Parent and Family Network Return to Work Survey Results

In May 2023 the Parent and Family Network ran a survey capturing return to work experiences of staff in the last five years (since 2018). It included individuals who had been on extended family leave (maternity leave, adoption leave, shared parental leave) or shorter family leave(childbirth/adoption support leave), since 2018. The aim of the survey was to understand experience of return to work and how individuals can be better supported with the transition back to the workplace.

67 individuals responded of which 75% had taken maternity leave (including maternity leave and shared parental leave), 16% shared parental leave and 9% childbirth support leave. 46% of respondents were first time parents. 45% of respondents were in academic and research roles, 43% in professional services and 12% in other roles. 93% were on permanent contracts and 7% on fixed term contracts. 61% were full time employed and 39% part time employed. 75% of respondents were female and 25% male, and 86% of respondents were white.

Key Results

1. Information Gaps

On the whole respondents were satisfied with family leave policies. 73% of those who returned from shared parental leave were completely or mostly satisfied, 67% of those who returned from child birth support leave and 66% of those returning from maternity leave. However, a recurring theme was some respondents felt there was some information gaps and it was not always clear what information was available and how to access it. Whilst the majority felt information on their rights was clear, 27% felt this was unclear. In particular 46% of those returning from shared parental leave felt it was unclear. In particular respondents reported information gaps in the following areas:

a. Shared Parental Leave (SPL)

"Shared parental leave could be clearer to understand. We met with HR prior to my pregnancy to see if it would suit us but it was very confusing to understand so we didn't pursue it."

Several respondents reported that it was difficult to understand SPL rules and SPL was complicated to work out; one respondent acknowledged this may have reflected the scheme itself. Issues with SPL included needing clearer information on the SPL occupational policy in relation to maternity allowance, inflexibility in relation to "on" and "off" blocks, and the language around SPL is difficult to understand. For example: *"the forms had confusing questions which were unclear (e.g. relating to dates) and repetition of information being provided across several different forms (felt unnecessary)".*

b. Return to work rights/policies

"I think generally the leave side of things was good but rights on returning had limited information."

Respondents would have liked clearer information on return to work policies such as flexible working, unpaid parental leave for emergencies, reduced workload to ease transition (discussed further in section 7), and practical guidance such as handling emails, and return to work funds (discussed further below and in section 5). One suggestion was: *"I think in addition to line manager support it would be really helpful to have a HR induction/return to work so you*

know what the general UoR guidance is around the return to work and who to go for support or any requirements for flexibility etc.."

"Clarity needed on the fund for return to work: Is it given for all staff or just academic staff? What can it be used for? How do you access it?"

Quite a few respondents reported knowing there was a return to work fund to aid their transition back to the workplace but not knowing if it applied to them (especially non-academic roles), how to access this, what they could use it for or whether it had been spent by their department/function.

c. **Maternity Pay and Annual Leave Entitlement**

"Very different experience to a different institution prior where Equality & Diversity HR officer sat down and worked out all different options and to find the most advantageous way to take maximum leave etc"

There was some confusion for some over pay and the tax implications. Several respondents reported wanting more clarity on finances and how much they would be paid at different points across their leave, especially which months they would receive statutory maternity pay and how much. For those starting maternity leave early (12% reported their maternity leave started early due to ill health) it was suggested that new dates reflecting the different pay rates (e.g. occupation maternity pay, statutory maternity pay, unpaid maternity pay) should be included in any written communication.

Some respondents reported it was unclear that return to work starts when maternity/SPL/childbirth support leave ends not when any annual leave ends. There was also a lack of understanding of how accrued annual leave worked, how they could work this out and some felt "very much left to your own devices". Several respondents wanted reassurance and help from HR to ensure they had worked out their annual leave entitlement correctly. Several respondents did comment they had a useful and detailed meeting with HR to help them understand their leave and annual leave entitlements.

d. **KIT/SPLIT days**

A number of respondents reported a lack of information on KIT days (including from their line managers) and the process (how they could organise them, how they would get paid), and some did even not know about the KIT form. There was some confusion on how many SPLIT days could be used. Of those on extended family leave, 38% did not use any KIT/SPLIT days. For those who used KIT/SPLIT days the number of days ranging from 1 to 10, with 15% using all available KIT/SPLIT days.

"I was discouraged from using KIT days because the department would have to pay for them."

Several reported they wanted to use KIT days but these were never formally agreed, they were discouraged from using them or they did work (such as supervising PhD students) but did not know how to claim for KIT days. Some wanted advice on when to claim KIT days and the tax implications.'

2. Lack of Communication, Protocols, and Guidance for Line Managers

"There should be a clear protocol in place to follow when someone returns to work and communication from HR and managers"

"Having HR policies then saying its at the discretion of the line manager needs to change. That person has the complete power and it can become a personal issue as to whether you're supported or not. It needs to be a system which is assessed independently."

A number of respondents commented that they felt there was a lack of protocol or guidance for line managers (including for employees returning to work during fixed term contracts), and there was not a clear process in place for returnees. There were several comments relating to poor communication in relation to changes in line manager, job role, changes in function and even location, and they were kept informed by their co-workers rather than their line manager or the University. One suggestion was *"It would be good to get a summary of all major changes in relation to policies, or emails if something is required by a certain date"*..

'I feel there should be stricter rules about when a line manager is able to contact you in the early stages of maternity leave."

Some respondents felt boundaries were not met and they were contacted whilst on leave on aspects unrelated to their return to work and some communication caused them stress. Or they felt pressure to respond to emails and keep on top of emails. There were some comments relating to bullying by their line manager and not knowing the channels to go to report bullying or when they felt policies and rules had not be adhered too/properly applied.

The lack of process/guidance and policy relates to a number of areas that are discussed in the next sections: health and safety risk assessments, breastfeeding, return to work support and workload management.

3. Health and Safety Risk Assessments

"My line manager informed me that a risk assessment would be needed for me to work safely whilst pregnant, but one was never carried out. I experienced significant health concerns during pregnancy. No risk assessment was carried out on my return to work either."

Those who took maternity leave were asked if they had received a health and safety risk assessment. Whilst the vast majority had a risk assessment, 20% said they did not, suggesting some inconsistency with if and how risk assessments were conducted. Some were frustrated that although they asked they never received a risk assessment, including those who were breastfeeding.

Several frustrations were reported with the risk assessment. That it was outdated, questions are too personal, included irrelevant questions (*"Completely useless unless you work with biohazards"*) and was *"not particularly helpful from a line management point of view"*. There were several comments relating to wanting a follow-up and updated risk assessments as their pregnancy progresses and on return to work. There was also a need to factor in more explicitly pregnancy health issues such as hyperemesis gravidarum (severe pregnancy sickness) and to consider mental health and work-related stress.

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4. Breastfeeding

"It would be good to have a formal policy around breaks, working from home to facilitate breastfeeding and expressing".

48% of those returning from maternity leave reported they were still breastfeeding upon their return to work. 33% of these respondents still breastfeeding informed their line manager they were breastfeeding. Of those who did not inform their line manager the most common reason was they did not think their line manager needed to know (reported by 63%), whilst 19% felt uncomfortable and 19% did not know the procedure. For some return to work was not an issue as both they and their child adjusted to not feeding during work hours; more typical of those whose child were older (around 12 months and over) upon return to work. Reported barriers to continuing to breastfeed upon return to work include a lack of time and no access to a "safe" fridge close to their office. There were some comments relating to introducing a formal breastfeeding policy. Whilst the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) state that breastfeeding employees are entitled to more frequent breaks these are not required to be paid. Some commented there was a lack of guidance on whether they had to use their 'standard' breaks for breastfeeding/expressing breast or were entitled to additional breaks, and if they had any say over when they could take breaks. 29% of those who were still breastfeeding upon return to work reported working from home (all returned in 2020 and beyond) and some reported working flexible hours to help facilitate breastfeeding and expressing breast milk. However, respondents were unsure of the formal guidance in this regard.

"If KIT days were paid for a full day, irrespective of the number of hours worked, I would have been able to do more of them while still breastfeeding my child who did not take a bottle, easing the transition back to work."

For some KIT days were an issue as they could only use partial KIT days as they needed to return to breastfeed their child, hence losing out on full KIT days which "felt like a breastfeeding penalty".

Breastfeeding Facilities

62% of those returning from maternity leave were aware of the breastfeeding facilities, however several respondents commented they did not know their location and/or how to access them. 25% had expressed whilst at work on campus and 13% had breastfeed their baby on campus or a nearby location during breaks. Only 2 individuals reported having used the breastfeeding facilities. The majority who expressed breast milk or breastfed at work had done so in a private room office/workspace or other space. 1 individual reported expressing in the toilets (the HSE state that the toilets is not a suitable place). Other issues reported relating to breastfeeding/expressing whilst at work, included 'the nature of the role made it difficult/impractical' (13%), 'negative comments or reactions from managers' (8%) and health issues of mastitis/engorgement (21%).

Feedback on breastfeeding facilities included praising the availability of breastfeeding facilities but also concerns about being disturbed and one respondent reported not being allowed entry "which caused a lot of distress." One suggestion was to include a room divider or screen to provide more privacy in case someone entered the room (although most of the rooms now include an "in use" sign). There was also a request for further guidance on storing milk, particularly outside of the breastfeeding rooms, as it was not always convenient to store breast milk in the breastfeeding facilities. Other suggestions included making rooms feel more comforting and inviting, maybe including more pictures.

5. Return to Work Support

Overall 46% of those returning from maternity leave were completely or mostly satisfied with their return to work, 64% of those returning from SPL and 67% returning from child birth support. However, fewer were satisfied with the support they received, with 38% of those returning from maternity leave, 46% from SPL and 33% returning from child birth support completely or mostly satisfied with the support on their return to work.

"I have a very supportive line manager which has made my transition easy but there hasn't been any formal support / anything that felt like supportive University processes (other than the right to request flexible working) more just individual good will and understanding"

There were some reports of very supportive and helpful line managers who made the difference . 75% felt very or fairly well supported by their line manager, 85% by their co-workers but fewer (56%) felt supported by the University. 70% heard from their line manager whilst they were on leave. More respondents (54%) found the transition back to work difficult (very, mostly or somewhat) than easy (very, mostly or somewhat). Some individuals felt there was no preparation or planning for their return to work. The majority had a meeting to discuss their return to work (40% had a meeting before they went on leave, 42% whilst they were leave and 45% upon their return) but 13% said their line manager did not discuss their return to work. There was one report of not having a return to work meeting until 4 months after their return, despite asking for meetings and one respondent reported that required adaptations were not actioned until after they returned to work delaying their return to the office.

"Having a mentor or a network of people to talk to about returning to work would have been really helpful and would have helped to feel less isolated."

Whilst 18% said they received a workload reduction, 3% a mentor, 6% offered training and 3% extra resources, 68% said they were not offered any help with their return to work. Common suggestions on what could help individuals feel more supported included mentor and buddy systems, a 'new parents meet-up and more face-to support from line-managers. There is already a mentoring system in place but this not well signposted, and relies on willing volunteers. The parent and family network have a new and expectant parent's channel, but this is not well signposted outside of the parent and family network. The parent and family network could facilitate a mentor and buddy system, but would need help with signposting and expectant/new parents being introduced to the parent and family network.

Return to Work Support Funds

"The central policies around ringfencing funds for the return to work are not consistently implemented at School level"

Only 25% of those that had been on extended family leave reported that funds had been made available to aid their transition back to work (28% of academic staff reported funds being made available and 9% of professional staff). Of those who received funds only 40% said they were able to use it and 47% were able to use it for the purpose they wanted. Reasons cited for not being able to use all the money included delays on informing them there were funds available, no advice or support on how to use it, they could not think of anything to use it for (particularly among non-academic staff), they were not allowed to use it for teaching buyout, they were told there were insufficient funds and University level obstacles (such as procurement issues). Some also cited that the department/function had decided how they wanted to use it rather than the individual. As mentioned earlier in section 1, some respondents were not aware that

such funds were available. Respondents felt that *"there should be a firm framework so requests cannot be so easily rejected"* in particular using it for a teaching buy out.

6. Flexible Working Arrangements

"In terms of flexible working and reducing hours it was very supportive, I could also swap my days based on my child's needs."

54% of respondents put in a request for flexible working (58% of those returning from maternity leave, 36% returning from shared parental leave, 50% returning from child birth support leave). Of those who did not request flexible working 19% were not aware of the right to request flexible working. The most common flexible requests among those who requested flexible working were reduced hours (39%), compressed hours (31%), altered start/end time (25%) and working from home (19%). 86% said all of their requests were accepted. Reasons why requests were denied included demands of the job and timetabling pressures.

"The start and ends of the day are most problematic / stressful and very early (pre 8:30am) / late meetings (post 5:30pm)can be a problem."

"Not much has been done to help accommodate parents who have young children at school. We are at the mercy of timetabling, academics work flexi time yet timetabling don't seem to be able to allow us amenable hours to drop children off and pick them up from school without us going part time"

Timetabling pressures were mentioned as a cause of stress, especially with the confirmed timetable released in September (which leaves little scope for making changes to child care with child care places limited and in high demand). It was also perceived as unfair to be asked to go part time in order to restrict teaching times.. For example, expecting individuals to be available 9-6pm puts pressure on child care arrangements. There are core hours for meetings so it is perceived as inconsistent not to apply these to teaching.

"Request for flexible working (compressed hours) has helped me to not feel guilty responding on the day when i am not supposed to be working, but it hasnt stopped emails/deadlines due on that day."

Whilst there was praise for flexible working arrangements, there were concerns that flexible working arrangements were not being properly applied and/or respected.

7. Workload and Job Role Issues

Issues relating to workload were a common feature of comments provided by respondents. It was felt there was a lack of recognition of having to deal with changes such as to IT and technology (reported by 22%, particularly those returning after COVID), changes to university, function and/or department changes and procedures(reported by 36%) and changes to job roles (reported by 28%). 9% also reported a lack of space/desk upon return.

"Decisions had already been made by colleagues with respect to workload without proper and compassionate consultation with the person returning from leave".

There was some dissatisfaction with workload and how it was organised upon return. One respondent reported they were due a research sabbatical whilst on leave and were due to have this on their return but it was given to someone else. Others reported there was a lack

of recognition of how hard it was to transition back to the workplace and would have appreciated a workload reduction (or extra support from other team members) to allow them to transition back/catch up. Some reported that their workload had accumulated and/or increased whilst away, that despite reducing FTE they saw no workload reduction. Some reported roles/responsibilities had changed without being consulted which caused stress and in some instances leading to a period of sick leave.

"One term of teaching buy-out would be amazing, as restarting research is such a challenge, with children taking up much of the focus time outside of regular work hours"

In particular there was dissatisfaction among academic and research staff who felt their research "had taken a hit". And one suggestion was to follow the [UCL policy](#) of giving all research active staff a period of research leave after returning from extended parental leave.

Travel for Work Purposes

"Travel is harder due to childcare responsibilities. An unsustainable workload that doesn't allow for flexibility. There is no wiggle room."

51% reported that travel for work purposes was part of their job role. 65% of these individuals reported that travelling was harder as a result of having children. In particular travel to day meetings with early/late starts, conferences, travel involving overnight stays were reported as being harder with children. Reasons cited included because they were breastfeeding their child (several reported issues of engorgement and mastitis), did not want to be away from their child (overnight), had difficulties arranging child care and workload pressures. Many reporting difficulties travelling felt this put their career at a disadvantage. Some reporting travelling with their child and partner at their own expense, in order to attend conferences.

Fulfilling Out of Normal Hours Responsibilities

60% reported out of normal working hour commitments (e.g. open and visit days, outreach activities) were expected as part of their job role, with 73% of these reporting they found it hard to meet out of normal hours commitments. The most common barriers reported are child care responsibilities, arranging child care and weekend commitments. Some felt pressured into fulfilling these commitments and resented time away from family, especially as there was no time in lieu (and even if there was this would be during time that children are in childcare). Some fulfilled these commitments by bringing their children with them or doing alternative activities such as outreach webinars. Suggestions to support those required to do out of normal hours duties included flexible hours during these commitments and the University providing ("the campus nursery should be open for open/visit days") or paying for child care.

8. Health and Well-being Issues

A number of issues were raised relating to health and well-being issues.

Child and Partner Illness/Well-Being

"It would also be beneficial to have it clearly laid out as to what are specific expectations around leave - I have had to learn as the situations have come up what is acceptable in terms of me needing time off unexpectedly if my little one is unwell/unable to go to nursery etc, or what is suitable if I receive a call during the working day from nursery and have to finish work early etc."

"For clarity and avoidance of doubt about using parental, sick or compassionate leave, the University should build in provisions for leave when things go wrong."

Several comments related to work interruptions of children being sick, which is common when children start nursery, and puts added pressure on return to work and catching up. Respondents were unsure what the guidance and policies were around this situation, and if there were any provisions for this situation.

"I think the University should not wait for the neonatal bill to go through but set an example and offer the extra paid leave to parents of premature and sick children. As a result of my son's birth my partners company changed their maternity and paternity policies completely to provide more paid leave."

Some comments also relate to sick and premature babies and that this should be taken into account in parental leave policies, particularly relating to the neonatal bill. This is particularly important as *"This significantly compresses the time you then have to adjust before returning to work"*.

"Paternity leave could be a bit longer - perhaps up to a maximum of 3 months [i.e. a solitary term] - my current partner felt left high and dry too soon upon my return to work only 2 weeks later."

For those who returned from child birth support leave it was felt that 2 weeks (and even the new 4 weeks) is not enough time, particularly if the child is premature/ill and/or their partner has birth complications as *"fathers need to support their children and in particular the mother at this very early stage after birth"*. They would have "appreciated a tapered return to full time working, e.g. coming back for a few hours a day and gradually increasing my FTE as the baby gets older, and things become settled at home."

Emotional and Mental Health

"Some kind of mental health assessment or appointment would have been useful to talk over anxieties that had built up over the leave period and issues with coming back to work."

Some felt there was a lack of recognition that life has changed trying to balance work and life and other pressures such as continuing to breastfeed and expressing breast milk. Many reported emotional difficulties relating to depression, feeling empty, separation anxiety, guilt of not being with child/family and tiredness, and would benefit from some kind of mental health check in such as by occupational health.

9. Other Issues

"Adoption timings are really tricky (there is no clear 'due date') and this causes uncertainty for HR and line managers. More could be done around this in terms of guidance regarding questions and language."

"I think there should be a review on the policy for foster-to-adopt to allow an extended period of time off given the nature of the role being different to mainstream adoption."

85% reported being able to attend all appointments but for adoption appointments there was not the same allowance appointments as part of the adoption pre-matching process. Given the uncertainty around timing of adoption, guidance could be reviewed in terms of the language and questions, as well as guidance on 'foster-to-adopt'.

The was a minor complaint relating to parking permits which have to be returned to stop being charged (this was not possible during COVID when there was no one to receive the parking permit that had to be posted) and they ended up paying for parking whilst on maternity leave. Handing in a parking permit leads to difficulties if individuals want to come in for KIT days, and reactivating a parking permit is yet another thing to do on return. One suggestion is *"Why not provide an option of a free parking permit for all pregnant women from their third trimester until they return to wor*k."

10. Key Recommendations

- Introduce more formal **mentor and/or buddy schemes**. The parent and family network can support/run these but signposting will be important as not all returnees are members of the parent and family network.
- Create a **return to work package** for parents which provides information and guidance in one place and is accessible e.g. consider alternative formats such as videos
- Review **guidance for line managers** (and provide training) to aid transition back to work. For example, providing guidance on KIT days, formalising return to work meetings, return to work and workload support
- Put in clear processes to ensure **clear protocols** are met and there are clear routes to report bullying and complaints over policies/protocols not being applied
- Put in a procedure to ensure and check a **risk assessment** has been performed, allowing for follow up health and safety risk assessments at different points of the pregnancy and upon return to work. Review the risk assessment questions to ensure they are relevant to pregnancy, support the line manager, aid actions, and explicitly capture physical and mental health related issues.
- Consider a **formal breastfeeding policy** (e.g. paid breaks, working from home/flexible working to facilitate breastfeeding/expressing rules) – this links to research being led by researchers the Department of Economics funded by the Nuffield Foundation.
- Raise awareness of **breastfeeding facilities** and how to access them; make the process of being granted access to breastfeeding facilities easier.
- Review **travel for work purposes** policy to include adjustments for individuals with young children and breastfeeding employees e.g. allowing funds to be used for child care costs, travelling with child/partner
- Consider reviewing policies for **dealing with sick children during work hours**, **adoption leave**, **flexibility with timetabling** (especially given portfolio review is designed to reduce pressure on timetabling) and **out of standard hour activities**