

Consultation: Funding for MP parental leave cover and staff reservists leave

Response from the UK Women's Budget Group

About us

The UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) is an independent network of leading academic researchers, policy experts and campaigners that analyses the gendered impact of economic policy on different groups of women and men and promotes alternative policies for a gender equal economy.

1. Do you agree that a new MP Parental Leave Cover Fund should be created?

Yes. We have long called for a formal provision for MPs to take maternity or paternity leave, which must be uniform and automatic.

Public life at all levels is still dominated by men and parliamentary practices like unpredictable hours and lack of maternity leave have resulted in a 'motherhood gap' in Westminster. In 2016, 45% of women MPs did not have children compared to only 28% of male Members.¹ This changed slightly following the 2017 general election - 39% of female MPs having no children in comparison to 30% of male MPs.² Moreover, the available data also suggests women are more likely to enter politics once their children are significantly older. The average age of the MP's eldest child when they first entered Parliament was 15 years old for women and 11 years old for men.³

Parliament is putting in place leave for Ministers - having a two-tier system is unfair and having different terms and conditions to access leave creates inequality.

In all workplaces we should expect equal access and terms and conditions for maternity leave – parliament should be no different. All MPs and staff must have access to paid parental leave. Without this in place, there is a barrier to participation in politics which will impact parents and prospective parents, disproportionately women of childbearing age. By introducing a MP Parental Leave cover fund, the House of Commons can take a small but symbolic step in demonstrating that it is forward-looking, inclusive, and family-friendly.

2. Do you have any comments about the proposed rules of eligibility for this funding?

No.

¹ Childs, S., (2016) "The Good Parliament" Available at: <https://bit.ly/37OM7P3>

² Results of the 2017 parenthood survey carried out Campbell and Childs with the Commons Reference Group on Representation and Inclusion, see: Campbell, R. & Childs, S., (2018). "Where's Mum? She's in the House – Parents in Parliament". PSA Women and Politics Specialist Group. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3qUwQDO>

³ Ibid.

3. Is there anything else IPSA should take into account when deciding on its policy in this area?

Fathers and secondary carers should be given more than 2 weeks leave. This is not enough time to spend with a new baby, and also prevents their partner from going back to work if they wish to do so. We know that a case-by-case basis does not work and would therefore argue that the policy for fathers and secondary carers should be longer and uniform. It is then up to the MP themselves if they do not wish to take this.

The fund to cover parental leave should be recorded as a separate budget and not as part of the MPs general expenses. MPs will be discouraged from using the parental leave cover if the cost is recorded as part of their overall expenses as they will be open to criticism from those who just see the overall expenses total, which will be higher than those who have not taken parental leave.

This isn't just about parliament. There should be schemes to ensure parental leave possible across public life including in local and regional government.

There has never been a more important time to speak out on these issues. The TUC found that during the pandemic one in four pregnant women and new mothers have reported experiencing unfair treatment or discrimination at work, including being singled out for redundancy or furlough. In May 2020, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that mothers are one and a half times more likely than fathers to have either lost their job or quit since the lockdown began, and 23% more likely than fathers to have lost their jobs either temporarily or permanently during the pandemic. Statutory Maternity Pay and Maternity Allowance is just £151.20 per week, equivalent to about half of the national minimum wage. Parliament needs to produce an action plan to tackle the evidence of pregnancy and maternity discrimination during the pandemic.

UK Women's Budget Group submission 2021

Contact: maryann.stephenson@wbg.org.uk

For further details on resources and our recommendations for parental, maternity and paternity leave please see:

<https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/2019-wbg-briefing-maternity-paternity-and-parental-leave/>