

**Evidence Submission to the Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry
Equality at work: Paternity and Shared Parental Leave**

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This submission reports on findings from two funded research studies conducted by researchers at the University of Lincoln; a qualitative longitudinal study of the parenting journeys of young fathers, aged 25 and under and a mixed methods study of couple/parent dynamics and work-care arrangements.

Summary of key research findings

- **Key to equality at work is creating leave systems that promote equality in parenting.** Where gender equal work/care arrangements can be established and/or sustained by couples in the early stages of parenthood, continued gender equal work-care arrangements are more feasible to achieve.
- **Parents in both studies expressed a desire to share work and care more equally and to experience parental leave together for a longer period of time.** This includes young parents and those in low pay industries. In the current system, **wider structural barriers and traditionally gendered occupational cultures** prevent parents from the uptake of SPL and preclude opportunities to achieve this in practice.
- **Variations in eligibility for non-statutory leave, gender pay disparities, and unclear workplace guidance about leave entitlements** are reported by parents as key barriers to the uptake of shared parental leave, contributing to an uneven playing field both in terms of gender and across socio-economic circumstances. **Workplace stigma is also commonly experienced among fathers.**
- The limited accessibility and financial burden of shared parental leave means **the current leave system does not provide the flexibility and choice that all parents need** around how they navigate and share work/care responsibilities in the first year of parenting.
- Work-care arrangements among couples prior to becoming parents reflect a complex blend of traditional gender roles, equal sharing commitments, and reverse gender roles (a female breadwinner, male caregiver). **Leave entitlements currently require couples, who have an established commitment to equal or reversed work-care arrangements, revert to a traditional gendered division** that does not accord with their expectations and is disruptive of couple dynamics and life satisfaction.
- Where shared parental leave is not possible for couples, paternity leave becomes the default option for fathers. At only two weeks (one of the least generous offers across Europe), **this is not enough time for them to: bond with their child, support their co-parent, and establish and/or sustain gender equal patterns of work/care and domestic responsibilities.**
- Young fathers in the UK who are in secondary and/or tertiary education or in low-pay, zero-hour work are among the most disadvantaged by the current system of leave. **Those in education have no choice or flexibility in terms of parental leave entitlement. Those**

in low-pay sectors either lack awareness of their entitlements, have no entitlement at all, and/or experience workplace stigma around taking leave.

- Sweden's **'dual-earner, dual-carer' family policy approach embeds effective state support for working parents**, including extensive paid non-transferable paternal and maternal leave that is supported by accessible public childcare and paid leave for the care of sick children. This approach enables greater choice and flexibility around leave and in a way that is not a detriment to their employment and/or investments in further education and future career prospects.

Further Background to the evidence

Evidence presented in this submission is based on two University of Lincoln research studies exploring parenting arrangements, work-care balance, fatherhood and social policy/welfare. The first is a seven-year, UK Research & Innovation funded Future Leaders Fellowship study called ['Following Young Fathers Further'](#) (FYFF; 2020-2027). This qualitative longitudinal programme of research involved repeat interviews with young men who became fathers aged 25 and under, a cohort who are considered 'young' in practice and policy contexts. In this study we asked about their parenting journeys, support needs and experiences of the current parental leave system.

The second is a Nuffield Foundation funded study called ['Caregiving Dads, Breadwinning Mums'](#) (CDBM, 2019-22; Gaunt et al., 2022), which employed a mixed-methods research approach drawing on a large representative sample of parents with young children as well as in-depth qualitative interviews to examine how couples manage work and care. The sample included couples with traditional gendered work-care arrangements (i.e. a female caregiver, male breadwinner), alongside couples who share work and care equally, or reverse roles (i.e. a father caregiver, female breadwinner). The study explored how these arrangements are supported or constrained in current welfare systems and the impact of these on parents' wellbeing and relationship satisfaction.

Detailed responses to questions:

To what extent has the statutory shared parental leave scheme given parents (including different sex and same sex parents, adoptive parents, and parents through surrogacy) choice and flexibility in how they share parenting responsibilities in the first year?

N.B. Our findings relate predominantly to different sex couples.

- **Shared parental leave does not currently provide the flexibility and choice parents need around sharing responsibilities in the first year of parenting.**
- **Both studies demonstrate that workplace discrimination, lack of affordability, lack of awareness about entitlement, and/or limited understanding about entitlements**, are key factors that impact on choice and flexibility for parents. Parents who are marginalised, working for industries that are low pay, are self-employed or haven't been in continuous employment are especially disadvantaged by the current leave system.

I would have [taken parental leave] but because I got told that it would have been unpaid it were a case of well, I really can't financially do that. (Craig, aged 29, FYFF, nightshift restocking delivery vans)

I don't really understand it. Or the shared parental leave, maternity leave, paternity leave, like I don't even really know what the difference is, so. (Jake, aged 26, FYFF, software developer working from home)

- In all couple categories where parents were entitled to leave, the fathers cited (un)supportive managers as influencing how much leave they took when their child was born. Rather than their choices being facilitated by workplace policies, they relied on managers who were understanding and/or aware of entitlements to access leave for parenting (Gaunt et al., 2022, p. 22).

[discussing a family member] his work wouldn't let him take the time off. He asked, and they basically said you'll get fired if you take the time off...every dad that I've spoken to who has been working and that, they've never....[fathers] should be entitled to take leave when their kids are born. (Martin, aged 22, FYFF, third sector worker)

- Uptake of SPL is likely to be higher where entitlements are clear, and where leave packages are generous and understood by employees:

I think in my place of work, it's very well-known about shared parental leave and a few of my peers who started having children have actually taken up the sort of shared parental leave option. And, you know, I think our business offers quite a favourable package anyway in terms of parental leave, I think it's beyond the sort of two weeks anyway that the sort of statutory requirement is. So, in terms of my experiences there, it seems to be quite positive. (Dominic, aged 29, banking industry, FYFF)

- In a context where uptake of SPL is only 2%, and therefore for the large percentage of couples for whom shared parental leave is not an option, **gendered state policies around maternity and paternity leave prevent couples from sharing leave in a way that is consistent with their prior arrangements for sharing paid work and childcare** (Gaunt et al., 2022).
- For those committed to an equal or role-reversed work-care arrangement, current leave policies are severely restrictive. **Fathers, in particular, want to be involved in parenting so consider paternity leave to be too time limited**, undermining vital opportunities to bond with their children and support their partners/co-parents. **Equal sharing couples report that they cannot manage financially if the father takes more than the statutory two weeks paternity leave**, since they were reliant on two incomes. Couples therefore feel pushed to revert to gendered care arrangements when fathers' leave entitlement ends, undermining role and life satisfaction at a crucial stage in their child's life and family formation (Gaunt et al., 2022).
- **Breadwinning and equal sharing fathers often supplement their two weeks' statutory paternity leave, using their annual leave allowance.** The practice of adding annual leave is an individualised response to short-term, low paid paternity leave (not all employers 'top up' statutory paternity pay, while annual leave is on full pay) (Gaunt et al., 2022). Longer term effects include limited time for leave when children are unwell, reproducing gender inequality longer term and/or offsetting time for family life.

- For low-income parents, where the traditional breadwinner/caregiver model tends to be more pronounced, shared parental leave is often unaffordable and creates an uneven playing field (Gaunt et al., 2022; FYFF).

Traditionally males get paid more than females and, you know, it's purely financial that they can't afford to do the shared leave. (Jock, aged 30, FYFF, Special Education Needs Teacher)

Limited choice and flexibility for young parents in education

- **Choice and flexibility around leave entitlements are especially constrained for young parents who are still in education.** This is a cohort of parents who are often overlooked in parental leave entitlement debates, including those who are not recognised as employees. There is no statutory or policy guidance to support educators around entitlements to leave for students who are parents, leading to national variation in practice and inequalities for those who become a parent while still in education or training. The most common response by schools/colleges is to prioritise support for young mothers:

She got to go out of school when she needed to go to appointments.....I never got time out of school to go to any of them, because I was the father and because it wasn't medically needed....I wasn't able to take any leave. (Adam, aged 26, FYFF, construction)

[son] were born, like, early doors on the Sunday morning, and then we spent the majority of the day at hospital. It was school the next day and I had I think a day or two off because I wanted to spend time with [son] and his mum. Outside of that there were no rights, there were no acknowledgment that why would I need time off at that point. (Dominic, aged 29, FYFF, finance fraud prevention)

I was a student at university so I didn't have paternity leave [laughs], this was the first one at least. And she...was born I think it was three days before I had an exam. (Christopher, aged 32, FYFF, teacher)

How can inequalities in take up of shared parental leave, including by ethnicity, income, qualification level and occupational status, be addressed?

- Greater parity across sectors is necessary to level the playing field for parents, and especially fathers, regardless of industry or employment contract/status. **A review is needed of parents who are most disadvantaged by the current system**, alongside consideration of policies that ensure all parents, regardless of circumstances receive adequate financial support in the early stages of becoming a parent.
- To be eligible for Statutory Paternity Leave and pay, as well as for shared parental leave and pay, fathers must be considered an employee and have worked continuously for an employer for 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth. Different rules often apply according to employment types e.g. for agency workers or those who are self-employed.

- **Self-employed parents are especially disadvantaged by the current system** and would value the opportunity to apply for, or be eligible for, a grant or state-funded benefit to financially support time for leave:

You kind of get kicked in the teeth constantly, so you know, there's situations that you should be allowed a day off and not lose out on it, so yeah, I think there should be something, you know, I'm not saying the whole sort of paternity leave, not the whole period, but you know, they do all these grants and things, like Covid, stuff like that, I feel like there should be a sort of, not a grant but like a statutory sort of pay that you can apply for to at least have a week off and not, not sort of feel bad for it. (Toby, aged 23, FYFF, self-employed)

- Short-term statutory entitlements to leave for fathers need to be decoupled from workplace entitlements and supplemented by a more generous time and financial state-based benefit to level the playing field for families in lower economic circumstances and/or across industry contexts. Without adequate time to support their partners and invest in the early years of their children's lives, vital opportunities to invest in child development and progress towards gender equality are being missed.
- Young people who transition into parenthood while still in education would benefit from entitlements and clearer guidance about statutory entitlements. Leave for fathers should align with that of mothers to address gender inequalities currently enforced by the existing leave system.

What have been the longer-term equality impacts of the scheme, for example, on equal sharing of responsibilities for children as they grow up, and wider domestic responsibilities?

- **Where couples make a conscious commitment to gender equal arrangements prior to becoming parents, shared parental leave is valued** and enables a continuation of already established couple dynamics, contributing to reduced disruption and sustained satisfaction with roles:

No, it was conscious, definitely conscious. We had talked about it even, even before, like long before Lisa was pregnant we were talking about how we would, how we would like to...approach parenting. And we always wanted it to be split as evenly as possibly. We were kinda lucky in our circumstances in that, so and parental leave was a big part a' that. I knew from, from the start that I wanted to take a period of leave. (Jim, Equal sharing ather, Gaunt et al., 2022)

- **Where fathers have been able to take longer parental leave, they are more likely to remain involved and engaged as fathers over time.** This helps them to build a strong bond with their children over time, enables mothers more choice to sustain engagement in employment, and means that they are better equipped to share childcare and domestic responsibilities with their partners and/or mothers of their children, progressing a more gender equal care arrangement over time. Having decided to become parents together, many parents also strongly valued the time to parent together as a couple:

We really enjoyed that time together, it was really good for us and it meant that we then headed on into the parenting journey both knowing what it was like to be with a child all the time for a long time. So that wasn't alien to either of us. So neither of us felt like that wasn't our thing or that wasn't our sphere. (Meera, Role-reversed mother, Gaunt et al., 2022)

In all honesty I don't find it naturally the easiest thing in the world. I find it easier to be at work. But...it's definitely worth it and I do think to myself sometimes that I've got a bond with [son] at the moment that a lot of fathers would be very jealous of. (Ryan, Role reversed father, Gaunt et al., 2022)

- Where fathers have less time for leave, **equal sharing mothers suggest maternity leave provides them with a knowledge advantage over their partners.** This embeds gendered roles over time:

You just know that inside out and the other person doesn't. So, then you start telling isn't it, "oh now he needs a sleep at ten and he needs a sleep at two", and stuff. And then I was always worried that it comes across as a little bit like overpowering or something. But at the same time it just makes it easy isn't it. Why does he have to discover it for himself when I've obviously spent weeks now experiencing this routine. (Liz, Equal sharing mother, Gaunt et al., 2022)

- These findings suggest that when mothers take more maternity leave, this has a knock-on effect on the division of labour as the child grows up. Mothers learn more about the child and feel more confident, while fathers miss out on this knowledge and confidence building period that also support them to get to know their child. This impacts on caregiving ability and confidence longer term, reinforces traditional gender roles early on, and affects decision making within the family about who should do more caregiving moving forward.

Why has take up of statutory shared parental leave been low and what could be done to increase take up?

- **Affordability, the gender pay gap, and workplace stigma for men continue to be key barriers to the uptake of shared parental leave.** Addressing these key issues are essential to increasing uptake.
- **For men as-fathers, there is relatively little precedent for taking shared parental leave, so it is not currently normalised in their workplace.** Fathers are unaware of their entitlement, encounter employers who are unfamiliar with entitlements, or feel uncomfortable asking for it. Dads in workplaces with this culture may also worry that they will be treated less favourably by management in the future if they ask for shared parental leave: 'the experience of managers as key gatekeepers to how workplace policies are implemented in practice was common across the interviews for both mothers and fathers' (Gaunt et al., 2022, p. 31).

You can't look at an example and say ah, well that worked, that didn't affect that person, that person still thrived and they still got what they wanted out of work and managed to get a different balance with their home life, you can't see those examples around you, so I guess you, being the first to jump into that situation is a pretty scary thing, I think. (Mark, Traditional father, Gaunt et al., 2022)

- Where a workplace is inflexible regarding childcare responsibilities (especially breastfeeding needs), it often becomes a necessity for mothers to stay at home over fathers.
- A shared parental leave system that requires mothers to take less leave and to transfer this to co-parents and for leave to be taken consecutively is less desirable or useful. Mothers report that they do not want to 'give up' their leave because they do not want to sacrifice their allowance of time, which supports the development of parenting skills and bonding with their child.

Are there potentially more effective alternatives to the current "maternal transfer" model of shared parental leave?

- Gaunt et al. (2022) recommend that equal, 'use-it-or-lose-it' maternal and paternal leave entitlements should be available instead of a transfer model. Findings from both studies suggest that Shared Parental Leave was not utilised because couples were not entitled, could not afford the reduction in the father's income, or the mothers did not want to lose their time with their child by reducing their maternity leave. However, parents in both studies viewed the two-week statutory paternity leave, which is currently the only remaining alternative for men, as insufficient for adjusting to parenthood, learning parenting skills, and bonding with their new child. At the same time, they felt it was unfair to ask mothers to give up their leave entitlement to allow fathers more time and would prefer an option to parent equally:

You look at Maternity Leave and **a woman gets six months to a year off work, a man can have two weeks... I think it's an absolute joke.** Parenting is the hardest thing you can ever do, so to say that one person has to be limited to doing it whilst the other one doesn't. (Edward, Role-reversed father, Gaunt et al., 2022; our emphasis)

Which countries have most effectively incentivised equal parenting and wider gender equality through their approaches to parental leave? What would be the costs and benefits of replicating these approaches in the UK?

- It is well established that the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland) have more effectively incentivised equal parenting through leave provisions. Our evidence comparing young fatherhood in Sweden with the UK confirms that the 'use-it-or-lose-it' approach is more effective at supporting young fathers to take leave (Andreasson, Tarrant et al., 2022):

I think us as a country aren't in that sort of mindset really in terms of sort of fostering the positives in terms of having both parents there at those early stages over work, I think there's just still, [...] very much a sort of view of to work first and foremost. If we lived in Scandinavia, it'd be a different kettle of fish. (Dominic, 29, FYFF, finance fraud prevention)

I think it's quite harsh actually. It would be nice to see more of, like you say, more of like a Swedish kind of approach to it, where you have that option to really kind of be there in those really important first few months, definitely. I'd say the first six months before you start weaning them and stuff is so important, cause you've gotta bond, like how do you expect to bond with a child when you're only seeing them in the evenings and then two days a week. (Jake, 26, FYFF, software developer)

Benefits of the Swedish leave system to young fathers:

- Sweden's well established '**dual-earner, dual-carer family policy**' approach embeds **effective state support for working parents, combining extensive paid parental leave, public childcare, and paid leave for the care of sick children** (Wissö & Bäck-Wiklund, 2021). Swedish parental leave is family friendly in that it consists of 480 days of which three months are reserved for one of each parent (a 'use it or lose it' approach). This creates more choice and flexibility and enables both parents to make longer-term plans around work-care balance and investment.
- It is observable that **young fatherhood in Sweden is not a disadvantaged experience in the same way as it is in the UK** (Andreasson, Tarrant et al., 2022). This is because **parental leave systems more equally distribute care in the early years of parenthood and wider welfare systems** (including education, housing and employment) support gender equal parenting in the longer term:

It's not loads of money but it's still a lot better than nothing. We try to save it a bit so we can have it in the summer and not have to work in the summer and stuff, because then in the future when we both study then we're going to need to work in the summer, somewhat in any case. Or that we've saved during the rest of the year so that you still are able to manage. (Claes, aged 25, FYFF, master's student, Sweden)

We have the plan that she's going to be on maternity leave for a year, so it'll be until the winter again then, and then she's going to study. And then there's three months there that come after, that the dad can take. And if I don't take them then no one can take them, **so that's just money that gets thrown away**. So, we have the plan that I'm going to try and take those three months, after one year. As it looks right now ... Then things can ... she might get a really good job or something, you never know, it might change. (Johan, aged 20, part time packing and delivery for an online store, Sweden)

Progressing gender equality through investment in supporting parents in the early stages of parenting is of paramount economic importance, with potential to increase GDP in emerging markets and developing economies by almost 8% (Calvino et al., 2024).

Key evidence

- Andreasson, J., Tarrant, A., Johansson, T., & Ladlow, L. (2023) Perceptions of gender equality and engaged fatherhood among young fathers: parenthood and the welfare state in Sweden and the UK. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 12(3), 323-340.
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- Following Young Fathers Further (2020-27), <https://followingyoungfathersfurther.org/>
- Gaunt, R., Jordan, A., Tarrant, A., Chanamoto, N., Pinho, M., & Wezyk, A. (2022). Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: Transforming gender in work and childcare? Available at: [Caregiving-Dads-Breadwinning-Mums-Full-Report-September-2022.pdf](#)
- Wissö, T. & Bäck-Wiklund, M. (2021) Fathering Practices in Sweden During the COVID-19: Experiences of Syrian Refugee Fathers. *Front Sociol.* 11; (6):721-881.