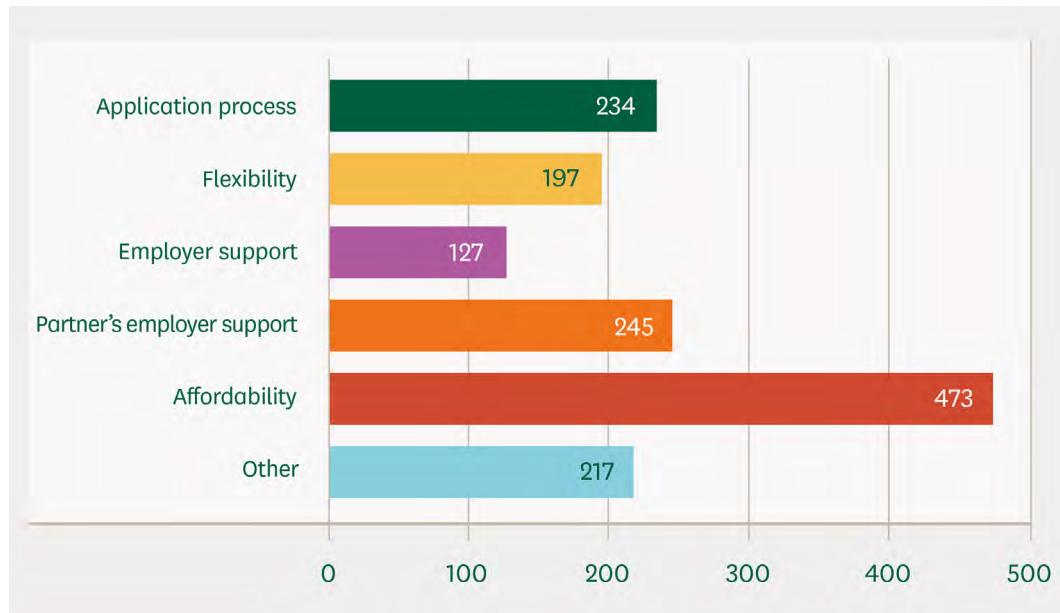
19. As noted above, unlike mothers, for whom the first six weeks of statutory maternity pay may be paid at 90% of average earnings with no cap, many fathers and other parents taking paternity or SPL receive only the statutory minimum of £187.18. Evidence from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the TUC confirmed that employers are less likely to enhance paternity pay, and even less likely to enhance SPL, than maternity pay.³⁹
20. The Government’s evaluation of SPL, published in 2023, found that financial constraints were a key barrier to take up, with 25% of mothers and 30% of fathers in couples who decided not to use the scheme citing negative impacts on family finances as the main reason for their decision.⁴⁰ This was broadly reflected in responses to our survey conducted earlier this year. Respondents confirmed that affordability was the biggest factor in their decisions not to use the statutory SPL scheme. This reason was cited by 473 (36%) of 1,308 respondents, more by far than any other reason, including

39 See, for example, Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, [Employer Focus on Working Parents: Parental leave and pay and childcare policies](#), August 2022; see also, Trades Union Congress (SPL0051); Q66 [Nikki Pound]

40 Department for Business and Trade, [Shared Parental Leave: Evaluation report](#), June 2023, para 4.180, figure 4.29, p 108

lack of support from the respondent’s partner’s employer (245 respondents, 19%) and difficulties associated with the application process (234, 18%), the next two most cited factors.⁴¹

Figure 3: Factors in couples’ decisions not to use the statutory SPL scheme



Source: Women and Equalities Committee survey, 12 December 2024 - 27 January 2025. Respondents were asked, “Which factors influenced your decision not to use the Government’s shared parental leave scheme (select as many as apply)”.

A typical comment from a birth parent mother was that “while the idea of sharing leave was appealing, the financial support provided under the scheme wouldn’t have covered our essential living costs.”⁴²

21. Several academic witnesses cited research that suggests the low rate of pay has devastating impacts on take up of SPL. The Equal Parenting Project, led by academics Dr Sarah Forbes and Dr Holly Birkett, described SPL as a “non-starter” for most families, for financial reasons. This is starkly reflected in take up rates by income level. The Equal Parenting Project noted that HMRC data show that in 2023/24, 33% of claims for shared parental pay were from parents in the highest income decile, while there were zero claims from parents in the lowest two income deciles.⁴³

41 See annex for a summary of headline survey results

42 Survey respondent no. 20

43 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

- 22.** Discussing the disparities in SPL take up by income level, Dr Forbes argued that:

The problem is not that the rich are using it, the ones that have higher education, the ones that are in dual-income households; the problem is no one else is using it. We need to make it so that other people can actually access it.⁴⁴

Jemima Olchawski, Chief Executive of The Fawcett Society, agreed that SPL had “a lot of potential” and that it “needs to have proper-level rates of pay that make it affordable and accessible for more families and households.”⁴⁵ We examine wider reforms necessary to increase access to and take up of SPL in chapter 4.

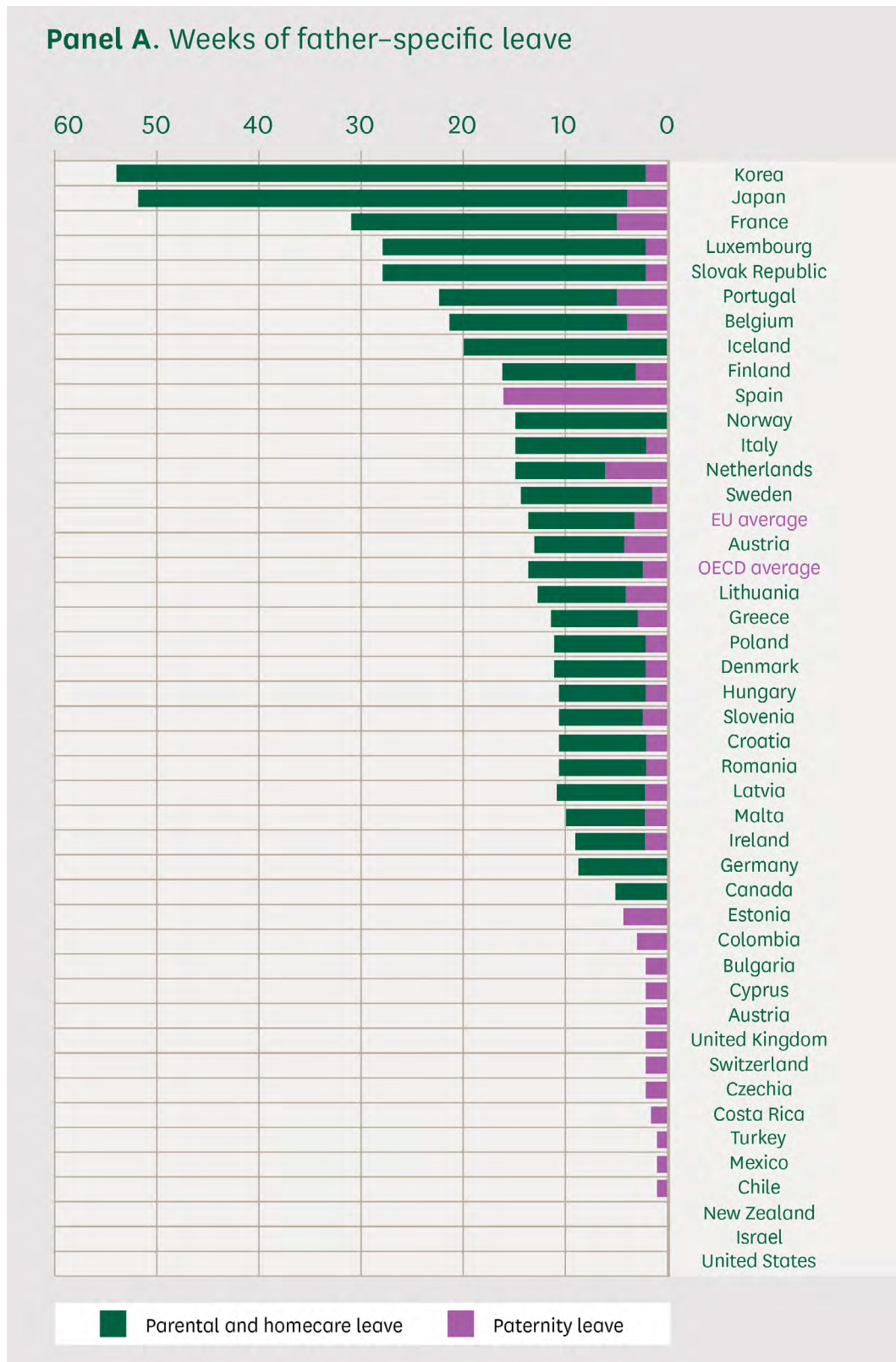
International comparisons

- 23.** The UK’s paternity entitlements compare unfavourably with most developed countries. The chart below, from the OECD’s family database, shows that the UK has among the least generous statutory leave periods for fathers and other partners, and that it is paid at one of the lowest rates.

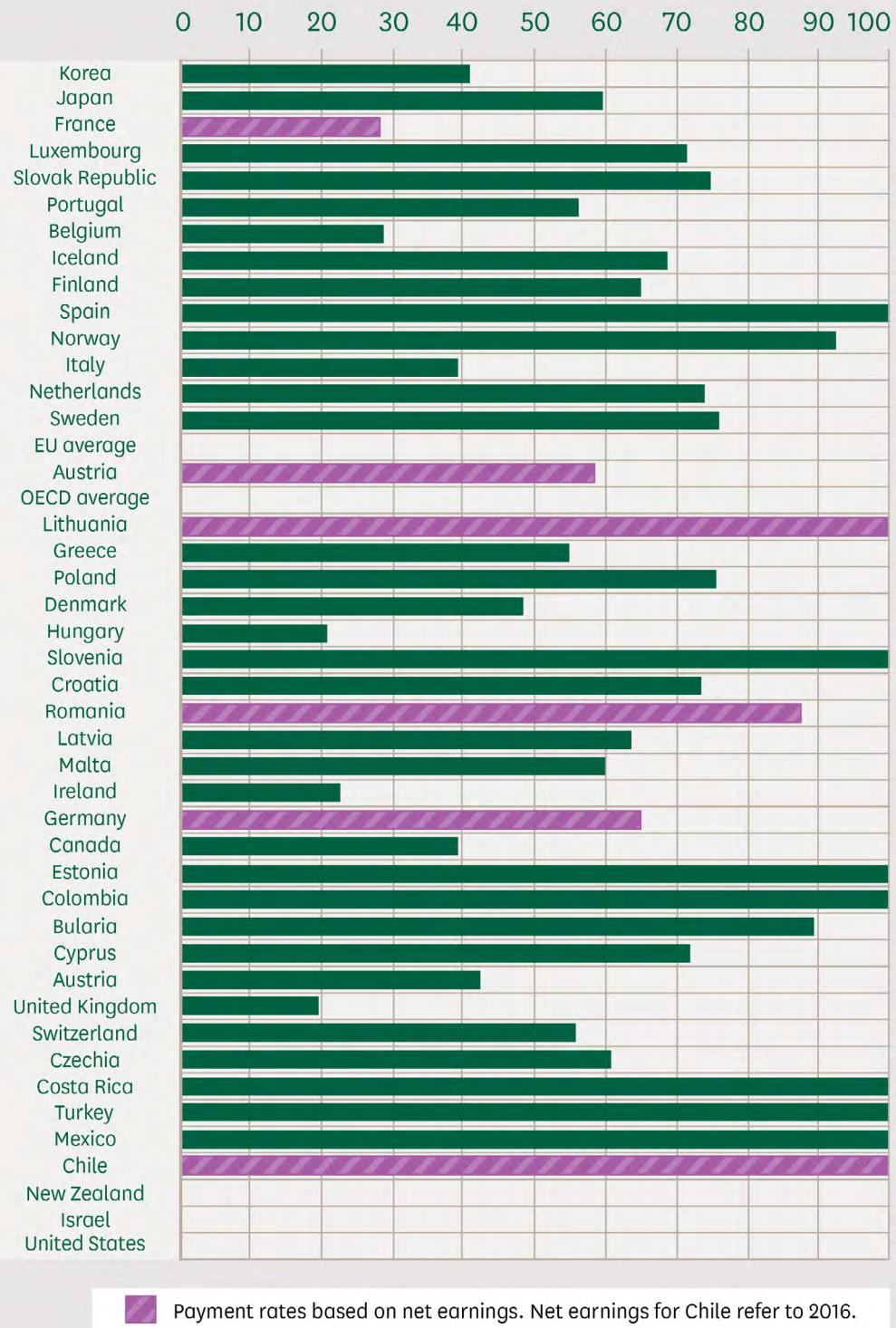
44 [Q41](#) [Dr Forbes]

45 [Q35](#) [Jemima Olchawski]

Figure 4: Duration of paid paternity leave and paid father-specific parental and home care leave in weeks, and the average payment rate across paid paternity and father-specific leave for an individual on national average earnings, 2023



Panel B. Average payment rate across father-specific leave %



Source: OECD Family database, parental leave systems, Chart PF2.1.C

24. Countries with the highest rates of pay for fathers and other partners taking leave include Spain, where fathers/co-partners receive 100% of their earnings during a 16-week leave period.⁴⁶ Payments to fathers/co-partners in Norway “almost fully replace gross earnings for an average earner during parental leave”. In Japan, which has among the most generous leave periods for fathers (up to 52 weeks), parental pay replaces around 60% of the gross earnings for an average earner.⁴⁷ The Fatherhood Institute reported that in 2023, 11 of 38 OECD countries offered more than six weeks’ leave to fathers at the equivalent of 100% of salary.⁴⁸
25. Dr Gemma Mitchell and others pointed to “very clear evidence” from overseas systems that increasing rates of statutory pay would increase take up of leave among fathers.⁴⁹ Alex Lloyd Hunter of The Dad Shift and others emphasised the experience of Spain, which in recent years has made incremental improvements to leave and pay entitlements for fathers and now provides a substantial period of paid leave for all parents at 100% of average earnings.⁵⁰ Witnesses emphasised that Spain’s reform programme had hugely increased take up of leave by dads. The Fatherhood Institute noted that take up of parental leave by fathers in Spain in 2022 was almost 90%.⁵¹ The Fawcett Society emphasised that since 2021, take up of parental leave in Spain has been equal between mothers and fathers (Spain’s approach to parental leave reform is examined further in chapter 3).⁵²

An ambitious yet feasible reform objective

26. There was consensus among witnesses that the Government must consider how to increase statutory parental pay as a priority in its proposed review. Most supported a very substantial increase, particularly if the goal is to incentivise more fathers to take more leave and play a greater role in caring for their babies.⁵³
27. Campaigners for maternity and paternity rights agreed that the statutory rate ought to be at least 90% of average earnings. Pregnant Then Screwed believed that such an increase had:

46 See, for example, [Q12](#) [Alex Loyd Hunter]; The Fawcett Society ([SPL0045](#)); Simon Kelleher and Dr Rebecca Jones with Professor Emma Banister and Dr Helen Norman ([SPL0053](#))

47 OECD Family Database, PF2.1. [Parental leave systems](#), p8

48 The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

49 [Q43](#)

50 [Q12](#)

51 The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

52 The Fawcett Society ([SPL0045](#))

53 See, for example, [Q38](#) [Abby Jitendra]; [Q41](#) [Dr Forbes]; [Q43](#) [Dr Mitchell]; [Q59](#) [Nikki Pound]

[...] the potential to bring widespread benefits to society by increasing workforce participation during a time of low productivity [see chapter 6], reducing demands on the NHS and improving outcomes for children and gender parity.⁵⁴

Alex Lloyd Hunter explained why The Dad Shift was arguing for paternity pay at 90% of earnings. He told us:

[...] because that is what mums get before they drop down to statutory rates. It is very hard to argue that dads and other non-birthing parents should get higher pay than mothers. So, really, we are capped at [...] 90% until we look at improving maternity pay as well. We need to make advances on both sides of the coin in order for this to benefit everyone.⁵⁵

He argued that a statutory rate of 90% of earnings should be seen as a “bare minimum” but believed it would be “transformative”.⁵⁶

- 28.** The Trades Union Congress (TUC) argued that parental pay rates needed to “reflect the cost of living and the cost of supporting a family”. It called for the Government’s review to consider “charting a path [...] towards statutory rates of pay at 80% of the Real Living Wage” (RLW), which is independently calculated based on the cost of living.⁵⁷ The RLW for 2025 is slightly more than the NLW at £12.60, and £13.85 in London. Weekly pay at 80% of RLW rates would therefore be around £440 to £485 per week, increases of considerably more than double the current rate of £187.18.⁵⁸
- 29.** Witnesses acknowledged that substantial increases of this order would be costly for the Exchequer. Most rejected, however, any suggestion that maternity entitlements, in particular the first six weeks of maternity pay at 90% of earnings, should be capped to make increases to paternity pay more affordable. Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed argued vehemently that:

[...] we have a generous [maternity leave] system in terms of time. We do not have a generous system in terms of pay. We are in the bottom 10 OECD countries in terms of maternity benefits [...]. Our whole parental leave system does not work. The worst part of it is paternity leave, which is why there is such a big push at the moment to change

54 Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

55 [Q27](#)

56 [Q16](#)

57 [Q59](#) [Nikki Pound]

58 Living Wage Foundation, ‘[The real Living Wage](#)’, accessed 28 April 2025

that because it is so bad and we are so behind other countries on it, but our maternity leave system is also very poor. Hacking away at an already inadequate system is not the right answer.⁵⁹

Similarly, Nikki Pound, Policy Officer at the TUC, argued that it “definitely” did not want to see maternity entitlements “diminished in any way”.⁶⁰ Claire McCartney, a Policy and Practice Manager at the CIPD, agreed that the Government’s review:

[...] should not be about reducing or taking away entitlement; it should be about looking holistically and seeing how all these things interact and how we can create a system that provides adequate support for working parents and supports labour market participation, progression, fairness and choice.⁶¹

We look at ways of modelling the direct fiscal costs of increasing paternity entitlements alongside the likely wider social and economic benefits in chapter 6.

30. **CONCLUSION**

The UK’s rate of statutory parental pay is completely out of kilter with the cost of living. At considerably less than half of the National Living Wage and real Living Wage, it has not kept pace with inflation and is far below rates in most comparable countries. This causes financial hardship, particularly in lower income households, and is a barrier to parents taking the time they need to care for their babies. The low rate particularly inhibits take up of the very limited amount of statutory leave available to fathers and other parents, a disproportionately high number of whom are entirely reliant on the inadequate statutory minimum.

31. **RECOMMENDATION**

A key aim of the Government’s review of the parental leave system must be to incentivise greater gender equality in parenting responsibilities. Increasing statutory paternity pay is a vital part of achieving this. As a priority, the Government must consider raising paternity pay to the level of maternity pay in the first six weeks i.e. 90% of average earnings. We recommend this change be made during this Parliament.

59 [Q27](#)

60 [Q59](#)

61 [Q60](#)

32.

RECOMMENDATION

In the longer term, the Government must also consider a feasible approach to phased introduction of increases to statutory pay across the system, to bring rates for all working parents up to a very substantial proportion (80% or more) of average earnings or the real Living Wage. Overall paid maternity entitlements in the UK compare unfavourably with most developed countries; reform of statutory pay must therefore not include any diminution of existing maternity entitlements.

3 Extending paternity leave

33. The UK introduced its statutory paternity leave period of up to two weeks before many comparable countries, in 2003. Since then, however, it has fallen far behind the leading nations and now has one of the least generous and most gender unequal systems for fathers and other parents in the developed world.⁶² Below we examine the case for a substantial increase in the period of statutory paternity leave. We consider evidence on the public's attitudes towards paid parental leave and examine evidence on take up of extended periods of leave by fathers, including lessons from reform programmes overseas and a major UK employer's gender equal leave policy. We examine the need for paid statutory leave for self-employed fathers and an improved offer for other self-employed parents. We also consider wider cultural issues that may affect the amount of leave fathers take.

Public attitudes to extending paternity leave

34. Witnesses argued that the UK's parental leave system does not reflect how most couples want to share their parenting responsibilities.⁶³ Pregnant Then Screwed highlighted survey evidence that only 18% of people believe that two weeks of paternity leave is sufficient.⁶⁴ The Dad Shift reported that:

The evidence we see is that there is almost universal support among not just dads but the public as a whole for the idea that dads should be more involved in their kids' lives. We have poll results that show that 90% of fathers agree that [...] fathers want to be more involved with their kids and 86% of people agree that it is better when both parents have equal opportunities to be involved in childcare, rather than just one parent shouldering it alone.⁶⁵

35. Alex Lloyd Hunter, co-founder of The Dad Shift, spoke eloquently about how attitudes had changed substantially in recent decades and why he started his campaign. He told us that older generations of dads, including

62 University College London ([SPL0027](#)); OECD, '[Paid parental leave: Big differences for mothers and fathers](#)' (January 2023), accessed 4 April 2025

63 For example, [Q3](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q4](#) [Karla Capstick]; The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

64 Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

65 [Q3](#)

his own father, now deeply regretted not playing a more active role in their children's lives. He noted, however, that his father's generation "just didn't know there was a different way of doing it. There just wasn't an alternative". While attitudes about the role of fathers had now shifted considerably, he emphasised that the system had not yet caught up:

[...] a lot of the structures in place that make it hard for dads to be a bigger part of their kids' lives have not changed that much. [...] That is bad for men themselves and for their kids, who miss out on that relationship with their fathers, and of course, for women, who end up shouldering the burden of childcare alone in many cases.⁶⁶

The Fatherhood Institute pointed to evidence that, despite the gender unequal leave system and the persistence of "traditionalist views about mothers' and fathers' roles", dads today "devote much more time to looking after their children than their own fathers did." Data show that many fathers have reallocated time to do this from sleep and leisure activities.⁶⁷

36. Witnesses emphasised evidence of benefits for children when fathers play a more active role. Karla Capstick, director of a National Children's Bureau parenting programme (see below), told us that having an actively involved father or other co-parent was "hugely beneficial" to babies' and children's development.⁶⁸ The Fatherhood Institute pointed to research evidence of positive effects on "infant health and educational outcomes".⁶⁹ Some witnesses believed that seeing parents sharing care and paid work responsibilities was a good example to children and helped to challenge harmful gender stereotypes.⁷⁰

37. Joeli Brearley argued that reform of the parental leave system was essentially about "what sort of society we want this to be". She posed this as a question:

Do we want to continue to perpetuate outdated and harmful gender stereotypes that tell us that women do the nurturing, the caring and the child-rearing and are the homemakers, whereas men just need to pull their socks up and get back to work, and they are the strong, stoic breadwinners and do not need this time to nurture and care for their family? [...] our laws are literally telling them, "You don't need time to nurture and to connect with your family."⁷¹

66 [Q1](#)

67 The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

68 [Q4](#)

69 The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

70 See, for example, Charlotte Sharp ([SPL0001](#)); Hannah Duncan ([SPL0007](#))

71 [Q15](#) [Joeli Brearley]

Her view was that it was “absolutely imperative that if we care about the wellbeing of women, men, parents and children, we make a change.”⁷²

International comparisons

Nordic countries and other leading examples

38. The women’s rights charity The Fawcett Society emphasised that there are much more generous and gender equal paid leave entitlements “all over the world”.⁷³ Fawcett and others pointed in particular to Nordic countries, including Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.⁷⁴
39. University College London (UCL) set out how Norway has been at the forefront of gender equality in parental rights since the 1970s. It introduced a SPL scheme on the maternal transfer model nearly 50 years ago, in 1977. Norway was also first to introduce four weeks of non-transferable “take it or leave it” leave and pay specifically for fathers and other partners, in 1993. Today, parental leave for either parent in Norway is 46 weeks paid at 100% of earnings or 56 weeks at 80%, both with an upper cap. The Norwegian system provides almost identical non-transferable paid leave quotas for mothers and fathers (14 or 19 weeks, depending on the payment option chosen; the key difference for mothers is that six weeks of their quota must be taken immediately after birth) and a family entitlement, which can be taken by either parent, for the remaining period.⁷⁵
40. UCL and others emphasised that the introduction of substantial periods of well-paid non-transferable leave quotas for fathers had transformed take up in some overseas systems.⁷⁶ For example, Pregnant Then Screwed reported that after fathers in Quebec gained entitlement to five weeks of non-transferable leave at 70–75% of earnings from 2006, take up reached 86%; elsewhere in Canada, where the scheme was not in place, the proportion remained at around 15%.⁷⁷ A range of witnesses noted similar impacts of reforms overseas and argued that the Government’s forthcoming review should prioritise an extended period of well-paid non-transferable leave for fathers over reform of the maternal transfer-based SPL scheme (see chapter 4).⁷⁸

72 [Q15](#)

73 The Fawcett Society ([SPL0045](#))

74 See, for example, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development ([SPL0019](#)); Muslim Women’s Network UK ([SPL0026](#)); University College London ([SPL0027](#))

75 University College London ([SPL0027](#))

76 University College London ([SPL0027](#))

77 Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

78 See, for example, Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#)); The Dad Shift ([SPL0033](#)); Trades Union Congress ([SPL0051](#)); Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#))

41. The Equal Parenting Project, however, expressed caution about the UK attempting directly to replicate much more gender equal leave systems from overseas, particularly the longest-established systems in Nordic countries. It argued that:

[...] this is because most of the effective equal and inclusive policies globally have been developed in an inclusive and often non-gendered way over the past 50 years within an entirely different social, political and economic system. In the UK, our current situation is 12 months of low paid leave for mothers, two weeks low paid leave for fathers [...] and some ability to transfer leave between parents. Any attempt to move towards, for example, a Nordic-style shared scheme would be hugely expensive and the only way you could get to full equality would be to offer 12 months leave to fathers/other parents to match maternity leave, which in the current context is unrealistic.⁷⁹

42. Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed acknowledged that the UK's position as an outlier in terms of gender inequality in its system necessitates a phased approach to reform. She told us, "We would love to be in the position that Sweden is in, or any of the Nordic countries; we just appreciate that it is going to take a little time to get there."⁸⁰

Other recent reform programmes and impacts on take up

43. Witnesses highlighted Spain as a country that had transformed its system in recent years from a starting point similar in some ways to the UK's.⁸¹ Spain introduced 13 days of paid paternity leave in 2007. From 2017 to 2021, it implemented incremental reforms to extend leave for fathers and other parents to 16 weeks, equal to its pre-existing maternity leave period, paid at 100% of earnings. Other key reforms included making six weeks of leave compulsory for both mothers and fathers.⁸² Some expert witnesses recommended the UK consider making a period of paternity leave compulsory, as a way of shifting the culture and challenging gendered stereotypes around family responsibilities across all sectors (see wider cultural factors, below).⁸³

79 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

80 [Q20](#) [Joeli Brearley]

81 See, for example, [Q12](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; The Fawcett Society ([SPL0045](#)); The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

82 The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

83 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

44. As noted in chapter 2, the effect of the 2017–21 reforms on take up of leave in Spain has been transformational, with fathers now “routinely taking almost all the weeks” available to them, and a significant increase in the number of weeks of leave taken by dads non-concurrently with their partners, facilitating mothers’ increased labour market attachment.⁸⁴
45. The UK-owned multi-national insurance company Aviva reported results from its gender equal parental leave policy, which further demonstrated that when fathers have access to an extended period of leave at a sustainable rate of pay, take up rates are transformed. In 2018, Aviva was among the first major UK employers to de-gender its leave policy, offering all parent employees 52 weeks of leave after the birth or adoption of a child, 26 weeks of which is at full basic pay.⁸⁵ Jonny Briggs, Aviva’s Inclusion and Resource Director, told us that in the preceding year fathers in its scheme took an average of 22 weeks leave. The average had fluctuated slightly since the policy’s inception in 2018 and had been as high as “nearly 25 weeks” in previous years.⁸⁶

Provision for self-employed fathers

46. A wide range of witnesses noted the exclusion of self-employed fathers from statutory paternity and shared parental leave and pay and called for this to be addressed as a priority in the Government’s review.⁸⁷ Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed noted that the UK was rare in not having an offer for self-employed dads; only three of the 27 EU countries were in the same position.⁸⁸
47. The Dad Shift and others noted the unfairness of a lack of provision for self-employed fathers, given their substantial financial contribution to the UK economy. Alex Lloyd Hunter emphasised that:

Self-employed dads pay in £1.1 billion in national insurance contributions a year. That dwarfs what the Government spends on paternity leave [see chapter 6], but they get no access [...].⁸⁹

84 See, for example, Barcelona School of Economics, [Paternity Leave Reforms in Spain and Their Influence on Fathers’ Take-Up](#), April 2025

85 Aviva, [‘Take up of equal parental leave at Aviva remains high after four years’](#) (June 2022), accessed 29 April 2025

86 [Q65](#)

87 [Q3](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q9](#) [Joeli Brearley]; [Q43](#) [Abby Jitendra]; Trade Union Congress ([SPL0051](#)); The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

88 [Q9](#) [Joeli Brearley]

89 [Q9](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]

He reported some real-life cases of severe financial hardship among households with self-employed dads who had “done the right thing” and taken time off work after the birth of a child. The Dad Shift and others noted that the consequences could be particularly severe when fathers needed an extended period away from work to care for their partners after caesarean sections or medical complications after birth.⁹⁰

- 48.** A range of witnesses called for the Government’s review to ensure provision for self-employed dads.⁹¹ Some called for the introduction of a Paternity Allowance equivalent to Maternity Allowance, which as previously noted provides up to 39 weeks of statutory pay for self-employed mums, and some employed mothers who do not meet the earnings requirements for statutory maternity leave and pay.⁹² It should be noted, however, that witnesses also emphasised flaws in Maternity Allowance including gaps in provision for some self-employed and other working mothers. For example, Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed emphasised that:

[...] we should also talk about self-employed mums, who do not get that first six weeks at 90% of their salary; they go straight to [£187.18] a week, which is not enough money to live on. The Resolution Foundation did some research and found that self-employed mothers took around three to six weeks off after childbirth, compared to nine to 12 months taken by employed mothers. We hear from self-employed mothers all the time that they just are not able to stop working, yet they are told if they have a C-section they should be resting for six weeks. It is causing massive problems for mothers as well.⁹³

- 49.** We have recently drawn attention to unfairness in Maternity Allowance rules for self-employed mothers. In particular, evidence to our follow up inquiry into misogyny in music emphasised that self-employed mothers in receipt of Maternity Allowance are not permitted to do paid self-employed work beyond their 10 “keeping in touch days”, while employed women on statutory maternity pay are. Our recent Report recommended the Government amend the Employment Rights Bill to remove this unfairness.⁹⁴
- 50.** Abby Jitendra, a Principal Policy Adviser at Joseph Rowntree Foundation, argued that poor provision for self-employed workers should be viewed as a systemic flaw in the UK economy. She said:

90 The Dad Shift ([SPL0033](#))

91 See, for example, UK Music and Parents and Carers in Performing Arts ([SPL0047](#)); Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([SPL0049](#)); IPSE – The Self-Employment Association ([SPL0050](#)); Trade Union Congress ([SPL0051](#))

92 See, for example, The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#)); UK Music and Parents and Carers in Performing Arts ([SPL0047](#)); Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([SPL0049](#))

93 [Q9](#)

94 Women and Equalities Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2024–25, *Misogyny in music: on repeat*, [HC 573](#)

[...] we have a big gap in this country around self-employed fathers. We can talk about uptake as much as we want [...] but if a large section of our labour market, of our families, do not even have any access to paternity pay or leave at all, then that is really going to stop this being the kind of growth benefit policy that it has the possibility to be.⁹⁵

Wider cultural and societal change

51. Alex Lloyd Hunter reported that all types of fathers, from different places and in a wide range of income and occupational groups, were supporting The Dad Shift’s campaign for improved paternity leave and pay.⁹⁶ Some research, however, suggests that, even if pay rates were increased, disparities by income and occupational status would likely persist due to cultural factors. Dr Gemma Mitchell (University of East Anglia) and Dr Charlotte Bendall (University of Birmingham Law School) reported research that suggests working class dads (those in the Office for National Statistics’ categorisation of “routine and manual” occupations) faced additional cultural barriers. First, working class households and communities are more likely to adhere to “traditional roles within families”. Secondly, working class fathers are more likely to be employed in workplaces that are culturally unsupportive of men taking leave, leaving those who express a desire to take it more open to employment discrimination.⁹⁷ This was a theme in responses to our survey. The majority of respondents were women in different sex couples. As previously noted, lack of support from the respondent’s partner’s employer was the second-most cited reason (after affordability) for couples choosing not to use the SPL scheme. Typical comments from mums in different sex couples included, “My partner’s work are totally unsupportive of fathers taking any leave. It is a cultural thing within the company”; and “My partner works in construction and his employer felt the business would lose money if he took time off and that it’s really the woman’s job to be at home with the baby.”⁹⁸ Finally, Dr Mitchell and Dr Bendall reported that working class parents are more likely to be in non-conventional family forms, while schemes such as SPL assume a traditional “nuclear family”.⁹⁹
52. Dr Mitchell added that, even where reported attitudes had shifted, behaviours may not change, because:

95 [Q43](#)

96 [Q3](#)

97 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia, and Dr Charlotte Bendall, Birmingham Law School ([SPL0005](#))

98 Survey respondent no. 69

99 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia, and Dr Charlotte Bendall, Birmingham Law School ([SPL0005](#))

[...] when attitudes and behaviours clash, the research is very clear that it is attitudes that change rather than behaviour. Even if people are saying, “Yes, we’re all for equal parenting,” when push comes to shove and that becomes difficult, it is much more likely that the attitudes will shift rather than behaviour.¹⁰⁰

53. Jonny Briggs emphasised the importance of organisational culture in driving change towards gender equal take up of parental leave at Aviva. Senior managers who had taken an extended period of leave were encouraged to “tell the story of how much they got out of it” within the organisation when they returned to work. Aviva’s gender equal leave policy was one of several inclusive and family-friendly policies, such as flexible working options, that were part of a wider cultural transformation in the organisation. Mr Briggs told us that Aviva saw this as an “investment” because it brought substantially increased employee satisfaction, attracted people to work for the organisation in a highly competitive sector of the labour market and improved retention, saving on recruitment costs.¹⁰¹

54. Claire McCartney of the CIPD agreed that, while increasing access to leave was crucial:

[...] if the culture is one where people do not feel that they are able to take up the leave or that it might negatively impact their career progression, we are not going to be able to move forward on this.¹⁰²

Dr Forbes reported that the Equal Parenting Project had studied positive workplace cultures around fatherhood. Positive cultural change involved “normalising the visibility of fatherhood in the workplace”. She said that these workplaces would typically have parenting groups specifically for fathers and a “fathers’ network” or “fathers’ champions”.¹⁰³

55. The National Children’s Bureau (NCB) noted the highly gendered nature of services for parents caring for babies, which can act as a barrier to fathers taking a greater role.¹⁰⁴ The NCB’s “A Better Start” partnerships with a range of service providers in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend are part of a 10-year programme, largely coming to an end this year, which includes the aim of “bridging the gap between maternal and paternal support, challenging the stigma around fathers taking on caregiving roles, and playing a leading role in their child’s development.” Its work has included providing workplace training for service providers to become more inclusive of fathers and other marginalised groups of parents,

100 [Q43](#)

101 [Q65](#)

102 [Q85](#)

103 [Q41](#)

104 The National Children’s Bureau – A Better Start ([SPL0016](#))

bespoke services for dads caring for babies and young children, and provision of “community spaces” for fathers to share their experiences. Its aim is to reduce the “marginalisation and bias fathers face from the earliest stages of parenthood in pregnancy.”¹⁰⁵

- 56.** Karla Capstick, director of the Nottingham programme, told us that a key focus was on designing services with fathers in mind, and asking care-giving dads:

“What works for you? Where do you want your service to be? Who do you want to deliver your service? What time should the service be? What kind of environment? What does it look like for you?” Getting that first-hand, lived experience to help shape a service will make it more accessible and acceptable.¹⁰⁶

The 10-year programme is being evaluated by the National Centre for Social Research, with the findings expected to be published in early 2026.

- 57.** Joeli Brearley’s view was that, while society was now encouraging girls to be “more like boys” in some respects, through messages such as “Be strong, be a warrior. You can do anything”, there had been little focus on similar gender equality messages to boys. She argued that “We have not said to boys, ‘You can be nurses, you can be stay-at-home dads, you can be really, really great fathers.’”¹⁰⁷
- 58.** Ms Kapstick and Imanuel Ben Israel, a father who participated in the Nottingham programme, agreed with a range of other witnesses that supporting fathers to be more involved parents, including through extending paid parental leave for new dads and providing wider support for men caring for babies, was good for children, mothers, and fathers. Ms Kapstick described it as a “triple win in terms of policy”.¹⁰⁸

A day one right to paid leave

- 59.** While the Government has deferred fundamental reform of the paid parental leave system until after its proposed review, it has committed to one important change to statutory paternity leave via the Employment Rights Bill, which has completed its stages in the House of Commons and is now being scrutinised in the House of Lords. The Government has said that it will legislate to make statutory paternity leave a day one right for

105 The National Children’s Bureau – A Better Start ([SPL0016](#))

106 [Q6](#)

107 [Q32](#)

108 [Q4](#)

employees, in line with maternity leave. Currently fathers and other parents must have completed 26 six weeks' continuous service with their employer before becoming entitled to paternity leave and pay.¹⁰⁹

60. A wide range of witnesses supported making paid paternity leave a day one right, as an important step towards gender equality in the system.¹¹⁰ Joseph Rowntree Foundation argued, however, that legislating to give fathers a day one right to paternity leave, but not pay, via the Employment Rights Bill would only “partially” end the unfairness for new fathers who have only recently started a job. It would mean that these new fathers “will need to take [...] leave unpaid or not take leave at all.” Joseph Rowntree Foundation argued that these new fathers would be:

[...] missing out on financial support just because they happened to move into work or move jobs whilst their partner was expecting their baby. Beyond the hardship experienced by families in these situations, job moves are linked to increasing household incomes and we need to ensure there are no disincentives in parental leave policy to make those beneficial job moves.¹¹¹

An amendment has been tabled in the House of Lords to legislate for a day one right to paid paternity leave.¹¹²

61. **RECOMMENDATION**

A key objective of reform of the paid parental leave system should be to promote equality. Maternity and paternity rights should be as equal as possible, to benefit mothers, fathers and families. We therefore welcome the Government's intention to legislate for a day one right to paternity leave, in line with rights to maternity leave. A day one right to unpaid paternity leave would be, however, only a limited move towards equality. The Government should either amend the Employment Rights Bill to legislate for a day one right to paid paternity leave or at least commit to consider bringing in this vital change, in consultation with employers, as part of its forthcoming review of the parental leave system.

109 See, UK Government, [Next Steps to Make Work Pay](#), October 2024, para 10; [Explanatory notes to the Employment Rights Bill](#), para 13

110 See, for example, Union of Shop, Distribution and Allied Workers (USDAW) ([SPL0010](#)); Unite the Union ([SPL0022](#)); Maternity Action ([SPL0025](#)); University College London ([SPL0027](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#)); Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([SPL0049](#)); Trade Union Congress ([SPL0051](#))

111 Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([SPL0049](#))

112 House of Lords, Employment Rights Bill, [Third Marshalled List of Amendments to be Moved in Committee of the Whole House](#), amendment no. 139 [Baroness Penn; Baroness Lister of Burtersett; Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb; Baroness Smith of Llanfaes]

Protection against paternity discrimination

62. The Equal Parenting Project noted recent survey evidence, which suggests fear of negative workplace impacts is preventing fathers from taking the leave they would like. Approaching two fifths (37%) of men surveyed believed that taking a period of leave longer than was usual in their organisation would put their job at risk.¹¹³ Joeli Brearley told us there was evidence of “shocking” attitudes in some workplaces to men who want to take an extended period of leave, for example employers saying, “‘Shall I buy you a dress while you’re at it?’ or writing emails to them entitled, ‘Hello, Nanny’—all sorts of awful, gendered messages to men.”¹¹⁴
63. Witnesses argued that, in a sense, an increase in paternity discrimination could be seen as positive for gender equality, in that it would level the playing field for mothers, who face widespread discrimination and a motherhood penalty in the labour market.¹¹⁵ They agreed, however, that protections against paternity discrimination may need to be strengthened to ensure they are in line with pregnancy and maternity discrimination law.¹¹⁶ For example, currently fathers and other parents who take paternity leave are not protected from redundancy in the same way that mothers are.¹¹⁷

64. **CONCLUSION**

Since introducing up to two weeks of paid statutory paternity leave over 20 years ago, the UK has fallen far behind many comparable countries. We now have one of the worst leave offers in the developed world for fathers and other parents. A maximum of two weeks paternity leave is completely out of step with how most couples want to share their parenting responsibilities and balance these with working life. Our system entrenches outdated gender stereotypes about caring and harms fathers, mothers and families. The system requires substantial change.

113 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

114 [Q19](#) [Joeli Brearley]; [Q39](#) [Jemima Olchawski]

115 [Q18](#) [Joeli Brearley]

116 [Q19](#) [Joeli Brearley and Alex Lloyd Hunter]

117 Acas, [‘Redundancy protection for pregnancy and new parents’](#), accessed 14 May 2025

65.

RECOMMENDATION

There is very strong evidence from around the world and from UK employers' gender equal schemes that providing fathers and other parents with an extended period of sustainably paid statutory leave typically transforms take up. Extending paternity leave therefore has the potential to shift the dial on gendered allocation of parental responsibilities. Addressing the stark gendered disparity in our statutory leave periods should therefore be considered fundamental to fixing our broken system and a key priority of the Government's forthcoming review.

66.

RECOMMENDATION

The Government's review must consider a feasible plan to incrementally increase the period of paid paternity leave, drawing on lessons from recent reform programmes overseas, for example in Spain. As an initial medium-term objective, it should set out a pathway to increasing paid statutory paternity leave to six weeks over the course of this Parliament. It should aim to ensure maximum flexibility in the number of blocks the leave can be taken in during the first year after a baby's birth or adoption. The Government must also assess the likely benefits of making a portion of the extended period of paternity leave compulsory, to drive culture change and normalise fathers taking a greater role in caring responsibilities.

67.

RECOMMENDATION

Lack of provision for self-employed parents, particularly fathers and other parents, is a key flaw in the system. Given the substantial economic contribution of self-employed fathers, it is grossly unfair to exclude them. Lack of provision causes financial hardship and associated family difficulties, notably where a self-employed father "does the right thing" in taking time away from earning to care for his partner after a caesarean section or medical complications after birth. The Government must aim to rectify this by: a) considering options for providing statutory paid leave for all self-employed and non-employee working fathers as part of its review of the parental leave system; including, b) introducing a Paternity Allowance equivalent to Maternity Allowance, which provides self-employed mothers with up to 39 weekly payments at the statutory rate; and c) rectifying unfairness in the existing Maternity Allowance rules, including in relation to permitted paid self-employed work beyond 10 "keeping in touch" days while in receipt of the allowance, as identified in our recent follow up Report on misogyny in music, to ensure unfairness is not replicated in provision for self-employed fathers.

68. CONCLUSION

While there is evidence of appetite for more leave among fathers across occupational and income groups, fathers in lower income and working-class occupational groups may face additional cultural barriers to taking leave. These households and communities are more likely to hold traditionalist views about gendered caring responsibilities, and these fathers are less likely to have supportive employers.

69. CONCLUSION

The design and staffing of services for new parents caring for babies is highly gendered and can exclude or marginalise men, compounding cultural barriers to them taking a greater role in caring for their children.

70. RECOMMENDATION

Alongside reforms of statutory paternity pay and leave entitlements, the Government's review must consider steps it can take to reduce wider cultural and societal barriers to fathers taking more leave. It should in particular consider steps to reduce cultural barriers in working class households and workplaces in which working class fathers are more likely to be employed. This could be through, for example, targeted awareness campaigns to ensure all fathers are aware of their paternity and shared parental leave entitlements and work with trade unions and employers of all sizes across all sectors to promote best practice.

71. RECOMMENDATION

There have been recent local initiatives, for example in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend, in partnership with the National Children's Bureau's A Better Start campaign, designed to support fathers to play a more equal role in parenting. This has included training for local authority, third sector and NHS service providers, bespoke services for men taking care of their babies and facilitating spaces and communities in which fathers can share their experiences and support each other. A Better Start was a 10-year programme that is largely coming to an end this year, with an evaluation expected early in 2026. As part of its review, the Government should consider the evidence on the effectiveness of initiatives such as A Better Start partnerships in supporting men to take a greater caring role. It should consider the benefits of commissioning schemes of this nature across the country.

72.

RECOMMENDATION

In implementing reforms that work towards a more gender equal parental leave system, the Government must consider the potential impacts on employment discrimination against fathers and other parents. The Government's review must consider the adequacy of legal protections against paternity discrimination, including protection from redundancy for those taking paternity leave, and steps needed to raise fathers' and co-parents', and their employers', awareness of legal rights in his area.

4 Reforming shared parental leave

- 73.** While most witnesses called for the Government’s review to focus primarily on extending the period of dedicated leave for fathers, most also recognised the continuing need for a statutory SPL scheme.¹¹⁸ SPL allows up to 50 weeks of a mother’s statutory leave and 37 weeks of her pay entitlement to be transferred to the father/co-parent within the first year.¹¹⁹ As discussed above, the UK is an outlier internationally, in that the differential between leave and pay entitlements for mothers and fathers/co-parents is among the largest in the world. Some witnesses acknowledged that closing the gender gap in entitlements in the UK was therefore much more challenging than in other countries.¹²⁰ While a large, gendered differential in leave exists, a mechanism by which couples can continue to “share” a portion of the mother’s entitlements is therefore necessary to provide greater flexibility in how parental responsibilities are allocated within families.¹²¹
- 74.** In this chapter, we examine the benefits of SPL for those who use it and consider reforms necessary to overcome some of its well-documented flaws. In particular, we look at its very complex and exclusionary eligibility criteria, lack of awareness and understanding of the scheme among parents and employers, and barriers to parents using SPL as flexibly as they would like, all of which contribute to very low take up. We also note options to financially incentivise fathers to use SPL. As previously noted, the Government’s evaluation, published in 2023, found that only 5% of eligible fathers and 1% of mothers had used SPL.¹²²

Benefits of the SPL scheme

- 75.** Dr Sarah Forbes of the Equal Parenting Project described four key benefits of SPL in its current form. The first was at the broad policy level: the existence of an SPL scheme “encapsulates the idea that we, as a country, want to encourage more sharing of care and equal parenting and move away from

118 See, for example, [Q17](#), [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q35](#) [Jemima Olchawski]; [Q36](#) [Abby Jitendra]

119 GOV.UK, ‘[Shared Parental Leave and Pay](#)’, accessed 14 May 2025

120 See, for example, The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

121 See, for example, The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

122 Department for Business and Trade, [Shared Parental Leave: Evaluation report](#), June 2023

gendered assumptions”.¹²³ The second was flexibility for couples, which was demonstrated by a wide range of choices that couples using the scheme had been enabled to make. The Equal Parenting Project set out some real-life examples, which had emerged from its qualitative research, including:

- Both parents taking four months of leave following their child’s birth to travel together as a family, bond, and visit relatives.
- A mother returning to work during maternity leave to complete an important work project while the father/second parent took over childcare responsibilities, then returning to leave on SPL as the father/second parent went back to work. The parents are essentially tag-teaming care, and this cannot be done with any other statutory parental leave policies currently.
- A father taking a month of leave at the end of the mother’s maternity leave to support the transition to nursery care and the mother’s return to work.
- One parent taking six months of maternity leave, followed by the other parent taking six months of SPL to share caregiving responsibilities and strengthen family bonds.
- Parents alternating leave in blocks to share childcare duties while maintaining their career progression.¹²⁴

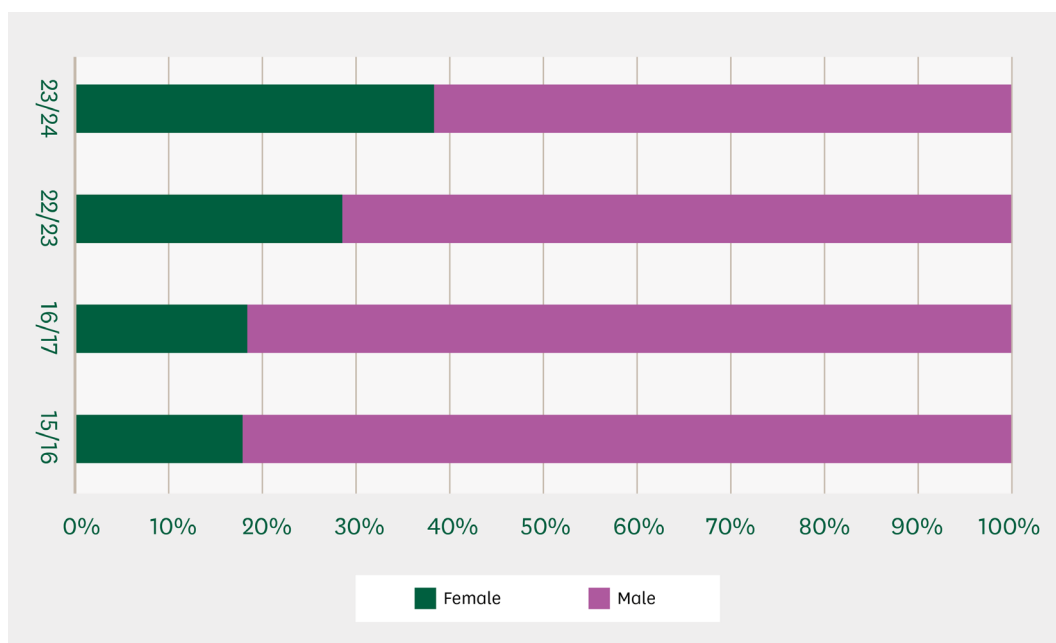
Thirdly, taking SPL is the only route by which fathers currently have a right to more than two weeks of paid leave. Lastly, while the Equal Parenting Project agreed that access to SPL was largely restricted to highly educated higher earners and that this needed to be addressed, women using the scheme were “relying on the flexibility it offers to support their labour market attachment and help them return to their careers.” It argued that this had the potential to support wider gender equality goals, including tackling the gender pay gap and increasing women’s representation at senior levels. The Equal Parenting Project further noted that in recent years an increasing proportion of parents who use the scheme are mothers. The proportion of claims for shared parental pay from mothers increased from 18% in 2015/16 to 38% in 2023/24. This suggests that mums “are increasingly aware of and motivated to use it due to the flexibility the policy offers”.¹²⁵

123 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

124 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#)); [Q41](#) [Dr Forbes]

125 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

Figure 5: Percentage of claims for shared parental pay by gender



Source: HMRC Freedom of Information request

76. While some witnesses described SPL as a “failed policy” and several argued, as our predecessor Committee did in 2018, that it should be replaced by a policy of extended non-transferable leave for fathers, most experts acknowledged its value, or at least its potential.¹²⁶ For example, Jemima Olchawski of the Fawcett Society agreed that, notwithstanding its flaws, SPL was “one of the most powerful tools we have” to address key issues including women’s labour market disadvantage and the gender pay gap.¹²⁷ Abby Jitendra, Principal Policy Adviser at Joseph Rowntree Foundation, broadly agreed, while also lamenting “acceptance of the completely mediocre take-up rate.” She urged the Government to “really take the reins and do something better”.¹²⁸

77. Dr Forbes argued that the Government must look at reform of SPL alongside options to extend the period of non-transferable paternity leave because:

[...] it is also a means of actually creating cultural change. [...] that is pretty much our only means of extending beyond what would be offered for paternity leave. For any father, if there was going to be a six-week paternity leave, shared parental leave would be the only means of actually going beyond that. So, it is really important; it is a huge lever in creating cultural change.¹²⁹

126 [Q17](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q35](#) [Jemima Olchawski]; Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#))

127 [Q35](#)

128 [Q36](#)

129 [Q41](#)

Addressing some of the flaws of SPL

Simplifying or removing employment status, time in service and earnings requirements

- 78.** The eligibility criteria for the SPL scheme are a complex mix of employment status, earnings and time in service requirements. The scheme allows mothers to transfer up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay to their partner. For both parents to access shared leave and pay they must individually earn at least £125 per week and have been continuously employed by their respective employers for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the baby's due date. If the mother's partner is to take the SPL and pay, the mother must have been working for at least 26 weeks out of the 66 weeks before the week of the baby's due date (or placement date in the case of adoption or surrogacy) and have earned at least £390 in total across any 13 of the 66 weeks. The mother's partner must have been continuously employed by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the due date or placement date and earned at least £125 per week on average. Pay before any enhancement by the employer is at the statutory rate of £187.18 per week, or 90% of average weekly earnings, whichever is lower.¹³⁰
- 79.** There was broad consensus that these criteria are unnecessarily complex and very difficult for the average parent or employer to understand.¹³¹ It was clear from responses to our survey that the complexity of the criteria deterred a substantial proportion of parents from engaging with the scheme. For example, a typical comment from a mother was that it was "horribly complicated to work out".¹³² Our survey reflected previous studies that demonstrate that many employers also struggle to understand the rules of SPL. A mother responding to our survey told us that her employer had an HR department of nine people, only one of whom understood the eligibility criteria and application process (see raising awareness and understanding, below).¹³³
- 80.** Dr Gemma Mitchell of the University of East Anglia, an academic lawyer who has been researching parental leave law and policy for many years and who was determined that her partner should use SPL, reported that even she found it difficult to understand and navigate. She told us:

130 GOV.UK, '[Shared Parental Leave and Pay](#)', accessed 8 May 2025

131 See, for example, The Scottish Women's Convention ([SPL0004](#)); Unite the Union ([SPL0022](#)); Maternity Action ([SPL0025](#)); The Dad Shift ([SPL0033](#)); Pregnant and Screwed ([SPL0036](#)); The Fawcett Society ([SPL0045](#))

132 Survey respondent no. 97

133 Survey respondent no. 8

Even though I went in knowing about all the issues [...] it was still a nightmare working it out with HR and it was still very difficult. My partner was the first man ever to take it at the organisation that he worked in. If it was not for me kind of pushing it and being really Rottweiler-ish about it, it might not have happened so easily.¹³⁴

Witnesses agreed that requiring two employers to coordinate periods of leave transferred from a mother to her partner would inevitably be relatively burdensome for employers, particularly smaller workplaces without professional HR resources (see raising awareness and understanding, below).¹³⁵

81. Dr Mitchell, with Dr Charlotte Bendall of the University of Birmingham Law School, argued that the SPL eligibility criteria should be substantially revised because they do not reflect the reality of many working couples' lives, particularly those in routine and manual occupations and on lower incomes. They emphasised that the requirement to be an employee with six months service with the same employer "will exclude many, particularly precarious workers." Their view was that employment status and earnings eligibility requirements are simply "unnecessary".¹³⁶
82. A range of witnesses agreed that the Government's aim should be to ensure that all workers, regardless of employment status and earnings, should have access to a dedicated period of paid leave, and SPL if they are in a couple.¹³⁷ Many witnesses highlighted the exclusion of self-employed fathers from paternity and SPL, and most noted generally poor provision for non-employee working parents across the whole system.¹³⁸

Raising awareness and understanding among employers

83. SPL has been in place for a decade but awareness and understanding of the scheme among some types of employers in some sectors is relatively low. The Government's evaluation of SPL, published in 2023, found that across all sizes of employer, awareness of the scheme among managers was around three-quarters (73%), with a notable difference in awareness between managers in large employers of 250+ people (94%) and smaller employers with 5 to 50 employees (71%). Awareness also varied by sector.

134 [Q45](#)

135 [Q77](#)

136 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia, and Dr Charlotte Bendall, Birmingham Law School ([SPL0005](#))

137 See, for example, [Q8](#) [Joeli Brearley]; Jessica Hobbs, Birkbeck College, University of London ([SPL0012](#)); Trade Union Congress ([SPL0051](#))

138 See, for example, [Q9](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q35](#) [Jemima Olchawski]; [Q43](#) [Abby Jitendra]; [Q64](#), [Q66](#), [Q73](#) [Nikki Pound]

It was highest in the public sector (87%) and high across the private and not-for-profit sectors (72% and 79% respectively). However, awareness was relatively low in some parts of the economy, for example in construction (61%) and hotels and restaurants (57%).¹³⁹

84. Levels of knowledge and understanding of SPL among managers also vary considerably by employer type and are much lower. Around two-fifths (43%) of managers across all workplaces say they have “some knowledge of what SPL involves”. Only 15% have a “good understanding”. The figure for good understanding among managers varies considerably by employer size, from 12% in the smallest employers to 45% in the largest:

Figure 6: Employers’ awareness and knowledge of SPL, by workplace size



Source: Government evaluation report, figure 3.2

85. Witnesses put forward a range of ideas for how the Government could help raise awareness and understanding of SPL among employers. Claire McCartney from the HR professionals’ membership and accreditation organisation, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, suggested:

A communication campaign would perhaps be really helpful around all the different types of parental leave, because it is a confusing system. Providing template policies that could be used by HR professionals and

139 Department for Business and Trade, [Shared Parental Leave Evaluation report](#), Research Paper Series Number 2023/010, June 2023, para 3.18

managers, particularly in smaller organisations, could be helpful. [...] we could also have promotional materials that people can put in their workplace settings.¹⁴⁰

Ms McCartney believed that “some kind of illustrative toolkit or flowchart to give you an image of the steps that you need to take” would be helpful, particularly for smaller employers.¹⁴¹ The Equal Parenting Project agreed that “simplified communication”, such as minimising text and using graphics to explain SPL could aid understanding.¹⁴²

Reducing barriers to flexibility: notice periods

- 86.** SPL allows parents to take leave in up to three blocks. Requests for blocks of leave cannot be refused by employers if requested by an eligible employee with at least eight weeks’ notice. Employees can also request that blocks of leave be split into non-consecutive periods, for example splitting a 12-week block to work every other week, thereby using six weeks of their SPL entitlement in that 12-week block. Employers can turn down requests to split blocks of leave. Employees can request to change the dates of blocks of leave previously agreed. These requests also require eight weeks’ notice.¹⁴³
- 87.** While the flexibility facilitated by SPL was broadly welcomed, some witnesses argued that eight weeks’ notice to book blocks of leave and change the dates of leave was unnecessarily cumbersome, particularly where support from both parents’ employers was required.¹⁴⁴ Dr Mitchell acknowledged that employers would require some notice of their employees’ leave plans, but argued that eight weeks was unnecessarily onerous on employees and “incompatible with the reality” of balancing work with shared responsibilities for parenting.¹⁴⁵

Financially incentivising SPL take up

- 88.** As discussed in chapter 3, most campaigners and expert witnesses called for the Government’s review to prioritise extending the period of dedicated statutory paternity leave, at a higher rate of statutory pay.¹⁴⁶ While the Equal Parenting Project agreed that extending paternity leave would be

140 [Q72](#)

141 [Q75](#)

142 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

143 GOV.UK, ‘[Shared Parental Leave and Pay: employer guide](#)’, accessed 7 May 2025; See also, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [Shared Parental Leave and Pay: Employers’ technical guide](#), December 2014 (updated April 2020)

144 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#)); [Q46](#) [Dr Mitchell]

145 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#))

146 For example, The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#)); Joseph Rowntree Foundation ([SPL0049](#))

a “good first step”, it argued that a reform programme which focused entirely on that aspect of the system risked moving away from a “narrative of encouraging shared care”. Its view was that the Government’s review must also consider reforms to the SPL scheme, in line with the shared care narrative.¹⁴⁷

- 89.** Its preferred option was to increase statutory paternity pay to 90% of earnings during two weeks of paternity leave and additionally making fathers and other parents eligible for four weeks of leave at 90% of earnings within the SPL scheme. This would allow four weeks of the mother’s entitlement at 90% of average earnings to be transferred to the father/co-parent at any point during the first year after a baby’s birth. This proposal would achieve a right to six weeks of sustainably paid leave for fathers/co-parents, while also substantially increasing the financial incentive to share care. The Equal Parenting Project argued that this approach was likely to encourage participation across all income groups because of the improved financial offer. Under this proposal, maternity pay in the first six weeks would remain at 90% of average earnings but be capped at a higher rate tax threshold to minimise the overall costs of the reform.¹⁴⁸ As noted in chapter 2, most witnesses were opposed to any diminution of existing maternity entitlements, including a cap on maternity pay in the first six weeks. Most were also broadly opposed to relying on maternal transfer, on which this reform would continue to rely.
- 90.** Other academic witnesses noted examples from overseas of financial incentives for families where parents share leave entitlements. For example, University College London noted Germany’s system, which has a household entitlement with a financial incentive (“partnership bonus”) for fathers to share care.¹⁴⁹ Dr Mitchell reported that Portugal had used a financial “sharing bonus” (a fully compensated additional month of leave) for fathers and other parents who take at least four weeks of the mother’s maternity leave allowance to care for their babies on their own.¹⁵⁰ The Fatherhood Institute provided further detail about the Portuguese model. Families are entitled to an initial parental leave period of either 120 days at 100% of earnings or 150 days at 80%. The mother must take at least 42 days of leave; fathers and other parents are obliged to take at least 28 days from an allocation of 35. If each parent takes at least 30 consecutive days, or two periods of 15 days, while the other returns to work, the sharing bonus applies.¹⁵¹ Dr Mitchell’s research found that a financial bonus “sends a clear

147 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

148 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0052](#))

149 University College London ([SPL0027](#))

150 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#))

151 The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

signal that parents should share the entitlement”. She reported that take up of at least 30 consecutive days of transferable leave by eligible fathers in Portugal was just over half (51.4%).¹⁵²

91. CONCLUSION

Shared Parental Leave (SPL) has clear benefits for couples who are able to access it. SPL enables a range of flexible options in how parents share their parental responsibilities and balance these with working life. It is the only aspect of our system that allows fathers and other parents an extended period to care for their babies, strengthening bonds with their children and enhancing family life. The scheme’s flexibility allows mothers to maintain attachment to the labour market and career progression. There is evidence that mothers are increasingly aware of this and taking advantage of the flexibility the scheme allows. However, SPL’s complex set of employment status, time in service and earnings eligibility criteria exclude many working parents and are extremely difficult for most parents and their employers to understand. Take up is consequently too low to have a significant societal or economy-wide impact.

92. RECOMMENDATION

The Government must consider steps to address flaws in SPL, increase take up and widen access. The Government’s review must examine the function and necessity of SPL’s complex eligibility criteria, with a view to simplifying or removing the employment status, time in service and earnings criteria. Its objective for reforms of SPL must be to widen access to as broad a range of working parents as possible, including the self-employed and those on lower incomes.

93. RECOMMENDATION

The Government’s review should examine barriers to flexibility in the SPL scheme, including the requirement for employees to give employers eight weeks’ notice of blocks of leave and changes to start and end dates for leave. This should be with a view, subject to consultation with employers, to reducing notice periods and maximising flexibility within the scheme.

152 Dr Gemma Mitchell, University of East Anglia ([SPL0013](#))

94.

RECOMMENDATION

The Government's review must consider financial incentives to increase take up of SPL. The review should examine approaches taken in overseas systems, including the German "partnership bonus" and Portugal's "sharing bonus", which provide additional paid leave to couples in which both parents take a substantial portion of leave while the other returns to paid work.

5 Extending access to paid leave

95. The Government has said that it wants to ensure the parental leave system better supports all working families.¹⁵³ As described throughout this Report, many non-employee and low paid working parents, particularly fathers and other parents, are excluded or poorly provided for in the current system. Witnesses highlighted other groups who are also excluded or poorly served, notably kinship carers, single parents and parents of multiple births.¹⁵⁴ In this chapter, we set out the case for the Government to consider the needs of these groups in its proposed review.

Kinship carers

96. Kinship carers are typically family members or friends who step in to care for children after family crises, including serious illnesses and deaths of parents, and other extremely challenging family circumstances, such as parents going into prison, issues with drug and alcohol misuse and neglect or abuse.¹⁵⁵ The 2021 census showed that there were around 141,000 children living in kinship care in England and Wales.¹⁵⁶
97. The charity Kinship noted that the majority of kinship carers take on children through informal arrangements made privately within the family, rather than via formal guardianship or other caring arrangements made by court order or foster care placement. Kinship carers have no specific rights to paid employment leave, although a growing number of employers have their own policies.¹⁵⁷ For example, B&Q's kinship carer leave policy is six weeks at 100% pay and 33 weeks at 50%, equivalent to its enhanced adoption pay policy.¹⁵⁸ Nikki Pound of the TUC reported that the USDAW union had negotiated a policy of 26 weeks leave at full pay for employees of Tesco who

153 See, for example, Labour Party, [Change: Labour Party manifesto 2024](#), June 2024, p81

154 See, for example, Kinship ([SPL0018](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#)); Dr Michelle Weldon-Johns ([SPL0048](#)); Dr Laura Radcliffe et al ([SPL0015](#)); Single Parent Rights ([SPL0023](#))

155 Kinship ([SPL0018](#))

156 Kinship ([SPL0018](#)); Office for National Statistics, '[Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](#)' (September 2023), accessed 8 May 2025

157 Kinship ([SPL0018](#)); Kinship, '[Kinship Friendly Employers case studies](#)', accessed 8 May 2025

158 Kinship, '[Kinship Friendly Employers case studies](#)', accessed 8 May 2025

have a special guardianship order to care for children.¹⁵⁹ The Kinship charity told us, however, that “employers of all types and sizes tell us they can only go so far and need the government to introduce statutory entitlements too.”¹⁶⁰

- 98.** The Kinship charity reported that lack of statutory provision is “pushing kinship families into poverty and the benefits system.” It told us that 80% of kinship carers it works with have been “forced to leave work permanently or reduce their hours” after taking on the care of a child. It is calling for statutory provision for kinship carers equivalent to adoption leave and pay i.e. up to 52 weeks of leave paid at the statutory rate or 90% of average earnings (whichever is lower) for up to 39 weeks for the primary carer, with secondary carers eligible for paternity leave and pay.¹⁶¹
- 99.** A wide range of witnesses supported inclusion of kinship carers in the statutory paid leave system.¹⁶² Claire McCartney of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development believed there was a strong case for the Government’s review to consider the needs of kinship carers but recommended a careful approach, including consultation with employers, given that they were already dealing with a range of additional employment rights demands.¹⁶³ Abby Jitendra of Joseph Rowntree Foundation also noted more broadly that employers will be coping with “a lot of change with the Employment Rights Bill”, and that consultation was vital to avoid the perception that reforms were about “bearing down on employers”.¹⁶⁴
- 100.** There have been other calls for inclusion of kinship carers in the statutory system in recent years. The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, published in 2022, recommended paid leave equivalent to adoption leave and pay for kinship carers and special guardians with a child arrangements court order for a child who would otherwise be in care.¹⁶⁵ A similar recommendation was made by the House of Lords’ Children and Families Act 2014 Committee in December 2022.¹⁶⁶ In May 2024, the House of Commons Education Committee acknowledged that “many kinship carers live in poverty” and urged the Government to consider additional financial

159 [Q90](#)

160 Kinship ([SPL0018](#))

161 Kinship ([SPL0018](#)); GOV.UK, ‘[Adoption leave and pay](#)’, accessed 8 May 2025

162 [Q8](#) [Joeli Brearley]; [Q9](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; Dr Laura Radcliffe et al ([SPL0015](#)) Kinship ([SPL0018](#)); University College London ([SPL0027](#)); Pregnant Then Screwed ([SPL0036](#)); Dr Michelle Weldon-Johns ([SPL0048](#))

163 [Q88](#)

164 [Q55](#)

165 Josh MacAlister, *The independent review of children’s social care*, May 2022

166 House of Lords Children and Families Act 2014 Committee, Report of Session 2022–23, [Children and Families Act 2014: A failure of implementation](#), HL Paper 100

support.¹⁶⁷ Lord Palmer of Childs Hill and the Lord Bishop of Newcastle have tabled amendments to the Employment Rights Bill to provide statutory paid leave to a range of kinship carers.¹⁶⁸

- 101.** The Government has heavily implied in answers to Parliamentary Questions that it will consider provision for kinship carers in its review of the parental leave system. For example, in December 2024, Justin Madders MP, the minister with responsibility for employment rights, said:

We recognise the vital role that kinship carers play in caring for vulnerable children, and the challenges that many face in balancing that care with employment. [...] We will also review the parental leave system to ensure that it best supports all working families, and work is already under way to plan for that delivery.¹⁶⁹

102. RECOMMENDATION

The Government’s review must include consideration of the needs of kinship carers, with a view to including them in the paid parental leave system. This should include consideration of the costs and wider benefits of implementing statutory paid leave for kinship carers, in line with provision for parents by adoption and surrogacy.

Single parents

- 103.** The Dad Shift and others argued that the Government should look at improving statutory leave for single parents.¹⁷⁰ Dr Laura Radcliffe of the Liverpool University Management School and others from the Future Families Work network, argued for “equitable leave entitlements for single parents, ensuring they receive the same total allocation as two-parent families”.¹⁷¹ Alex Lloyd Hunter noted that it was “common” in overseas systems for single parents to receive a second parent’s entitlement or to be able to “transfer it to a friend or family member.”¹⁷²

167 [Letter from Mr Robin Walker MP, Chair of the Education Committee, to David Johnston MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing, Department for Education, 24 May 2024](#)

168 See House of Lords, [Employment Rights Bill: Second Marshalled List of Amendments to be Moved in Committee of the Whole House](#), amendments 78 and 29

169 HC Deb, 12 December 2024, [col 1019](#)

170 For example, [Q8](#) [Joeli Brearley]; [Q9](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]; [Q86](#) [Nikki Pound]

171 Dr Laura Radcliffe et al ([SPL0015](#))

172 [Q9](#) [Alex Lloyd Hunter]

- 104.** The campaign group Single Parent Rights was concerned that the differential between leave allocations for single parents and couples, while currently “not huge” at two weeks, would increase if the Government extends paternity leave without fully considering the impacts on single parent families. It argued:

In recent years there has been an increasing focus on parental leave for the non-birthing/second parent with many prominent and popular campaigns pushing for non-transferable leave for fathers/co-parents. While this is a positive move to tackle gender inequalities within couples, very few campaigns or policy recommendations have considered the needs of single parents. If parental leave policies are reformed to include a non-transferable portion of leave, or bonus leave, for the second parent this could leave single parent families with less time with a (paid) home-based care giver. This is despite the fact that evidence shows that single parents face greater work/family conflict than parents in two-parent families and single parent families face higher poverty rates (almost double that of two-parent families).¹⁷³

- 105.** Campaigners and academic witnesses set out some overseas approaches to paid parental leave for single parents in more detail. In the Norwegian system, mothers automatically receive the paternal quota of leave.¹⁷⁴ University College London noted that single parents in Norway are also entitled to an additional 20/30 days leave per year until their child reaches the age of 18. German single parents receive a two-month paid leave “bonus”.¹⁷⁵ In Sweden, single parents are allowed to transfer up to 90 days of paid leave to “significant others such as grandparents.”¹⁷⁶

106. RECOMMENDATION

In reforming the parental leave system, the Government must address inequality for single parent families. Unlike in many developed countries, single parents do not receive any portion of the paid leave that would be available to the household if they had a co-parent. Extending paternity leave entitlements risks exacerbating this inequality. We recommend the Government’s review consider options for single parents to reallocate some or all of the entitlements of co-parents to nominated family friends or relatives who can share caring responsibilities. It should draw on experiences in overseas systems, including Norway and Sweden.

173 Single Parent Rights ([SPL0023](#))

174 Brandth, B., Kvande, E. (2018), [Norway country note](#), in Blum, S., Koslowski, A., Macht, A. and Moss, P. (eds.), *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2018*

175 University College London ([SPL0027](#))

176 The Work Foundation at Lancaster University ([SPL0039](#))

Multiple births

- 107.** Witnesses emphasised the additional costs faced by parents who have twins, triplets and larger multiple births and called for the paid leave system to reflect this.¹⁷⁷ The Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre at Birmingham City University cited research evidence on the unique physical and emotional demands on parents in multiple birth families. Survey evidence suggested that multiple birth fathers partly attribute the financial, physical and emotional stresses to the “shortfall” in paid parental leave. It reported that:

Multiple birth fathers are under a triple level of pressure, assisting in around-the-clock care of their babies as a necessity, prioritising work and financially supporting their family during a highly demanding time. This is in addition to supporting their partners’ physical and emotional needs.¹⁷⁸

- 108.** The Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre emphasised that the UK ranks “among the lowest of all advanced economies in terms of [...] multiple births support”.¹⁷⁹ Witnesses noted a number of overseas systems which better recognise the financial, practical and emotional difficulties after multiple births through additional paid leave for parents. For example, Sweden allocates an additional 180 days for each additional child, to be taken during the first 12 years of the child’s life.¹⁸⁰ France recently legislated for seven additional days’ paternity leave for multiple birth fathers. In Spain, fathers of multiple births can extend their leave entitlement of 16 weeks by two weeks.¹⁸¹

109. RECOMMENDATION

Our paid parental leave system provides comparatively very poorly for parents of multiple births, who face unique financial, practical and emotional impacts in caring for their babies and young children and juggling work commitments. The Government’s review must consider options to mitigate these impacts through additional financial support. It should draw on lessons from overseas systems, including in Sweden, France and Spain, which provide extra paid leave for multiple births.

177 See, for example, Q8 [Joeli Brearley]; Pregnant Then Screwed (SPL0036); Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038); Unite the Union (SPL0022)

178 Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

179 Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

180 Unite the Union (SPL0022); Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

181 Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

6 Modelling the costs and benefits and measuring the success of reforms

110. The debate around reform of the paid parental leave system has often focused on the additional costs involved, particularly of increasing statutory pay and extending fathers' rights to paid leave.¹⁸² Recently there have been efforts to frame reforms as a long-term investment, modelling high additional direct costs alongside wider social and economic benefits, notably those achieved through increasing mothers' labour market attachment and career progression, with potentially substantial gains to economic output and growth.¹⁸³ Below we set out how the Government could model the overall economic impacts of necessary reforms, firmly aligning them with its key growth mission. We also recommend metrics by which to measure the success of reforms through the lens of gender equality.

Estimated costs

111. Estimating the additional direct costs of the types of reforms to statutory paternity leave and pay examined in this Report is challenging, in part because the Government does not routinely publish official data specifically on take up of and expenditure on paid paternity leave.¹⁸⁴ A recent answer to a Parliamentary Question sets out HMRC data on annual expenditure on parental leave payments, including statutory paternity pay (SPP). Total expenditure on SPP in 2023/24, the latest year for which data are available, was £69 million.¹⁸⁵ This allows a basic calculation to estimate additional costs of reform. In 2023/24 the SPP rate was £172.48 per week. Substantially increasing the rate would have a commensurate impact on expenditure. For example, an increase to 90% of average earnings (approximately £606 per week, based on median hourly earnings of £19.24 for men working full-time

182 [Q43](#) [Abby Jitendra]

183 See, in particular, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, '[Improving Statutory Paternity Leave would benefit families and the economy](#)', accessed 12 May 2025

184 The Government's caseload and expenditure data do not include a separate breakdown for statutory paternity pay, see GOV.UK, '[Benefit expenditure and caseload tables 2025](#)', accessed 12 May 2025

185 Parental Leave: Costs, [PQ 45980](#), 29 April 2025

and a 35-hour working week)¹⁸⁶ assumes an increase in the order of 251%, to around £173 million. Given this figure is based on a policy of a maximum of two weeks SPP per father/co-parent, each additional week of SPP at this increased rate assumes a rise in expenditure of around half of this figure (approximately £87 million). Extending paid paternity leave from a maximum of two weeks to six weeks, as recommended by a range of witnesses to our inquiry, therefore implies additional expenditure on SPP of at least £348 million per annum.

112. This basic calculation will be a substantial under-estimate of the actual additional costs, given that increases in the rate of pay typically lead to increases in take up of leave by fathers/co-parents, as discussed in chapter 2. The calculation also does not take account of any extension of access to SPP, for example to self-employed and other non-employee fathers, or the costs to the Exchequer of the impacts on tax revenues of more fathers/co-parents taking leave.
113. Recently published analysis by Joseph Rowntree Foundation modelled the potential total fiscal costs of reform, accounting for an increase in the SPP rate to 90% of average earnings, assumed increases in take up of SPP and estimates of the overall implications for tax revenues from working parents, drawing on data from 19 countries across Europe and north America.¹⁸⁷ The model calculated the total additional costs of its preferred reform option of six weeks non-transferable paternity leave paid at 90% of average earnings with a cap set at £1,200 per week and an earnings-related Paternity Allowance equivalent of Maternity Allowance for self-employed co-parents. This model projects total additional costs of £1.15 billion per year. It found, however, that these costs would be outweighed by wider economic benefits, which we discuss below.¹⁸⁸

Wider social and economic benefits

114. Witnesses highlighted a range of “substantial and persistent” societal benefits of extending parental leave for fathers and other parents. For example, research demonstrates that fathers who take paternity leave have “improved relationships with their children, with higher father child attachment and increased [...] involvement in caregiving.”¹⁸⁹ Research

186 See, House of Commons Library, *Economic indicators: average earnings*, [Research Paper 02795](#), April 2025

187 [Q54](#) [Abby Jitendra]

188 See, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, ‘[Improving Statutory Paternity Leave would benefit families and the economy](#)’, accessed 12 May 2025; [Q43](#) [Abby Jitenrda]

189 See, for example, Marcus Tamm, “[Fathers’ parental leave-taking, childcare involvement and labor market participation](#)”, *Labour Economics*, Vol 59, August 2019, pp 184–97 cited in, Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University ([SPL0038](#))

has found clear benefits for mothers' careers and reductions in household gender pay gaps,¹⁹⁰ and increased women's employment.¹⁹¹ More leave for fathers is associated with health benefits for both fathers and mothers, including reduced rates of postnatal depression.¹⁹² Research backs up evidence from Aviva about the business benefits of extending leave periods for fathers and other parents, notably increased employee engagement, retention and reduced recruitment costs, as discussed in chapter 3.¹⁹³

- 115.** Evidence from overseas systems suggests that normalising an extended period of paternity leave is likely to have long-term impacts on the division of child caring and wider unpaid care between men and women. Research shows that women not only overwhelmingly bear unpaid child caring responsibilities but also wider caring and domestic responsibilities. They are consequently far more likely to reduce their hours of paid work, for example by working part-time or in term-time only, or drop out of the labour market altogether for a period, harming their career and earnings progression.¹⁹⁴ The Women's Budget Group has calculated that women carry out around 60% more unpaid domestic work, including cooking and cleaning, than men and that this plays a crucial role in gender inequality, including the gender pay gap.¹⁹⁵
- 116.** There is some evidence from the SPL scheme, albeit at low levels of take up, that couples who share caring for their babies in the first year are more likely to more equally share parenting responsibilities beyond that.¹⁹⁶ Joeli Brearley of Pregnant Then Screwed noted evidence that countries that have longer periods of non-transferable leave for fathers, paid at a "decent percentage of salary", have smaller unpaid labour gaps between men and women. She said that:

190 See, for example, Anderson S.H., "[Paternity leave and the motherhood penalty: New causal evidence](#)", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol 80(5), August 2019, 2018, pp 1125–43 cited in, Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

191 See, for example, Andysz et al, "[Availability and the use of work-life balance benefits guaranteed by the Polish Labour Code among workers employed on the basis of employment contracts in small and medium enterprises](#)", *International Journal of Occupational Medicine and Environmental Health*, Vol 29(4), 2016, pp 709–17 cited in, Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

192 See, for example, Lloyd Frank Philpott and Paul Corcoran, "[Paternal postnatal depression in Ireland: Prevalence and associated factors](#)", *Midwifery*, Vol 56, January 2018, pp 121–7 cited in, Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

193 Q65 [Jonny Briggs]; see also, for example, Aidukaite, J., Family support systems in the Baltic and Nordic countries: an explorative overview, in *Challenges to the Welfare State*, 2021, pp 11–32, cited in, Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University (SPL0038)

194 See, for example, Drs Sara De Benedictis (Brunel University London), Tamsyn Dent (King's College London) and Natalie Wreyford (King's College London) (SPL0042)

195 Women's Budget Group, [Spirals of inequality: How unpaid care is at the heart of gender inequalities](#), April 2020

196 The Equal Parenting Project (SPL0052)

In other words, men do more in the home; they do more of the cooking, cleaning, sock pairing and childcare over the lifetime of that child. It is a trigger for changing the culture, not only in society and in workplaces, but in the home, and that is vital.¹⁹⁷

- 117.** Gender inequality in the labour market is a drag on economic output. Artificially shrinking the number of skilled women in the labour force because they are forced to reduce their hours or leave the labour market to care for children and take on wider unpaid caring and domestic responsibilities reduces the overall quality of labour.¹⁹⁸
- 118.** The Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Centre for Progressive Policy model described above calculates that the net economic effect of six weeks of leave for fathers/co-parents paid at 90% of average earnings, capped at £1,200 per week, would result in a positive economic contribution of £2.68 billion per annum. This is achieved because the overall losses to economic output of men taking more time away from work (£2.8 billion) are substantially outweighed by the benefits from increased female output (£5.5 billion).¹⁹⁹
- 119.** Abby Jitendra of Joseph Rowntree Foundation urged the Government to adopt this model or similar to project not only the additional direct fiscal costs of paid parental leave reforms but also the wider economic benefits. She told us that this kind of approach was necessary to ensure progress, because:

[...] we get so bogged down in the cost of policy. We are so weary of hearing that x policy will cost £x billion. It just feels like there is not much fiscal space to do anything. But there are policy changes that will have a net benefit. [...] this is not about saying that there are no costs at all. We need to be grown up about what the cost of this policy will be. [...] However, those changes will have an impact; there will be a benefit, and it will pay, which is really brilliant. That is quite rare in social policy.²⁰⁰

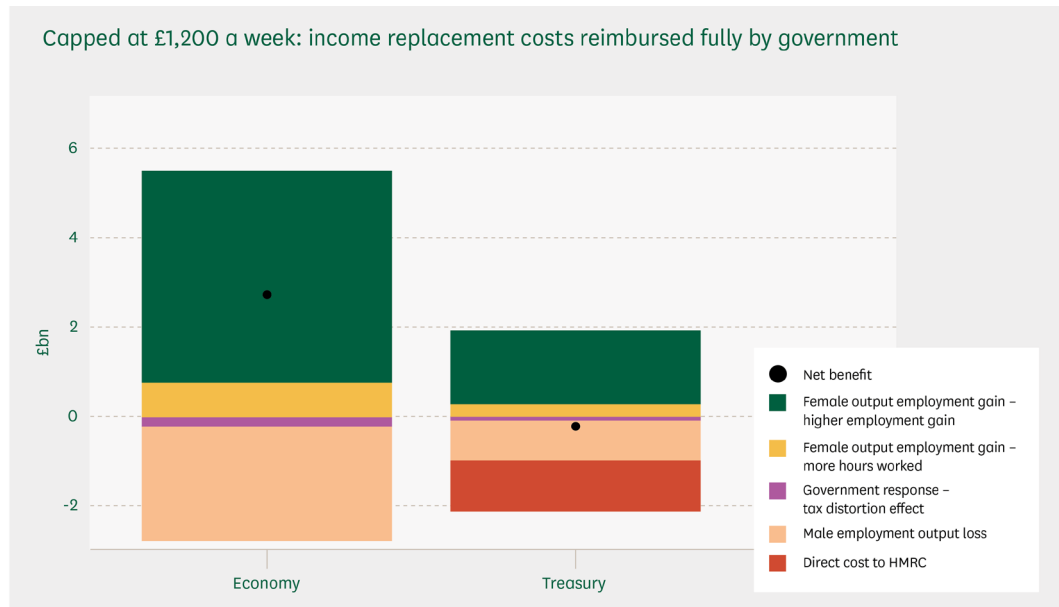
197 [Q29](#)

198 See, for example, Centre for Progressive Policy, [Fair growth: Opportunities for economic renewal](#), June 2023

199 See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [‘Improving Statutory Paternity Leave would benefit families and the economy’](#), accessed 12 May 2025

200 [Q56](#)

Figure 7: Modelling results for the costs and benefits to the treasury and the economy of 6 weeks of paternity leave at 90% pay



Source: Centre for Progressive Policy modelling for Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025). See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [‘Improving Statutory Paternity Leave would benefit families and the economy’](#), accessed 12 May 2025

120.

RECOMMENDATION

The Government has said the parental leave system is broken and promised to launch a “full review”. It is clear that the system has some fundamental failings, including low statutory pay across the board; inadequate leave periods for fathers and other parents; exclusion of many working parents and guardians; and design flaws and unnecessary complexity in the SPL scheme. We acknowledge that it is not feasible to solve all of these problems overnight. However, we expect the Government’s proposed review to lay the foundation for progress in each of these key areas over the course of this Parliament and in the longer term. Working parents will be let down by a review that leads only to tinkering around the edges of the system. The Government should commit to meaningful reforms in the medium term, followed by an assessment of the impacts at the end of this Parliament, with a view to going further towards a more gender equal parental leave system.

121. RECOMMENDATION

Producing much-needed substantial change to our paid parental leave system will require considerable financial investment. For example, the direct costs of extending and increasing paid leave for fathers and other parents to six weeks at 90% of average earnings are likely to be over £1 billion per year. The Government must, however, weigh these costs against the wider economic benefits. The model recently developed by the Centre for Progressive Policy for Joseph Rowntree Foundation demonstrates how this could be done. It projects a net economic benefit from this reform of £2.68 billion per annum around two years after full implementation. The Government must examine this model in detail with a view to adopting it or a similar approach to assessing the likely costs and benefits of necessary reforms.

Setting long-term objectives and measuring success

- 122.** Witnesses set out some clear ideas for the long-term objectives for reforms and metrics by which their success of could be measured. The Fawcett Society's view was that:

Overall, this has to be about increasing uptake [of leave by fathers], equalising unpaid caring responsibilities and getting as close as we can to equal—or having the opportunity for it to be equal within households where they are making unencumbered choices. It also needs to take into account supporting women's employment and their return to employment, and fathers' time to bond with their children and support their partners.²⁰¹

- 123.** Several witnesses pointed to reducing the UK's relatively large gender pay gap as a headline measure of policy success. They noted that countries with better paid parental leave offers for fathers and other parents tended to have smaller gender pay gaps. Pregnant Then Screwed, the Fatherhood Institute and others noted that systems which allowed fathers/co-parents at least six weeks leave at 90% of earnings had on average a four percentage point smaller gender pay gap than systems with less than six weeks of well-paid leave. These countries also had a smaller gap between men's and women's labour market participation, on average by 3.7 percentage points.²⁰²

201 [Q53](#) [Jemima Olchawski]

202 [Q18](#) [Joeli Brearley]; The Fatherhood Institute ([SPL0028](#))

124. Witnesses noted that there were a range of measures at the household level that drive the overall gender pay gap and gendered labour market participation picture. Abby Jitendra of Joseph Rowntree Foundation argued that the Government should frame its review around progress at the household level that demonstrates “increased freedom, and increased space and agency around choices” in relation to balancing work and caring responsibilities.²⁰³ The Equal Parenting Project suggested some specific metrics, including:

- unpaid work in the home by gender, including childcare and wider domestic responsibilities, measuring hours spent by each parent and “perceived division of work between parents”.
- return to work rates by mothers.
- amount of paid and unpaid leave taken by gender.
- use of flexible working options by men, including trends in part-time working, compressed hours (e.g. working full-time hours over the course of four days), and job-sharing.
- levels of maternal and paternal mental health and wellbeing.
- perceived consequences of policy use (in particular, a successfully implemented policy would see perceived negative consequences of men taking leave reduce over time).²⁰⁴

125. RECOMMENDATION

The Government’s review should have gender equality at its heart. Countries which provide a substantial period of well-paid leave for fathers and other parents have on average a four-percentage point smaller gender pay gap than those that allow less than six weeks. Increasing women’s labour market participation and earnings and reducing the gender gap pay should be key long-term objectives. Progress must be monitored at the household level, including by hours spent on unpaid caring and work in the home by gender; women’s rates of return to work after births; and take up of paid and unpaid parental leave by gender. The Government must ensure data on these measures are transparently available.

203 [Q54](#)

204 The Equal Parenting Project ([SPL0057](#))

Conclusions and recommendations

Increasing statutory pay

1. The UK's rate of statutory parental pay is completely out of kilter with the cost of living. At considerably less than half of the National Living Wage and real Living Wage, it has not kept pace with inflation and is far below rates in most comparable countries. This causes financial hardship, particularly in lower income households, and is a barrier to parents taking the time they need to care for their babies. The low rate particularly inhibits take up of the very limited amount of statutory leave available to fathers and other parents, a disproportionately high number of whom are entirely reliant on the inadequate statutory minimum. (Conclusion, Paragraph 30)
2. A key aim of the Government's review of the parental leave system must be to incentivise greater gender equality in parenting responsibilities. Increasing statutory paternity pay is a vital part of achieving this. As a priority, the Government must consider raising paternity pay to the level of maternity pay in the first six weeks i.e. 90% of average earnings. We recommend this change be made during this Parliament. (Recommendation, Paragraph 31)
3. In the longer term, the Government must also consider a feasible approach to phased introduction of increases to statutory pay across the system, to bring rates for all working parents up to a very substantial proportion (80% or more) of average earnings or the real Living Wage. Overall paid maternity entitlements in the UK compare unfavourably with most developed countries; reform of statutory pay must therefore not include any diminution of existing maternity entitlements. (Recommendation, Paragraph 32)

Extending paternity leave

4. A key objective of reform of the paid parental leave system should be to promote equality. Maternity and paternity rights should be as equal as possible, to benefit mothers, fathers and families. We therefore welcome the Government's intention to legislate for a day one right to paternity leave, in line with rights to maternity leave. A day one right to unpaid paternity leave

would be, however, only a limited move towards equality. The Government should either amend the Employment Rights Bill to legislate for a day one right to paid paternity leave or at least commit to consider bringing in this vital change, in consultation with employers, as part of its forthcoming review of the parental leave system. (Recommendation, Paragraph 61)

5. Since introducing up to two weeks of paid statutory paternity leave over 20 years ago, the UK has fallen far behind many comparable countries. We now have one of the worst leave offers in the developed world for fathers and other parents. A maximum of two weeks paternity leave is completely out of step with how most couples want to share their parenting responsibilities and balance these with working life. Our system entrenches outdated gender stereotypes about caring and harms fathers, mothers and families. The system requires substantial change. (Conclusion, Paragraph 64)
6. There is very strong evidence from around the world and from UK employers' gender equal schemes that providing fathers and other parents with an extended period of sustainably paid statutory leave typically transforms take up. Extending paternity leave therefore has the potential to shift the dial on gendered allocation of parental responsibilities. Addressing the stark gendered disparity in our statutory leave periods should therefore be considered fundamental to fixing our broken system and a key priority of the Government's forthcoming review. (Recommendation, Paragraph 65)
7. The Government's review must consider a feasible plan to incrementally increase the period of paid paternity leave, drawing on lessons from recent reform programmes overseas, for example in Spain. As an initial medium-term objective, it should set out a pathway to increasing paid statutory paternity leave to six weeks over the course of this Parliament. It should aim to ensure maximum flexibility in the number of blocks the leave can be taken in during the first year after a baby's birth or adoption. The Government must also assess the likely benefits of making a portion of the extended period of paternity leave compulsory, to drive culture change and normalise fathers taking a greater role in caring responsibilities. (Recommendation, Paragraph 66)
8. Lack of provision for self-employed parents, particularly fathers and other parents, is a key flaw in the system. Given the substantial economic contribution of self-employed fathers, it is grossly unfair to exclude them. Lack of provision causes financial hardship and associated family difficulties, notably where a self-employed father "does the right thing" in taking time away from earning to care for his partner after a caesarean section or medical complications after birth. The Government must aim to rectify this by: a) considering options for providing statutory paid leave for all self-employed and non-employee working fathers as part of its review of the parental leave system; including, b) introducing a Paternity Allowance

equivalent to Maternity Allowance, which provides self-employed mothers with up to 39 weekly payments at the statutory rate; and c) rectifying unfairness in the existing Maternity Allowance rules, including in relation to permitted paid self-employed work beyond 10 “keeping in touch” days while in receipt of the allowance, as identified in our recent follow up Report on misogyny in music, to ensure unfairness is not replicated in provision for self-employed fathers. (Recommendation, Paragraph 67)

9. While there is evidence of appetite for more leave among fathers across occupational and income groups, fathers in lower income and working-class occupational groups may face additional cultural barriers to taking leave. These households and communities are more likely to hold traditionalist views about gendered caring responsibilities, and these fathers are less likely to have supportive employers. (Conclusion, Paragraph 68)
10. The design and staffing of services for new parents caring for babies is highly gendered and can exclude or marginalise men, compounding cultural barriers to them taking a greater role in caring for their children. (Conclusion, Paragraph 69)
11. Alongside reforms of statutory paternity pay and leave entitlements, the Government’s review must consider steps it can take to reduce wider cultural and societal barriers to fathers taking more leave. It should in particular consider steps to reduce cultural barriers in working class households and workplaces in which working class fathers are more likely to be employed. This could be through, for example, targeted awareness campaigns to ensure all fathers are aware of their paternity and shared parental leave entitlements and work with trade unions and employers of all sizes across all sectors to promote best practice. (Recommendation, Paragraph 70)
12. There have been recent local initiatives, for example in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend, in partnership with the National Children’s Bureau’s A Better Start campaign, designed to support fathers to play a more equal role in parenting. This has included training for local authority, third sector and NHS service providers, bespoke services for men taking care of their babies and facilitating spaces and communities in which fathers can share their experiences and support each other. A Better Start was a 10-year programme that is largely coming to an end this year, with an evaluation expected early in 2026. As part of its review, the Government should consider the evidence on the effectiveness of initiatives such as A Better Start partnerships in supporting men to take a greater caring role. It should consider the benefits of commissioning schemes of this nature across the country. (Recommendation, Paragraph 71)

13. In implementing reforms that work towards a more gender equal parental leave system, the Government must consider the potential impacts on employment discrimination against fathers and other parents. The Government's review must consider the adequacy of legal protections against paternity discrimination, including protection from redundancy for those taking paternity leave, and steps needed to raise fathers' and co-parents', and their employers', awareness of legal rights in his area. (Recommendation, Paragraph 72)

Reforming shared parental leave

14. Shared Parental Leave (SPL) has clear benefits for couples who are able to access it. SPL enables a range of flexible options in how parents share their parental responsibilities and balance these with working life. It is the only aspect of our system that allows fathers and other parents an extended period to care for their babies, strengthening bonds with their children and enhancing family life. The scheme's flexibility allows mothers to maintain attachment to the labour market and career progression. There is evidence that mothers are increasingly aware of this and taking advantage of the flexibility the scheme allows. However, SPL's complex set of employment status, time in service and earnings eligibility criteria exclude many working parents and are extremely difficult for most parents and their employers to understand. Take up is consequently too low to have a significant societal or economy-wide impact. (Conclusion, Paragraph 91)
15. The Government must consider steps to address flaws in SPL, increase take up and widen access. The Government's review must examine the function and necessity of SPL's complex eligibility criteria, with a view to simplifying or removing the employment status, time in service and earnings criteria. Its objective for reforms of SPL must be to widen access to as broad a range of working parents as possible, including the self-employed and those on lower incomes. (Recommendation, Paragraph 92)
16. The Government's review should examine barriers to flexibility in the SPL scheme, including the requirement for employees to give employers eight weeks' notice of blocks of leave and changes to start and end dates for leave. This should be with a view, subject to consultation with employers, to reducing notice periods and maximising flexibility within the scheme. (Recommendation, Paragraph 93)
17. The Government's review must consider financial incentives to increase take up of SPL. The review should examine approaches taken in overseas systems, including the German "partnership bonus" and Portugal's "sharing

bonus”, which provide additional paid leave to couples in which both parents take a substantial portion of leave while the other returns to paid work. (Recommendation, Paragraph 94)

Extending access to paid leave

18. The Government’s review must include consideration of the needs of kinship carers, with a view to including them in the paid parental leave system. This should include consideration of the costs and wider benefits of implementing statutory paid leave for kinship carers, in line with provision for parents by adoption and surrogacy. (Recommendation, Paragraph 102)
19. In reforming the parental leave system, the Government must address inequality for single parent families. Unlike in many developed countries, single parents do not receive any portion of the paid leave that would be available to the household if they had a co-parent. Extending paternity leave entitlements risks exacerbating this inequality. We recommend the Government’s review consider options for single parents to reallocate some or all of the entitlements of co-parents to nominated family friends or relatives who can share caring responsibilities. It should draw on experiences in overseas systems, including Norway and Sweden. (Recommendation, Paragraph 106)
20. Our paid parental leave system provides comparatively very poorly for parents of multiple births, who face unique financial, practical and emotional impacts in caring for their babies and young children and juggling work commitments. The Government’s review must consider options to mitigate these impacts through additional financial support. It should draw on lessons from overseas systems, including in Sweden, France and Spain, which provide extra paid leave for multiple births. (Recommendation, Paragraph 109)

Modelling the costs and benefits and measuring the success of reforms

21. The Government has said the parental leave system is broken and promised to launch a “full review”. It is clear that the system has some fundamental failings, including low statutory pay across the board; inadequate leave periods for fathers and other parents; exclusion of many working parents and guardians; and design flaws and unnecessary complexity in the SPL scheme. We acknowledge that it is not feasible to solve all of these problems overnight. However, we expect the Government’s proposed review to lay the foundation for progress in each of these key areas over the course

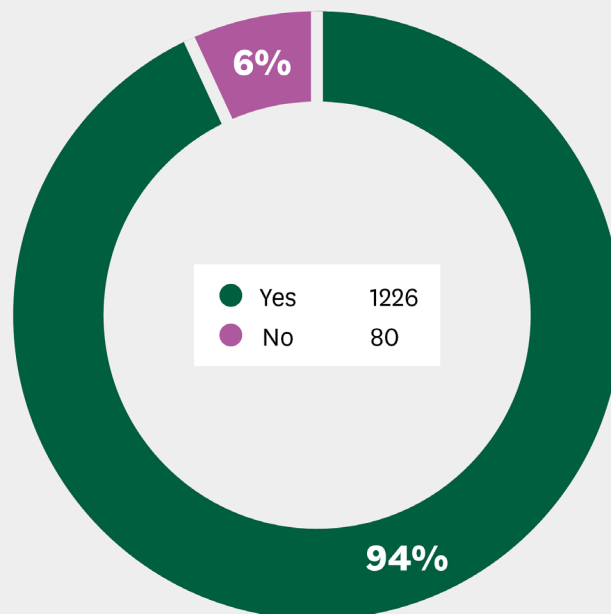
of this Parliament and in the longer term. Working parents will be let down by a review that leads only to tinkering around the edges of the system. The Government should commit to meaningful reforms in the medium term, followed by an assessment of the impacts at the end of this Parliament, with a view to going further towards a more gender equal parental leave system. (Recommendation, Paragraph 120)

- 22.** Producing much-needed substantial change to our paid parental leave system will require considerable financial investment. For example, the direct costs of extending and increasing paid leave for fathers and other parents to six weeks at 90% of average earnings are likely to be over £1 billion per year. The Government must, however, weigh these costs against the wider economic benefits. The model recently developed by the Centre for Progressive Policy for Joseph Rowntree Foundation demonstrates how this could be done. It projects a net economic benefit from this reform of £2.68 billion per annum around two years after full implementation. The Government must examine this model in detail with a view to adopting it or a similar approach to assessing the likely costs and benefits of necessary reforms. (Recommendation, Paragraph 121)
- 23.** The Government's review should have gender equality at its heart. Countries which provide a substantial period of well-paid leave for fathers and other parents have on average a four-percentage point smaller gender pay gap than those that allow less than six weeks. Increasing women's labour market participation and earnings and reducing the gender gap pay should be key long-term objectives. Progress must be monitored at the household level, including by hours spent on unpaid caring and work in the home by gender; women's rates of return to work after births; and take up of paid and unpaid parental leave by gender. The Government must ensure data on these measures are transparently available. (Recommendation, Paragraph 125)

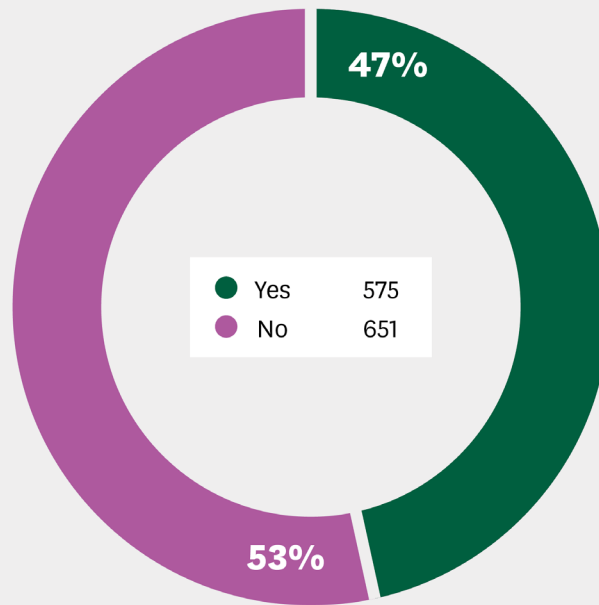
Annex: Summary of SPL survey responses

We published a short survey aimed at parents who had used the statutory SPL scheme and those who had considered using it but decided against it. The survey was launched on 10 December 2024 and shared via our social media channels. It closed on 31 January 2025. The survey received 1,308 responses. The main results are set out below.

1. Have you become a parent since the statutory shared parental leave scheme started in 2015?



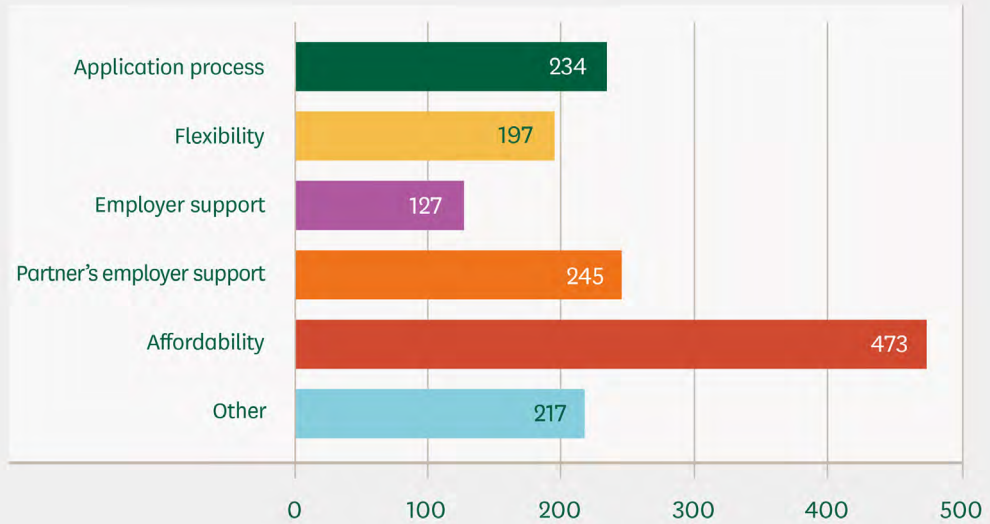
2. Have you used the Government's shared parental leave scheme?



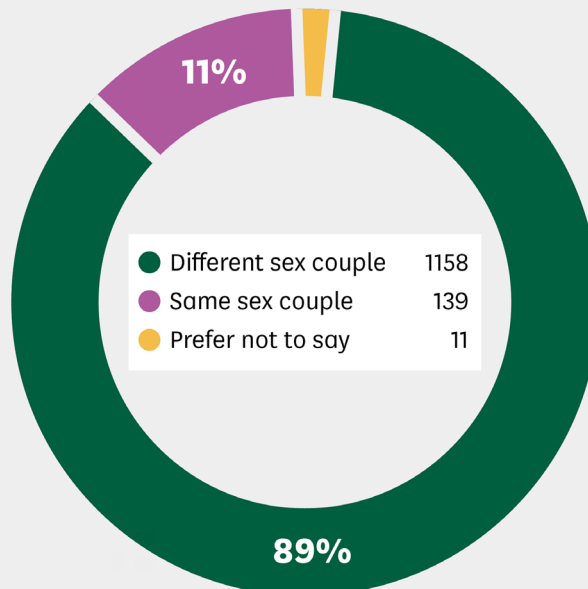
3. Which factors influenced your decision to use the statutory shared parental leave scheme? (select as many as apply)



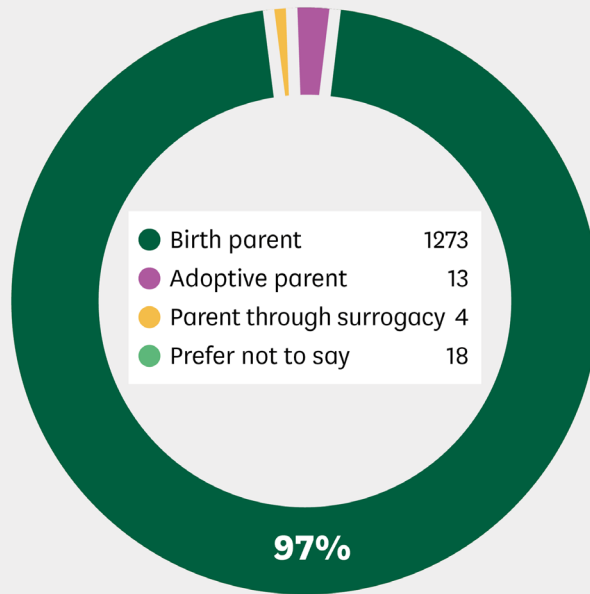
4. Which factors influenced your decision not to use the Government's shared parental scheme? (select as many as apply)



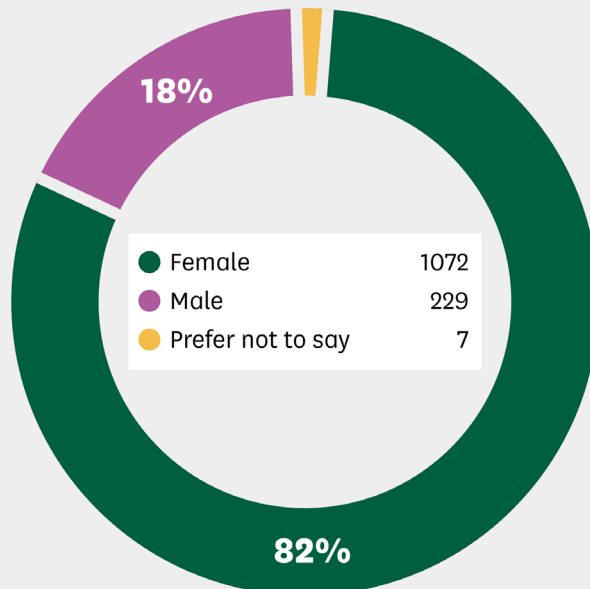
5. What type of couple are you part of?



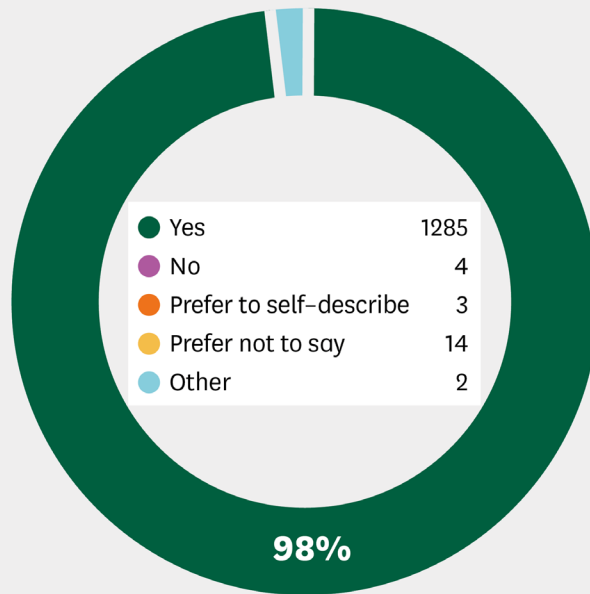
6. There are three types of parents eligible for the scheme.
Which type are you?



7. What best describes your sex?



8. Is the gender you identify with the same as your sex registered at birth?



Formal minutes

Wednesday 4 June

Members present

Sarah Owen, in the Chair

Alex Brewer

David Burton-Sampson

Rosie Duffield

Kirith Entwistle

Natalie Fleet

Christine Jardine

Rebecca Paul

Rachel Taylor

Equality at work: paternity and shared parental leave

Draft Report (*Equality at work: Paternity and shared parental leave*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

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

Paragraphs 1 to 125 read and agreed to.

Summary and annex agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixth 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, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

Adjournment

Adjourned till Wednesday 11 June at 2.00pm.

Witnesses

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

Wednesday 26 February 2025

Alex Lloyd Hunter, Co founder, The Dad Shift; **Joeli Brearley**, Founder and Director, Pregnant Then Screwed; **Karla Capstick**, A Better Start Nottingham, The National Children’s Bureau with Imanuel Ben Israel, dad and programme participant [Q1–33](#)

Dr Gemma Mitchell, Associate Professor in Law, University of East Anglia; **Abby Jitendra**, Principal Policy Adviser, Joseph Rowntree Foundation; **Dr Sarah Forbes**, Co-Director, The Equal Parenting Project; **Jemima Olchawski**, Chief Executive, The Fawcett Society [Q34–58](#)

Tuesday 25 March 2025

Jonny Briggs, Inclusion and Resource Director, Aviva; **Claire McCartney**, Policy and Practice Manager (Resourcing and Inclusion), Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD); **Nikki Pound**, Policy Officer (Women’s Equality), Trade Union Congress (TUC) [Q59–76](#)

Tuesday 1 April 2025

Claire McCartney, Policy and Practice Manager (Resourcing and Inclusion), Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD); **Jonny Briggs**, Inclusion and Resource Director, Aviva; **Nikki Pound**, Policy Officer (Women’s Equality), Trade Union Congress (TUC) [Q77–98](#)

Published written evidence

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

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

1	ABI	SPL0056
2	Brunel University London; King's College London; and King's College London	SPL0042
3	CIPD	SPL0019
4	Clifton-Sprigg, Dr Joanna (Lecturer in Economics, University of Bath); Fichera, Prof Eleonora (Professor of Economics, University of Bath); Hunt, Dr Alistair (Senior Lecturer in Economics, University of Bath); Jones, Prof Melanie (Professor of Economics, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University); and Kaya, Dr Ezgi (Senior Lecturer, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University)	SPL0035
5	Duncan, Mrs Hannah	SPL0007
6	Elizabeth Bryan Multiple Births Centre, Birmingham City University	SPL0038
7	Fairness for single people	SPL0011
8	Fatherhood Institute	SPL0028
9	Hamilton, Dr Patricia (Lecturer, University of York)	SPL0046
10	Hobbs, Jessica (PhD Candidate, Birkbeck College, University of London)	SPL0012
11	Hodkinson, Professor Paul (Professor of Sociology, University of Surrey); and Brooks, Professor Rachel (Professor of Higher Education, University of Oxford)	SPL0008
12	IPSE - The Self-Employment Association	SPL0050
13	Joseph Rowntree Foundation	SPL0049
14	Kelland, Dr Jasmine (Associate Professor , University of Plymouth)	SPL0020

15	Kelleher, Simon (Head of Policy and Influencing, Working Families); Jones, Dr Rebecca (Head of Research, Working Families); Banister, Professor Emma (University of Manchester); and Norman, Dr Helen (University of Leeds)	SPL0053
16	Kinship	SPL0018
17	Leeds Trinity University	SPL0037
18	Maternity Action	SPL0025
19	Mathews, Dr Manisha (Teaching Fellow, University of Birmingham)	SPL0034
20	Matysova, Dr Clare	SPL0009
21	Miller, Dr Tina (Professor of Sociology, Oxford Brookes University)	SPL0031
22	Mitchell, Dr Gemma (Associate Professor in Law, University of East Anglia); and Bendall, Dr Charlotte (Associate Professor at Birmingham Law School, University of Birmingham)	SPL0005
23	Mitchell, Dr Gemma (Associate Professor in Law, University of East Anglia)	SPL0013
24	Mitchell, Dr Gemma	SPL0058
25	Morando, Dr Greta (Lecturer in Economics, University of Sheffield); Fumagalli, Dr Laura (Research Fellow in Economics , University of Essex); and Sen, Dr Sonkurt (Postdoctoral Researcher in Economics , University of Bonn)	SPL0041
26	Muslim Women’s Network UK	SPL0026
27	NHS Employers	SPL0014
28	National Children’s Bureau; and A Better Start	SPL0016
29	Noncheva, Ms Lora	SPL0030
30	Organise	SPL0029
31	Parental Pay Equality	SPL0043
32	Pregnant Then Screwed	SPL0036
33	Prospect	SPL0040
34	Radcliffe, Dr Laura (Reader in Organisational Behaviour, University of Liverpool); Ashman, Dr Rachel (Reader in Marketing, University of Liverpool); and Future Families Work Network of Researchers	SPL0015
35	Royal College of Nursing	SPL0055
36	Scottish Women’s Convention	SPL0004

37	Sharp, Charlotte	SPL0001
38	Single Parent Rights	SPL0023
39	Stumbitz, Dr Bianca (Middlesex University); Norman, Dr Helen (University of Leeds); Banister, Professor Emma (University of Manchester); Jarvis-King, Dr Laura (University of Manchester); Burnett, Dr Amy (Middlesex University); and Dr Clarice Santos (Middlesex University)	SPL0054
40	Tarrant, Professor Anna (Professor of Sociology, University of Lincoln); Gaunt, Professor Ruth (Professor of Social Psychology, University of Lincoln); Jordan, Dr Ana (Associate Professor, University of Lincoln); Harle, Ms Emily (Research Assistant, University of Lincoln); and Ladlow, Dr Linzi (Research Fellow, University of Lincoln)	SPL0044
41	The Dad Shift	SPL0033
42	The Equal Parenting Project	SPL0057
43	The Equal Parenting Project	SPL0052
44	The Fawcett Society	SPL0045
45	Trade Unions Congress (TUC)	SPL0051
46	UK Music; and Parents & Carers in Performing Arts (PiPA)	SPL0047
47	UK Women’s Budget Group	SPL0024
48	Union of Shop, Distributive & Allied Workers (USDAW)	SPL0010
49	Unite the Union	SPL0022
50	University College London	SPL0027
51	Weldon-Johns, Dr Michelle (Senior Lecturer in Law, Abertay University)	SPL0048
52	Woodworth, Ms Charlotte (Policy Consultant , n/a)	SPL0032
53	Woollard, Professor Fiona (Professor of Philosophy, University of Southampton); Kent, Dr Alexandra (Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Keele University); and Williams, Ms Serena (Founder, bump & glide Ltd.)	SPL0017
54	Work Foundation at Lancaster University	SPL0039

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3rd	The rights of older people	HC 414
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1st	Women's reproductive health conditions	HC 337
4th Special	Tackling non-consensual intimate image abuse: Government Response	HC 911
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