



Sustainability@Leave

CA21150

Prof. Dr Margaret O'Brien
University College London

Parenting Leave Policies in the UK and Inequalities





Parenting Leaves in the UK: Types of Leave and Design Elements



Parenting Leave Policy in the UK

- Maternity Leave
- Paternity Leave
- Parental Leave
- Other leave types: Neonatal Care Leave; Parental Bereavement Leave; Carer's leave (one week per year, unpaid); emergency time-off (unpaid)
- No Breastfeeding Leave or Leave to care for sick children



Maternity leave

Length: 52 weeks (can start 11 weeks before birth)

Benefit: 90 per cent of a woman's average gross earnings for **6 weeks** with no upper limit, followed by a **flat-rate payment** € 223.70 for the next 33 weeks. The remaining 13 weeks are unpaid.

Obligatory: 2 weeks after childbirth (or 4 weeks if the mother works in a factory)

Transferable to father: > 2 weeks, flat-rate payment € 223.70 up to last 13 weeks when unpaid. "Shared Parental Leave"

Paternity leave

Length: 1 or 2 weeks, a week being equivalent to the number of days that the individual normally works in a week

Benefit: flat-rate payment € 223.70

Can be used: in first year after birth or adoption

Parental leave

Length: 18 weeks per parent per child (individual right)

Benefit: unpaid

Can be used: until the child's 18th birthday

Can be used: in blocks or in multiples of one week, up to, and for no more than, 4 weeks per year

All employees with a contract (but not self-employed or unemployed) eligible for leave and benefit, **if qualifying conditions met:** worked for their employer continuously for 26 weeks, up to the 15th week before the week the baby is due, and who meet a minimum weekly earnings threshold (€149) for maternity and paternity leave; or 1 year in the case of parental leave eligibility. **Maternity allowance** available for ineligible mothers but not fathers @ 39 weeks at the flat-rate



Parenting Leave Policy in the UK: main recent changes

- **Parental Bereavement Leave (2020)** 2 weeks leave if child dies before 18 years, or in case of a stillbirth occurring > 24 weeks pregnancy. Day 1 right to leave but pay at flat rate if eligible.
- **Neonatal Care Leave (2025)** up to 12 weeks additional leave if baby admitted into neonatal care within 28 days of birth for a period of at least 7 days. Day 1 right to leave but pay at flat rate if eligible.
- **Note: Adoption leave & Same- Sex partners** have same provisions for maternity, paternity and parental leave (since 1999)
- **Note: Antenatal appointments and care** Pregnant employees are permitted paid time off for antenatal care (1996) . Fathers are permitted time off to attend two antenatal appointments, but it does not have to be paid (2014). Potential adopters are allowed time off to attend two adoption appointments.



What do we know about take-up rates?

- No national administrative data
- Maternity leave: assumed that all eligible mothers take some leave, but recent survey data (2025) suggests 83 per cent of mothers took maternity leave
 - Transferable part “Shared parental leave”: 4 per cent of fathers (survey data, 2025)
- Paternity leave: recent survey data (2025) suggests that 59 per cent of fathers took paternity leave





Inequality-Reducing and Inequality-Generating Elements of Parental Leave Design in the UK



Who is eligible, who not?

- **Brexit** Access convergence for EU citizens, who were resident in the UK before 31 December 2020 i.e. employment status, length of service, and an earnings threshold'
- **Eligibility criteria (2026)** – qualifying conditions relaxed for access to paternity and parental leave (Day 1 right) but not for access to pay/benefit); maternity leave not changed; those with non-standard and self-employment or with earnings below threshold or newly arrived migrants or asylum seekers remain illegible, with strict visa & leave to remain rules.



Parenting Leave Policy in the UK and Gender Equality

- EU Directive 2019/1158 was not implemented in the UK so the gender equality incentives of the parental leave quota have not been incorporated in leave policy design (UK already had 10 days paternity leave)
- Eligibility problems, the very low benefits and the ceiling on benefits are a major obstacle for leave take-up & creating risk for the financial situation of UK parents
 - Several large companies and organizations are topping-up leave provision (labour market polarisation)
- A national review of Parental Leave and Pay Review underway
<https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/parental-leave-and-pay-review-call-for-evidence/parental-leave-and-pay-review-call-for-evidence> Covering Employment & Gender Pay Gap; Maternal and Paternal Health & Wellbeing; Child Development & Best Start; Childcare & co-parenting





Final Discussion & email me
m.obrien@ucl.ac.uk

