

More time, better pay: What current and prospective parents want from parental leave

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Parents and prospective parents in the UK want longer, better-paid leave for both mothers and fathers.

Our research, involving over 2,500 UK adults, reveals strong preferences for extending maternity leave paid at 90% of earnings and improving both the duration and pay of fathers' leave.

Extending maternity leave at 90% pay from six to 26 weeks increased policy support by 27 percentage points. Raising fathers' and partners' pay from the statutory rate to 90% of earnings increased support by 19 points.

As the government reviews parental leave and pay, our findings highlight the importance of considering improvements for both parents together.

Why reform matters now

The UK's parental leave system provides time away from work, but much of it is poorly paid. Employed mothers can take up to 52 weeks of maternity leave, of which the first six weeks are paid at the rate equivalent to 90% of average weekly earnings, 33 weeks are paid at a statutory rate (currently £194.32 a week) or 90% of earnings, whichever is lower, and the remaining 13 weeks are unpaid. Eligible fathers and other partners typically receive just two weeks of leave, with statutory pay capped at the same weekly statutory amount.¹

International comparisons highlight shortcomings for both parents. UK maternity leave is relatively long, but its average rate of pay is among the lowest in OECD countries: statutory payments replace less than one-third of gross earnings for a worker on the national average wage. Fathers and other partners, meanwhile, have very little well-paid leave reserved for their own use, leaving the UK an international outlier in the limited provision it offers them.²

The government's review of parental leave and pay offers an opportunity to address these gaps.³ Recent campaigns show significant demand for reform, calling for at least six weeks of well-paid paternity leave and a longer period of maternity pay at 90% of earnings.⁴

What should change?

- **Extend the period of well-paid maternity leave.** Increase the duration of maternity leave paid at 90% of earnings from the current six weeks to at least 12 weeks, with scope for further extension. Our findings show a strong preference for 26 weeks among the options tested.
- **Extend individual leave for fathers and partners from two to at least six weeks as an immediate reform.** Our experiment shows a clear preference for six rather than two weeks, with little additional preference for extending the entitlement to 26 weeks.
- **Substantially improve pay for fathers and partners.** Better pay matters more to public preferences than adding further weeks beyond a six-week entitlement. A combination of earnings replacement and a minimum payment could help make leave affordable for all.

1 UK Government (2026) [Maternity pay and leave: pay](#); [Paternity pay and leave: pay](#)

2 OECD (2026) PF2.1: [Parental leave systems](#). OECD Family Database, updated May 2026; comparison of April 2025 entitlements.

3 Department for Business and Trade and Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Parental leave and pay review](#).

4 Parent Strike (2026) [The Parent Strike: 27 August 2026](#); UK Parliament (2026) [Make statutory maternity pay 90% of wage for first 12 weeks & minimum wage after](#). Petition 779259.

- **Make entitlements broadly accessible.** Reform should protect lower earners and consider equivalent support for self-employed parents and others poorly served by the current system.
- **Treat pay, duration and access as a package.** International evidence suggests that extending entitlement while leaving fathers unable to afford to use it is unlikely to generate the same increases in take-up and caregiving as well-paid, individually reserved leave.

Measuring public preferences

We conducted a conjoint survey experiment in May and June 2026 with 2,501 UK adults aged 18–45 who plan to have a child or further children.

Each respondent completed five choices between two hypothetical parental leave policies. We randomly varied three features of the policies:

- Mothers' leave paid at 90% of earnings: six, 12 or 26 weeks.
- Length of fathers' or partners' leave: two, six or 26 weeks.
- Pay for fathers' or partners' leave: statutory pay, the National Living Wage or 90% of earnings.

In every scenario, mothers retained 52 weeks of total leave, including 39 paid weeks; respondents were told that mothers would not lose any leave.

By assigning policy features at random, we were able isolate how each feature affected the probability that a policy was selected, indicating the level of support for the policy. After each choice, respondents also reported how much leave they would anticipate taking under their selected policy.

The sample is not intended to represent all UK adults: it focuses on people for whom parental leave policy is currently or potentially relevant. Our sample is also more highly educated than the population of new parents. However, the central findings vary little by education, employment status or whether respondents already have children.

Our findings

More generous leave is strongly supported

Respondents showed strong support for more generous parental leave, in particular for mothers. Extending the period paid at 90% of earnings from six to 12 weeks increased policy support by 12.8 percentage points. Extending it to 26 weeks increased support by 27.4 points, the largest estimated effect of any change tested.

For fathers and partners, improving pay had a larger effect on preferences than extending leave. Raising pay from the statutory rate to the National Living Wage increased policy support by 16.8 percentage points, while offering 90% of earnings increased it by 18.9 points. Extending leave from two to six weeks increased support by 7.8 points; extending it to 26 weeks produced a similar increase of 8.5 points.

Both parents anticipate taking more leave under more generous policies

Respondents who chose more generous policies said they would take longer leave if those policies were available. Men choosing 26 weeks at 90% pay anticipated taking 14 weeks, compared with 7.2 weeks among those choosing two weeks at statutory pay (likely reflecting plans to use annual or unpaid leave as well). Women choosing 26 weeks of maternity leave at 90% pay anticipated taking 26.8 weeks overall, compared with 17.3 weeks among those choosing six weeks at that pay level. Although these comparisons do not establish a causal relationship, they suggest that extending leave entitlements and improving pay may encourage greater uptake of parental leave.

Support for reform reaches across social groups

Support for more generous parental leave is broad-based, extending beyond a narrow demographic or ideological group. Longer and better-paid leave for fathers and partners was preferred across age and income groups, with similar preferences among men and women. Extending mothers' leave paid at 90% of earnings was also preferred across age, education, income, employment and parental-status groups. Support for more generous parental leave was evident among respondents holding both more egalitarian and more traditional views on gender roles.

Although the strength of preferences varied between groups, the direction was consistent, with findings indicating widespread backing for improved provision for both parents.

Public preferences are consistent with evidence from actual reforms

These findings closely match evidence from countries that have changed their parental leave systems: fathers' take-up increases when leave is individually reserved and adequately paid. Longer periods of leave – especially where fathers take responsibility for care themselves – produce more persistent changes in fathers' involvement at home.⁵

5 Yuan, S., Kasperska, A., Chung, H. and Cowper-Coles, M. (2026) [Economic and Social Benefits of Enhanced Paternity Leave: Scoping Review](#). King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership, Equimundo and The Dad Shift.

Evidence also warns against partial reform. Many successful international reforms combine adequate pay, individual entitlement and meaningful duration, so simply adding weeks while retaining a low flat rate of pay may generate much smaller effects. Pay consistently emerges as a central constraint on take-up.

A practical direction for reform

Our findings point towards reform that improves provision for both parents. For mothers, extending the period paid at 90% of earnings from six to 12 weeks would reflect clear public preferences, although extending it to 26 weeks attracts even stronger support among the options tested.

For fathers and partners, the findings support extending individually reserved leave to at least six weeks, accompanied by substantially better pay. Extending leave without addressing affordability risks leaving a central barrier to take-up in place. Combining earnings replacement with a minimum payment could help protect both middle and lower earners.

Our experiment identifies public preferences rather than the optimal design of a parental leave system. It does not assess the fiscal or organisational costs of reform or predict actual take-up. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a consistent and strong preference among current and prospective parents for improving both maternity and paternity provision. Together with international evidence on the importance of adequate pay and individual entitlements, they provide a basis for considering coordinated reform.

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Appendix

Sample characteristics

The survey included 2,501 UK adults aged 18-45 who already have children or definitely or probably plan to have them.

Table A1. Survey sample

Characteristic	Number	%
Gender		
Women	1,279	51.1
Men	1,213	48.5
Another gender or prefer not to say	9	0.4
Age		
18–29	1,082	43.3
30–45	1,419	56.7
Mean age	30.9 years	
Children and plans		
Already has children	1,358	54.3
Does not currently have children	1,143	45.7
Definitely plans to have children	1,475	59.0
Probably plans to have children	1,026	41.0
Education		
Undergraduate or postgraduate degree	1,511	60.4
No degree	985	39.4
Prefer not to say	5	0.2

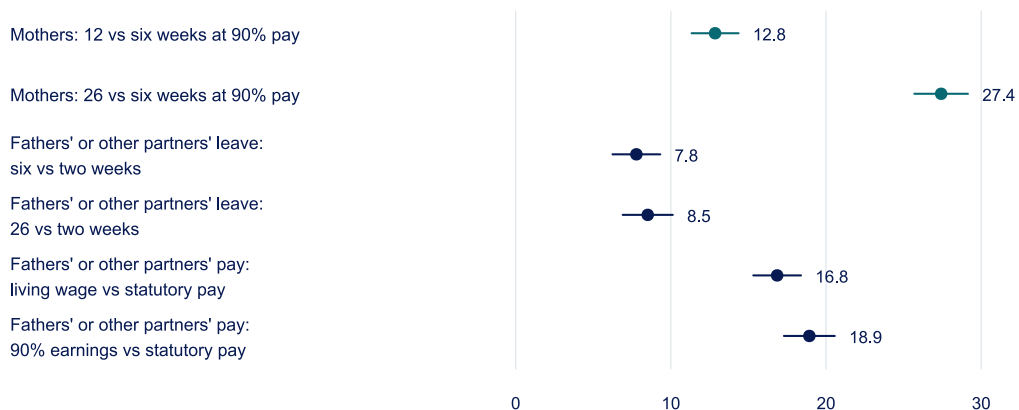
Characteristic	Number	%
<i>Employment</i>		
Paid employment, full-time	1,794	71.7
Paid employment, part-time	329	13.2
Self-employed	93	3.7
Full-time student	166	6.6
Unemployed and looking for work	119	4.8
<i>Nation</i>		
England	2,145	85.8
Scotland	191	7.6
Wales	120	4.8
Northern Ireland	45	1.8

Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. Plans to have children were asked of the full eligible sample and are not mutually exclusive with already having children. Statistics are unweighted.

More generous leave attracts support for both parents

Figure A1. More generous leave attracts support for both parents

Change in probability of policy selection (percentage points)



Points show estimates; lines show respondent-clustered 95% confidence intervals.

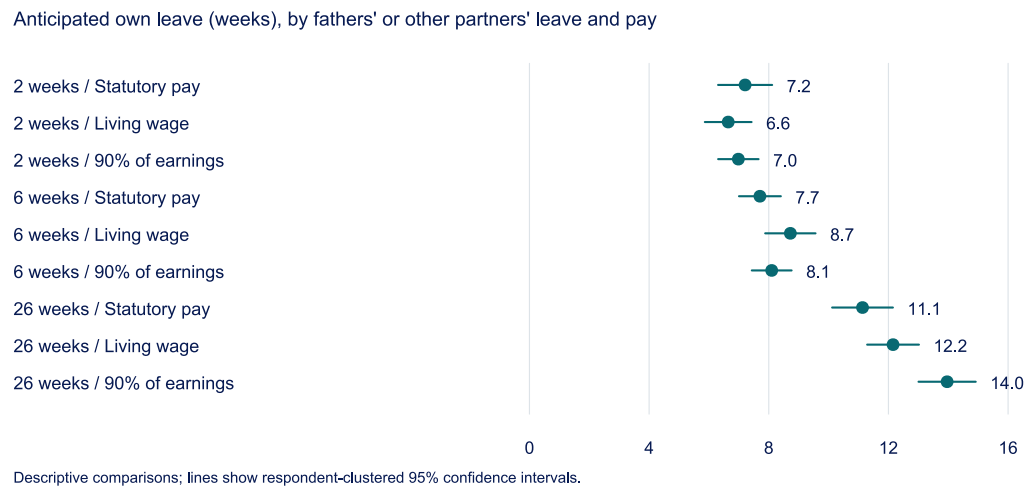
Each estimate shows how changing one policy feature affects its probability of being selected, relative to the stated baseline, averaging over other policy features. The estimates represent separate comparisons and should not be added together.

For mothers, increasing the period paid at 90% of earnings from six to 12 weeks raised the probability of selecting a policy by 12.8 percentage points. Extending it to 26 weeks increased selection by 27.4 points, the largest estimated effect in the experiment.

For fathers and partners, extending leave from two to six weeks increased policy selection by 7.8 percentage points, while extending it to 26 weeks produced a similar increase of 8.5 points. Improvements in pay had substantially larger effects: offering the National Living Wage increased policy selection by 16.8 points, while paying 90% of earnings increased it by 18.9 points, relative to statutory pay.

Both parents anticipate taking more leave under more generous policies

Figure A2. Men choosing longer leave anticipate taking more time off



Average anticipated own leave among male respondents, by the fathers' entitlement in their selected policy. Lines show 95% confidence intervals.

Fathers selecting a policy offering six weeks of leave paid at either the National Living Wage or 90% of earnings anticipated taking an average of 8.4 weeks, compared with 7.2 weeks among fathers who selected a policy resembling current provision—two weeks at statutory pay. This difference of 1.2 weeks is statistically significant ($p=0.012$). Anticipated leave was higher still among those selecting a 26-week entitlement: 12.2 weeks when paid at the National Living Wage and 14.0 weeks when paid at 90% of earnings.

Figure A3. Women choosing longer high-paid leave anticipate more time off



Exploratory, descriptive comparisons; lines show respondent-clustered 95% confidence intervals.

Average total anticipated own leave among female respondents, by maternal weeks paid at 90% of earnings in their selected policy. Lines show 95% confidence intervals, clustered by respondent.

Women selecting longer maternity leave at 90% pay as their preferred policy anticipate taking more leave overall: 17.3 weeks with six high-paid weeks, 20.5 weeks with 12 and 26.8 weeks with 26. All three pairwise differences are statistically significant ($p < .001$).



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