

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

How businesses can support working parents





ABOUT REGENERATE

ReGenerate is a charity that pioneers business solutions to the UK's greatest social and environmental challenges. We focus on unlocking the win-win opportunity where businesses—through their unique capacity to innovate and scale—can actively address the pressing issues of our time, from breaking down barriers to employment to climate change. We believe that businesses that operate in a purpose-driven way tend to be more successful and are key to driving economic growth.

SUPPORTERS

We thank the individuals, businesses and funders for their support and guidance throughout. ReGenerate's work to develop and test these ideas revealed widespread support, with key business backers including Amazon, Cadent Gas, John Lewis Partnership, Kier, NatWest, NEC Group, Toyota GB Plc and Wincanton. Our research draws on a rapid literature review of over 40 published papers and reports, alongside insights from a wide range of experts working across the early childhood development (ECD) landscape. This includes contributions from leaders at the Nuffield Foundation, the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood and a number of practitioners, academics and business leaders, who are actively driving innovation in this space.

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SUMMARY

Early Childhood Development (ECD) encompasses the physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth of children from before birth to around 5 years old.¹ The first 5 years of life are not only important for families but also critical for the long-term health, resilience and productivity of UK society.² Notably, 85% of brain growth occurs by age 3.³ The foundations for communication, emotional regulation, learning and behaviour are established during this period.⁴

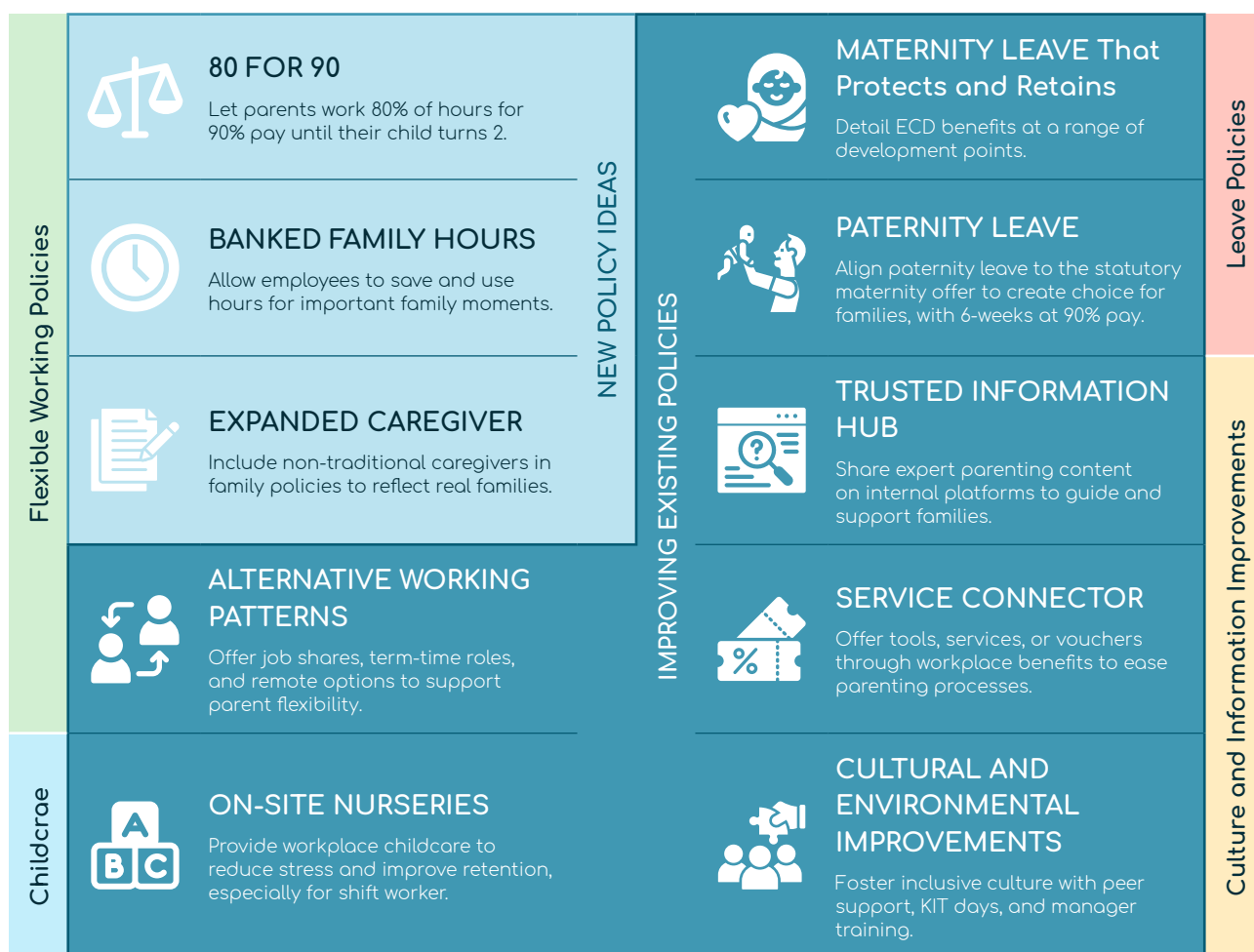
Businesses have a vital role to play in this journey - employing an estimated 2.5 million working parents with children under 5 in the UK.⁵ When employers create supportive environments for working parents through flexible working, inclusive leave policies, and access to relevant resources; working parents are able to be more present with children in those critical first few years and more effectively manage the transition back into work.

Businesses benefit too: those that offer flexible work and family-friendly policies report increased employee satisfaction (94%), higher productivity (65%), and stronger engagement (72%).⁶ These approaches also reduce absenteeism, lower recruitment costs, and improve staff retention. With 60% of working parents saying they would switch jobs for better parental benefits⁷ supportive policies are becoming a key differentiator in a competitive labour market. Businesses that invest in early years support don't just strengthen families, they build stronger, more resilient business.

Key benefits for businesses when you support working parents effectively

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Increased Productivity and Engagement Businesses offering flexible work and family-friendly benefits reported higher/ increased employee satisfaction (94%), productivity (65.2%) and employee engagement (71.9%). ⁸ | 2. Reduced absences 86% of businesses reported a decrease in unplanned absences after implementing such policies. ⁹ Family-friendly policies relieve pressure and stress on parents, increasing flexibility. | 3. Economic and business growth Investing in early childhood and supporting working parents can boost the UK economy, adding at least £45.5 billion annually. This will drive business turnover and growth. ¹⁰ |
| 4. Improved retention and lower costs The average cost to replace an employee in the UK is around £25,000, covering recruitment and lost productivity. ¹¹ Improved maternity leave can lead to increased retention of 70%. ¹² | 5. Talent attraction 60% of working parents would switch jobs for better parental leave. Businesses offering improved policies are more attractive to prospective applications. | 6. Brand reputation 72% of mothers and 66% of all employees said businesses who offer family-friendly benefits are more attractive than those who do not. ¹³ |

This paper highlights why supporting working parents should be a key focus area for businesses, including talent attraction and retention and presents **10 employee policy ideas** designed to positively impact both businesses and early years development.



New policy ideas

1. 80 for 90 (Work 80%, Earn 90%)

When someone returns from parental leave, this policy would let new parents work 80% of their hours for 90% of their pay until their child turns 2. This phased return could improve retention, boosts morale, and helps parents stay productive while they have increased caregiving responsibilities.

2. Banked Family Hours

Providing working parents with up to 2 additional hours per month for important family moments. It is a low-cost flexibility tool that improves responsiveness, engagement, and trust.

3. Expanded Caregiver Definition

Extend family-related benefits to kinship carers and non-traditional caregivers. Recognising real-life family structures strengthens inclusivity and improves retention, particularly in diverse teams.

Improving existing policies

4. Alternative Working Patterns

Offer job shares, term-time roles and remote/hybrid options. These flexible patterns broaden a business's talent pool, reduce return-to-work dropouts and support long-term retention.

5. On-Site Nurseries or Partnerships

Provide childcare on or near the workplace—especially valuable for shift workers. Though high-cost, it can reach parents who would not normally have access to childcare provision.

6. Improved Maternity Leave

Provide improvements beyond statutory leave (e.g. 12, 18, 26 weeks at full pay). Longer paid leave supports recovery, improves re-engagement and strengthens your employer brand.

7. Paternity Leave (6 Weeks at 90%)

Align paternity leave with maternity leave to support shared caregiving. This reduces the gender pay gap, boosts workforce participation, and enhances workplace culture.

8. Trusted Information Hub

Host expert parenting guidance via your intranet or HR platform. Providing evidence-based, employer-endorsed content builds trust and supports parents in balancing work and home life.

9. Service Connector Benefits

Offer access to parenting tools, classes, kits or apps via employee benefits platforms. Practical support improves wellbeing, reduces stress and increases loyalty among working parents.

10. Cultural & Environmental Improvements

Create a family-friendly workplace culture through peer groups, KIT days, and improved manager training. These low-cost interventions boost connection, reduce attrition, and enhance morale.

The scope and nature of our ideas

While we are grateful to all of those who fed into this paper and proud of the ideas it brings forward, we see it only as a starting point in our efforts to contribute towards businesses playing a bigger role in early childhood development.

The scope of the paper is on how businesses can make a real difference to working parents, primarily through the use of their policies. Alongside this, ReGenerate is also running our [Good Jobs Project](#) which focuses on how businesses can successfully employ people who have been kept on the margins of the job market, such as ex-offenders and care leavers, and are considering how success in this work could have a transformative impact through giving parents good employment opportunities. We will also be exploring other ways in which businesses can contribute with subsequent papers, such as through their products and services.

With all of this work, ReGenerate works on the principles of radical collaboration and having the humility to recognise that any learning we gain is open to challenge and is inherently iterative. As a result, we see these 10 ideas as a starting point, not the finished article and would welcome input on ways to strengthen them (or indeed, to know if you believe they are not the right ideas to pursue) and on ideas that may have been missed.

WHY SHOULD BUSINESSES SUPPORT THEIR WORKING PARENTS

Businesses have a vital role to play in this journey—not only through the products and services that shape the environment and experiences of young children, but also as employers. In the UK, they collectively employ around 2.5 million working parents with children under the age of five.¹⁴ This represents the scale of both the opportunity and the challenge in making sure working parents of children in their early years are well supported. For businesses and society alike, early years are a shared concern with generational consequences. The Heckman Curve illustrates how the rate of return from investment in people diminishes as the recipient ages, particularly when targeting disadvantaged individuals.¹⁵ It argues that investment in early childhood development (ECD) directly influences economic, health and social outcomes for individuals and society, by increasing revenue and reducing social spending. It estimates a return of \$7-\$13 for every \$1 invested¹⁶ showing investment in early childhood pays, over the long term.

Public debate around support for working parents still largely centres on the roles of government and individuals, with less recognition of the vital role businesses can play and how doing so can benefit businesses. A child's early years represent a journey, both in terms of the child's development and the level of support working parents receive from their employer. This support starts from when they inform their manager about their pregnancy through to their child starting school.

Improving parents' emotional health in the workplace, through practices like flexible working, can lead to £27.5 billion in additional earnings for the UK workforce and £11.8 billion in additional profits for businesses due to improved early childhood development outcomes.¹⁷

What is a family-friendly business?

Being a family-friendly business involves supporting parents in looking after their own well-being and addressing their families' needs, enabling them to make positive contributions at work, find fulfillment in their careers and achieve their professional goals.¹⁸ This is closely linked to a business's culture, including attitudes toward working parents and the level of understanding and empathy demonstrated by line managers. Businesses have reach, influence and daily contact with the people who matter most in a child's development.

What challenges are faced by working parents?

For many families, the early years are a period of intense pressure. The UK has one of the most expensive childcare systems in the OECD. A full-time nursery place for a child under 2 years old now costs over £14,500 per year on average — more than half the take-home pay of a parent earning the median salary.¹⁹ Many families, particularly those in lower-paid or less secure work, struggle to afford or access high-quality care. Nearly 1 in 4 parents report reducing hours or leaving work entirely due to childcare challenges.²⁰ 53% of parents with a child under 5 years of age in England say they spend more than a quarter of their household income on childcare, whilst 19% say they spend more than half their household income on childcare.²¹

Too often, parents—particularly women—feel forced to choose between their careers and their role as parents. 41% of mothers have turned down a promotion or career development opportunity because they worried it would not fit with childcare arrangements.²² 80% of working mothers consider childcare arrangements before accepting a new job or promotion.²³ Whilst 10% of mothers with under-4s quit work over childcare issues.²⁴

Support for early years is a critical social challenge for the UK

This is an imminent societal challenge. In 2023, the fertility rate in England and Wales fell to 1.44 children per woman—the lowest on record and significantly below the replacement level of 2.1.²⁵ This poses long-term risks, including a shrinking labor force and rising dependency ratios.²⁶ Factors influencing this decline include economic uncertainty related to the cost-of-living crisis and an increasing number of people choosing not to have children.²⁷ Figures from 2024 help to illustrate this; 45.9% of parents have either gone into debt or withdrawn their savings to pay for childcare (a 30% increase from 2023) and 50% of single parents have had to borrow money to pay for childcare.²⁸ Housing costs also play a role, where a 10% increase in house prices leads to a 4.9% decrease in the birth rate among renters.²⁹

The UK risks falling behind in Early Childhood Development (ECD)

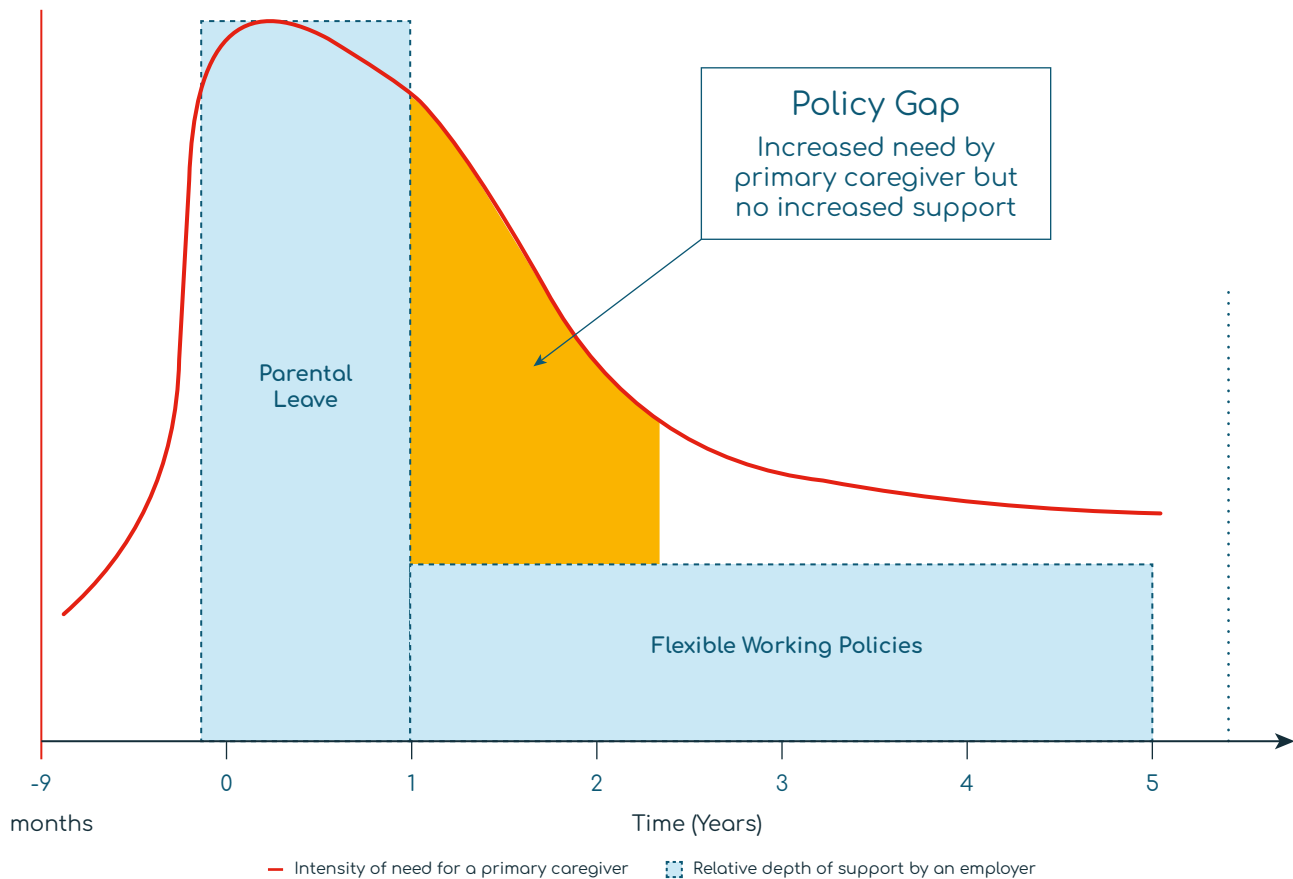
Gaps in development are more pronounced in the UK than in many comparable countries: OECD data shows the UK ranks below average for early childhood education equity and child well-being outcomes. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the UK are significantly less likely to start school with the expected cognitive, social and emotional skills — placing the UK 26th out of 29 OECD countries for equity in school readiness.³⁰ These disparities emerge early and can last a lifetime, shaping everything from educational progress and employment prospects to health, well-being and social participation.^{31,32} Research has shown that around 40% of the attainment gap at age 16 is already present at age 5.³³

Businesses have an important role in supporting working parents, but there are challenges to consider

Businesses have an important role in shaping the lives of working parents and their wider families. For new parents, the transition back to work is a critical period. The demand on their time has increased significantly and employers can lower pressure and stress when this transition is smoother. Those who do, will likely see better business outcomes through working parents remaining in work and improved performance and engagement.

For businesses to fully meet the needs of working parents, there are barriers to overcome in terms of the cost of potential policies, the complexity in implementing them, as well as the time, resource and expertise needed to implement policies effectively.

The current policy gap (illustrative journey)



The period from birth to age 3 is widely recognised as the most critical phase in a child's development. During these early years, over 1 million new neural connections are formed every second, laying the foundation for lifelong cognitive, emotional, and social functioning.³⁴ The "serve and return" interactions between caregivers and children help shape brain architecture and build the skills necessary for communication, empathy, and learning. A stable, responsive caregiving environment during this time is strongly associated with better health, educational, and economic outcomes later in life.^{35,36}

When a parent returns to the workplace following parental leave, there is often a policy gap between their additional needs and the support businesses provide. Businesses that can effectively address this gap will soften the often difficult choice between full-time work or full-time parenting, offering a third option: keeping more parents, and especially women, in the workforce.

The '80 for 90' employee policy idea (Idea 1), is an innovative new solution designed to address this policy gap. The idea is aimed at parents post parental leave, offering them 80% hours for 90% pay, until their child turns 2. It also helps democratise caregiving responsibilities, offering an accessible route for men to work part-time for a capped period. There is a large discrepancy in the sexes with part time work. Among mothers in work, 43% work part-time, compared to just 6% of fathers.³⁷

What are the benefits of increased support for working parents?

Despite the economic and societal challenges that businesses face, both in the UK and across the world, there is evidence that illustrates that supporting working parents is good business. Lower turnover, higher engagement and improved productivity are all within reach when workplaces are designed to help families thrive.

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|---|--|---|
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THE BUSINESS SOLUTION

How can businesses support their working parents

To help businesses identify practical levers for change, we are presenting 10 actionable employee policy ideas, across 4 categories. These are designed to support families in the early years while strengthening business performance.

ReGenerate's principle of humility mean we are not attached to fixed solutions, but rather to constantly learning and improving.⁴⁵ We are excited by each of the 10 ideas, and believe they can deliver a tangible impact to early childhood development (ECD) and for businesses. They will continue to evolve and we welcome suggestions from businesses and working parents on each of the ideas.

The paper starts with the new employee policy ideas, followed by enhancements of those that already exist within the UK businesses family-friendly offering. We are particularly interested in ideas that deliver mutual benefit: improving outcomes for families while also strengthening business performance. For every £1 spent on supporting the mental health and well-being of employees, including working parents, employers receive approximately £4.70 back in increased productivity. This demonstrates a clear financial return on investment.⁴⁶

Whilst we are focusing on business policy in this paper, we recognise that overall pay will continue to be a significant factor in shaping working parents' ability to provide for their young families.

How can each employee policy idea be assessed by businesses

The ability to implement each of the proposed ideas will depend on the type of business, the profile of the workforce, the industry in which the business is operating and external economic and societal factors. We have assessed each idea against three criteria, set out below.

- **Cost of delivery:** What relative level of investment will be required to offer this to all employees? Will it increase or reduce costs?
- **Implementation complexity:** How quickly and efficiently can a change be applied? This will be determined by the level of review and approvals and the amount of work associated with realising the change (e.g. number of documents, policies, contracts, etc.)
- **Impact for business:** The benefits for both businesses and working parents are detailed against each idea. The combination of the benefits being realised, for both businesses and working parents, can be considered as High Impact.

We recognise that there is an investment associated with employment policy changes, and businesses will likely need to prioritise based on what will help their business be successful and on where the greatest benefit for children's early years can be achieved.

NEW POLICY IDEAS

1. 80 for 90. Offer new parents 80% working hours for 90% of pay

Flexible Working Policies

1. 80 FOR 90

Let parents work 80% of hours for 90% pay until their child turns two.

Cost of delivery: M

Implementation complexity: M

Impact for business: H

1.1. What is the idea

Parents are allowed to work 80% of their hours for 90% of their pay, after returning from maternity or paternity leave, until their child turns two. How the 80% of time is split across a business's working week is at the discretion of each business. This should be agreed in consultation with the employee, to understand how splitting the time best fits with their care giving responsibilities.

1.2. Background to existing policy

There is a policy gap for businesses, where there is additional need for parents returning to work after parental leave, but currently no additional support in most businesses. There are businesses, such as Vodafone, John Lewis and NatWest, who all offer a variation of this policy, but for a shorter period of time. Over 200 businesses in the UK are now permanently adopting a 4-day working week⁴⁷, so this idea provides the benefit of a reduction in days worked for the employee for a time-capped period, whilst reducing the payroll cost to the business.

1.3. Why is this idea proposed

This optional benefit helps parents balance career and caregiving during the crucial early years, while businesses gain from improved retention, reduced absenteeism, higher employee satisfaction and a reduced wage bill. The science is clear: more direct parental time leads to better long-term outcomes for children in the majority of cases.⁴⁸ Parents across industries face tough choices between career and family but businesses that offer empowering flexible policies help ease this burden. While 98% of women want to return to work after maternity leave, only 13% think it is viable on a full-time basis.⁴⁹

Allowing parents to work flexibly to support childcare needs could unlock more than £10 billion for the UK economy and bring 440,000 parents back into the workforce, according to new research from Vodafone.⁵⁰ Results from the 4-day Working Week Pilot show 21% of employees reported a reduction in childcare costs (versus 1% who reported an increase).⁵¹

1.4. How will a business benefit

- **Increased productivity and cost savings.** Shorter working weeks can lead to higher efficiency, lower absenteeism and minimal impact on output, while reducing payroll for parents on the policy by 10%.⁵²

- **Improved brand reputation.** After The Wanderlust Group implemented a 4-day work week, job applications rose by 800% and their retention rate reached 98%. This kind of innovation signals to the market that the company values work-life balance, which is a major draw for top talent and enhances the employer brand. Businesses that pioneer new ways of working often receive positive media attention, which boosts their public image.⁵³ Although businesses that adopt '80 for 90' are not making a permanent move towards a 4-day working week, these benefits illustrate what could be achieved, with employees likely to stay for longer.

1.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Primary caregiver(s) spent, at least, 20% more time spent with their child.** The immediate benefit is parents have an additional day to spend with their child during the working week. This would double to 40% if both parents were able to benefit from an 80 to 90 employee policy and take their time on different days. A stronger attachment⁵⁴ between the parent and their child is likely, if there is an increase in sensitive and responsive caregiving. This period is critical for the continued brain growth of the child, and achieving language, social, cognitive and emotional development milestones.⁵⁵

1.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Capacity and coverage (e.g. shifts) will need to be balanced.** The principle with '80 for 90' is a supported, phased transition back into the workplace - recognising these first years of a child's life being particularly critical. For employers with diverse shift patterns this will require more creativity to implement, and there are options available such as Timewise's Flex Positive programme, which helps businesses to design a flexible working strategy.⁵⁶ The key is to move beyond a "one size fits all" policy and consider the specific needs of the roles and the workforce.
- **Policy and procedure changes.** The change will need to be reflected in policies and procedures, with clear guidance on why this is being offered to Working Parents. There should be clear guidance that the time be afforded to employees is to be used for caregiving responsibilities and not to seek additional employment. The culture of a business will determine the appropriate approach, which could be based on trust or a conflict of interest clause could be added to employees' contracts who opt in for 80 for 90.

1.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. How does your business support a phased return to work from maternity or paternity leave?
2. ReGenerate are building a coalition of willing businesses for this idea. Please reach out if you are interested in understanding more

1.8. Case study

Vodafone's phased return for working parents - In 2015, Vodafone implemented a flexible working policy, enabling a phased return to the workplace following maternity or paternity leave, through working a 30-hour week, at full pay, for 6 months. This equates to an 80/100 policy, if the hours were split across 4 days based on a 37.5-hour contracted working week.⁵⁷

Following the change 78% of parents report better work-life balance and 68% seeing improved mental wellbeing. Nicki Lyons, Chief Corporate Affairs & Sustainability Officer, Vodafone UK, "at Vodafone, we have seen firsthand how parent friendly policies can help employees thrive both at work and home through our 80/20 offering.



2. Banked Family Hours

Flexible Working Policies

BANKED FAMILY HOURS

Providing working parents with up to 2 additional hours per month for important family moments

Cost of delivery: L

Implementation complexity: L

Impact for business: L

2.1. What is the idea

Providing working parents with up to 2 additional hours per month empowers parents with the time that matters most. It allows employees to be present for important family moments, without using their leave entitlement.

2.2. Background to existing policy

The approach to taking short periods of time off varies significantly between businesses and industries. Some employers will offer their employees the flexibility to take time off for such events, either informally or through employee policy, whereas other businesses will not enable employees to take this time.

2.3. Why is this idea proposed

Primary caregiver presence in early childhood is incredibly important—not just in the early months but in the everyday touchpoints that build emotional security.⁵⁸ Banked Family Hours support this by enabling parents to show up for their children at crucial, often unpredictable, moments. Flexibility and encouragement for working parents to be there for their children at key moments, such as, birthdays, first days at nursery or religious and cultural holidays, is a simple yet effective way to empower connection.

Time off for dependent leave already exists in most businesses, allowing parents to take time when emergencies arise for employees in their caregiving responsibilities. Banked Family Hours builds in dedicated, proactive support for working parents during the critical early years of their child's life. By recognising that not all family needs require a full day off, Banked Family Hours offers a dignified and low-friction way to help parents be present for the little moments that make a big difference.

Across the UK 83% of businesses who have adopted flexible working had seen increases in productivity, while 61% had seen an upturn in profit.⁵⁹

2.4. How will a business benefit

- **Increased productivity.** 38% of employers say more flexible hours for parents have increased organisational productivity/efficiency.⁶⁰ Whilst Royal Mail's "Family-First Days" pilot (2019-21) recorded a 12 % fall in short-term absence among operational staff allowed two paid "family moments" days per year.⁶¹
- **Increased flexibility working offering, with no direct cost.** There is no direct cost as it uses existing payroll frameworks and does not involve salary top-ups or salary, it is based on the employees holiday entitlement. Rather than needing cover for full days off, short bursts of flexible time can be managed internally—keeping operations smooth and responsive.

2.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Improved emotional development for early years children.** Through parental presence at key moments there will become a stronger connection between parents and their children.⁶² Increased consistency in childcare and engagement at home will help with the child's development. Flexible time supports transitions and reduces behavioural problems, in term supporting school readiness.⁶³

2.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Concept vs reality.** The practicality of how a Banked Hour policy will be implemented will differ between businesses, given the number of employees and roles that those employees are performing. Do you empower employees to self-manage? And if you do, how do you ensure this is being followed in good faith by all employees? There is a balance between trust and motivation, along with ensuring employees are completing their work.

2.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. How does your business currently approach flexi-time for employees?
2. What systems and processes would need to be developed to allow employees to take small amounts of time off to support their children?

2.8. Case Study

Unilever's micro-leave approach - Unilever have implemented flexible micro-leave policies that allow for family-related leave in hourly increments, reporting higher employee satisfaction. This is known as 'everyday flexibility' providing employees, including Working Parents, the ability to manage their time and work in the best way for them.⁶⁴

This has resulted in improved workforce participation and talent attraction. Morag Lynagh, Ex-Global Future of Work Director, at Unilever commented how *"Flexibility is now important to all generations: millennials and Gen Zers value it above other benefits. And for employers, flexibility is one of the ways you get greater workforce participation, which helps to build better economies."*⁶⁵



3. Expanded Caregiver Definition

| Flexible Working Policies | | |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|
| EXPANDED CAREGIVER DEFINITION | | |
| Include kinship caregivers in family policies to reflect real families. | | |
| Cost of delivery: L | Implementation complexity: M | Impact for business: M |

3.1. What is the idea

A modern, family-friendly approach to family support policies, to cover kinship caregivers who provide consistent childcare support, either alongside or instead of the birthparents.

Example of Caregiver definition from Severn Trent: *"A caregiver includes a spouse, child, parent, grandparent or a person who lives in the same household as the employee, and/or any person who reasonably relies on the employee for support or care."*



3.2. Background to existing policy

Traditionally, many workplace family policies (parental leave, caregiver leave, flexible hours) often only support legal parents. But in many households, care responsibilities are shared—with grandparents, step-parents, aunts, uncles, or kinship caregivers playing key roles in raising children.

This idea would allow businesses to offer existing family support benefits—such as parental leave, banked family hours, or flexible work—to designated caregivers beyond birth parents.

There are 152,000 children under kinship care in the UK.⁶⁶ Kinship is a charity who have been campaigning for kinship carers to have the same rights to paid leave as parents and adopters.

3.3. Why is this idea proposed

The early years of life are shaped by consistent, responsive caregiving. This does not have to come from a birth parent alone. Allowing designated caregivers to step in supports the child's emotional well-being, social development and cognitive growth. Expanding eligibility does not expand cost—but it does expand impact, inclusion and trust. The business case for family-friendly caregiver support is tied to demographic reality and talent management.

Expanding the definition of "caregiver" in company policies to include all employees with significant caring responsibilities greatly broadens support and yields substantial retention benefits. By recognising caregiving as a shared role, companies can improve inclusivity, support real family dynamics and deliver stronger outcomes for children in the critical 0 to 5 years age window.

3.4. How will a business benefit

- **Improved retention, and attraction, of kinship carers.** Expanding the caregiver definition supports the family-friendly hiring agenda for a business. Caregivers who are legal guardians may be struggling to make their work and family responsibilities, if not provided with the same benefits and entitlements as a child's birth or adoptive parents. An improved brand reputation through being inclusive of different family set ups, will also support talent attraction.⁶⁷ 30% of employees receiving caregiving support are more likely to stay with their employer, reducing turnover and associated costs.⁶⁸

3.5. How will working parents benefit

- **A broader support network is available to the child.** The policy allows a wider group of adults to show up and support in key early years developmental moments. This can support transitions for early years children, such as nursery starts, health appointments and early school events.⁶⁹ Interacting with a variety of adults within the extended family exposes children to different personalities, communication styles, problem-solving approaches and life experiences.

3.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Agreement on what roles and relationships are included in the policy.** The breadth of expanding the definition will need to be discussed with employees. There might be friends or neighbours who support childcare arrangements who do not fit into one of the traditional family roles. Would they be excluded? And what could/would be the impact on employees if excluded but performing equal care giving responsibilities to other employees?

3.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. Do you have kinship carers in your workforce? Have you engaged them on their needs?
2. What is the level of maturity at your business in relation to kinship carers? Are they recognised in the same way as birth or adoptive parents?

3.8. Case Study

Tesco's support for kinship - Tesco's kinship policy provides employees who are grandparents or other kinship carers with 26 weeks of fully paid leave when they obtain a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). This policy, implemented in 2023, is a significant step for supporting families involved in kinship care, making Tesco one of the first UK retailers to offer such comprehensive support.⁷⁰ The kinship leave has allowed kinship carers to be able stay in the workforce, while managing their extra responsibilities. The new policy, which makes the grocer one of the first UK retailers to support these carers, benefited more than 300,000 colleagues when rolled out.

James Goodman, Tesco UK People Director, commented *"Relatives who take on the care of a child often feel forced to reduce their hours or even leave their jobs as they try to juggle extra responsibilities and we wanted to step up to offer kinship carers the same support as colleagues who adopt a child."*

The Tesco logo, consisting of the word "TESCO" in a bold, red, sans-serif font, with three blue diagonal stripes underneath the letters.

IMPROVING EXISTING POLICIES

4. Alternative Working Patterns

| Flexible Working Policies | | |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|
| ALTERNATIVE WORKING PATTERNS | | |
| Offer job shares, term-time roles and remote options to support working parent flexibility. | | |
| Cost of delivery: M | Implementation complexity: M | Impact for business: M |

4.1. What is the idea

- **Job sharing:** This involves splitting one full-time role between two people. This should be open to both mothers and fathers.
- **Term-time only roles:** Aligning work schedules with nursery calendars, as government funding does not cover school holidays.
- **Remote and hybrid working:** Offering greater autonomy over place of work.

4.2. Background to existing policy

Flexible working is where businesses provide working arrangements which allow employees to vary the amount, timing, or location of their work, usually to the mutual benefit of the individual and business.⁷¹ The focus of flexible working and specifically flexible working patterns, has historically seen a societal expectation that mothers, rather than fathers, would take on these roles to manage childcare responsibilities. UK legislation in 2024 also now enables employees to raise flexible working requests, so businesses have an opportunity to formalise policy compared with responding to individual requests from employees.

4.3. Why is this idea proposed

The core principle behind this employee policy idea is challenging traditional assumptions about how work is done. By evolving legacy ways of working, businesses can empower employees in new ways. When a business offers more dynamic approaches to fulfilling responsibilities, it gains access to a wider talent pool than with more traditional policies.

Job sharing: 98% of mothers want to return to work following maternity leave but only 13% think it is viable on a full-time basis and of the 24% that tried to go back full time, 79% ended up leaving because they could not maintain their full-time job alongside having a baby.⁷²

Term-time roles: Families on average pay £900 per child for childcare during the six-week summer break.⁷³ This seeks to reduce absenteeism while maintaining consistent coverage during peak times. Whilst nurseries for early years children operate during term time, UK government childcare funding covers 30 hours per week for 38 weeks of the year, not all year round. This means the 30 hours are not available during the school holidays.⁷⁴

Remote & hybrid working: Even one or two days a week working from home can give parents the flexibility to manage school runs, reduce commuting time and ease the burden of childcare. 82% of working parents say remote working helps them balance work and family.⁷⁵

4.4. How will a business benefit

- **Improved retention, return-to-work rates and talent attraction.** 84% of working parents say flexible working would make them more loyal to their employer.⁷⁶ Offering nuanced flexibility helps parents stay, especially after parental leave.⁷⁷ 9 in 10 people not currently working say flexible working would make them more likely to apply for a role.⁷⁸

4.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Supports stronger family routines.** Benefit from alternative working patterns allows working parents to spend more time at home and more time with their children. Routines reduce stress for children and support behavioural development. This is key to emotional regulation and early learning.⁷⁹

4.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Clear guidelines and structures required, especially for job shares.** Clear guidelines and structure are required for any job-share to be successful. The line managers of the colleagues who are job-sharing should create a comprehensive job-sharing policy outlining roles, expectations and processes.⁸⁰

4.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. How do you currently respond to requests for flexible working? Do you have a defined policy or are requests responded to on an individual basis?

4.8. Case Study

Job Sharing at Lloyds Banking Group - Two employees share one full-time role, each working three days per week with overlap on Wednesdays.⁸¹ This allows knowledge continuity, professional development and reduced pressure on parents.

LLOYDS BANK



Clare and Annabelle, Senior Managers in the Nature team, part of Group Environmental Sustainability, Lloyds Banking Group, *"We are huge advocates of job-sharing and believe it brings so many benefits to the business and the individual. This way of working is a game changer for anyone wanting to work part time – whatever the circumstances. For individuals, it means they can have a career and a great work-life balance; they are not mutually exclusive. We have had a fantastic career with Lloyds Banking Group and we feel that job-sharing has allowed us to pursue our ambition to progress and grow whilst working part time."*

5. On-Site Nurseries

| Childcare | | |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|
| ON-SITE NURSERIES | | |
| Provide workplace childcare to reduce stress and improve retention, especially for shift worker | | |
| Cost of delivery: H | Implementation complexity: H | Impact for business: H |

5.1. What is the idea

The employer provides, or co-locates, nursery provision on or near the workplace. Models can vary in scope, and may include fully operated in-house nurseries (such as those offered by Patagonia or Goldman Sachs), third-party provision subsidised by the employer, or local partnerships with trusted early years providers in proximity to the office. Access is prioritised for employees' children and may be subsidised or offered at cost.

5.2. Background to existing policy

In the 1970s and 1980s, as more women entered the workforce, there was renewed interest in workplace childcare. Some employers, particularly in the public sector and large corporations, began to offer on-site nurseries as part of broader equal opportunities and family-friendly policies.⁸² The Childcare Voucher Scheme was introduced in 2005, on-site nurseries became more common in larger businesses, especially in sectors with a high proportion of female employees or where talent retention was a priority.⁸³

5.3. Why is this idea proposed

For many working parents, the return to work after parental leave is dominated by one major issue: childcare. On-site nurseries offer a practical and impactful solution by removing the stress of long commutes, enabling real-time parental presence, and bridging the gap between work and caregiving in the most direct way possible. For industries where weekend and shift work is more common, for example hospitality and retail, there is typically a gap in provision given nurseries typically open Monday to Friday, during work and school hours. An on-site nursery can be offered to help fill this gap of access to provision.

5.4. How will a business benefit

- **Talent attraction and retention.** This is not a low-cost initiative—but it is a high-impact one. For businesses serious about retaining experienced talent and reducing return-to-work drop-off, on-site childcare sends the strongest possible signal of commitment. Companies with on-site childcare had 7.4 times higher worker retention rate.⁸⁴

5.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Increased access to early years care.** Could enable employees working diverse shifts to access childcare based around their schedule (Weekends and Evenings), compared to only during weekdays, which is the normal offering from professional childcare providers.

5.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Opportunity for local partnership.** An on-site nursery may seem expensive, especially for smaller businesses. Rather than dismissing this idea outright, businesses should consider possible business partnerships, either within their office building or in the local area. In 2022, there was a 45% month-on-month increase in UK companies searching for childcare facilities, compared with 2021.⁸⁵

5.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. Do you have an understanding of how many of your working parents use nursery services?
2. How can businesses also encourage quality in provision as a factor alongside access?

5.8. Case Study

Cisco's On-Site Nursery for employees - The technology company Cisco operates an on-site nursery at its UK headquarters for children aged from 3 months to 5 years, for both employees and local families. Employees reportedly pay a "significantly reduced" cost for childcare, likely through a salary sacrifice scheme. They also offer discounted back-up care. The idea to introduce the nursery was first raised by a group of employees in 2015.



The nursery is managed by Bright Horizons, who also manage other nurseries, including for NatWest in Edinburgh. It is open Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm, except for Christmas week and bank holidays. It is a key part of their employee benefits package, helping to attract and retain talent in a competitive industry.⁸⁶

According to Louise Cook, HR manager at Cisco, *"Our working parents are important to us, and we know it can be tough balancing work and family, so we want to make sure they have the support they need to help them be their best. Our on-site nursery and preschool plays a significant part in this and also highlights Cisco's commitment to its working families."*

6. Maternity Policy Enabling Working Parents

Leave Policies

MATERNITY LEAVE That Protects and Retains

Incremental improvements beyond statutory paid leave, at 6, 12, 18 or 26 weeks, can have outsized benefits.

Cost of delivery: H

Implementation complexity: M

Impact for business: H

6.1. What is the idea

A maternity policy should suitably support and protect working mothers who wish to remain in employment. Rather than prescribing a single model, our idea here is that businesses consider whether their current offering is optimal. We present a tiered menu of options. Each level offers distinct benefits, enabling businesses to align support with their business model, workforce composition, and long-term ambitions. As the length and generosity of maternity leave increase, so too can the gains – for families and for business. This recognises that many UK businesses already offer maternity leave and pay above the statutory minimum.

| Duration (Full pay) | Health & Social Outcomes | Business Outcomes | OECD Country Offering as Statutory ⁸⁷ (100% pay unless stated) |
|------------------------|--|--|---|
| 6 weeks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be insufficient time for a mother to make full recovery from giving birth⁸⁸ (particularly from c-section, which are ~42% of NHS England births⁸⁹). A return to work within such a short period can provide high stress for both mother and baby.⁹⁰ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High risk of attrition during / following maternity period, as mother does not feel⁹¹ ready to return to work. External risk of poor reputation for lack of support for working parents.⁹² Risk of low productivity from returning mothers.⁹³ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0 weeks: United States 6 weeks: UK (90% of pay) With the exception of the US, the UK has the least generous statutory maternity pay offering amongst OECD countries. |
| 12 weeks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mental health can improve through reduced risk of depressive symptoms, psychological distress, and burnout.⁹⁴ A greater chance of successful and sustained breastfeeding due to more frequent care.⁹⁵ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retention and productivity is likely to improve, relative to 6 weeks; but 12 weeks is still a relatively short time.⁹⁶ Reputation will be slightly enhanced but maternity offer remains behind the majority of employers, and OECD countries. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12 weeks - Mexico 14 weeks - Germany (max €450 per week) |
| 18 weeks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimum recommendation from International Labour Organisation (ILO)⁹⁷ due to impact on improved recovery, mental health outcomes and child bonding. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Having spent time to bond with their child there will likely be improved engagement on return to work.⁹⁸ Reduced stress and worry about their child will likely result in lower absenteeism. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16 weeks - France, Austria Netherlands ~(80% of pay) and Spain 17 weeks - Canada (55% of pay) 17 weeks - Portugal 20 weeks - Italy (80% of pay), Finland (90% of pay)) 22 weeks - Australia (min. wage) |

| Duration (Full pay) | Health & Social Outcomes | Business Outcomes | OECD Country Offering as Statutory ⁸⁷ (100% pay unless stated) |
|------------------------|---|---|--|
| 26 weeks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> WHO promotes 6-months maternity to develop exclusive breastfeeding.⁹⁹ Significantly beneficial for child health.¹⁰⁰ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attrition risk will reduce, as mothers are more likely to appreciate time given to spend with their child.¹⁰¹ Business will rank highly on ESG criteria for Family-Friendly policies.¹⁰² | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26 weeks - New Zealand (~£340 per week) 28 weeks - Czech Republic (70% of wage) |
| 36-52 weeks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child development outcomes will be enhanced from time spent with primary caregiver(s).¹⁰³ Mother's health outcomes are positive, improving work engagement and performance. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High impact on business, with increased engagement, stronger relationships, and stronger trust.¹⁰⁴ Demonstrates values-driven leadership, improving internal and external reputation.¹⁰⁵ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 35 weeks - Sweden (80% of pay) 36 weeks - Japan (~66% of pay) 49 weeks - Austria, Norway 52 weeks - Denmark (80% pay) 84 weeks - Estonia |

6.2. Background to existing policy

Statutory maternity pay in the UK provides mothers with 90% of their average weekly earnings for the first six weeks. For the subsequent 33 weeks, the pay offered is £184.03 or 90% of average weekly earnings, whichever is lower.¹⁰⁶

When comparing the UK's statutory maternity pay with other OECD countries, the UK ranks 36th from 38 countries. However, in terms of the total length of paid time women are legally entitled to take off and are paid for, the country ranks 3rd.¹⁰⁷

6.3. Why is this idea proposed

Maternity leave is increasingly recognised as a foundational workplace policy — one that supports families through a critical life stage and creates long-term value for employers. The early months after childbirth are vital for maternal recovery, infant development, and the formation of secure attachment. For businesses, this period also shapes whether employees return to work, how supported they feel, and how likely they are to stay. Over 60% of UK businesses now offer enhanced maternity pay above statutory levels, with nearly 40% offering at least 18 weeks at full pay and a smaller but growing proportion extending to 26 weeks or more.¹⁰⁸ This idea illustrates the benefits if businesses are able to do more.

6.4. How will a business benefit

- **Talent attraction and employee retention.** 55% of 18-34 year olds would be more likely to apply for a position if the employer offered good parental leave policies. Whilst 20% have quit their job because of poor parental leave policies.¹⁰⁹ This highlights the importance that employees are placing on family-friendly policies. The investment should be considered against costs associated with hiring and training new employees.

6.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Increased financial and job security.** Increased long-term financial earnings and improved career prospects for families are linked to greater well-being.¹¹⁰ 57% of new mothers cut their maternity leave short, or plan to do so, because they cannot afford to take the full entitlement.¹¹¹

6.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Mindset of 'benefit' vs investment in your employees.** The benefits of an enhanced maternity policy to an organisation are focused around motivation, efficiency, wellbeing and retention. Often a maternity policy has been considered as a 'benefit' by businesses through the HR or Reward Function, compared to a strategic investment in the business's future.¹¹² This should involve modeling the cost of extending Maternity Leave, alongside productivity and reduced costs from hiring for new staff.

6.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. How do you benchmark your maternity pay against your industry peers?
2. What is the feedback from employees and job applicants on your current policy?

6.8. Case Study

Lidl's increased Maternity Leave - Lidl GB provides a recent example of a large UK employer extending their maternity offering. From the beginning of 2024 Lidl offers 28 weeks or 6 ½ months of full pay for colleagues on maternity or adoption leave, a significant increase from their previous policy of 14 weeks.



This offers new parents significantly more time to bond with their newborn and adjust to parenthood, with enhanced financial security. Doubling their maternity offering will have enhanced Lidl's reputation for prospective employees and likely retained those considering starting a family in the near future.

Stephanie Rogers, Chief Human Resources Officer at Lidl GB, commented *"these latest enhancements to our Family Leave policies show our dedication to fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace and reinforce our ambition to be a first-choice employer."*¹¹³

With a UK workforce of 35,000 people (as at May 2025), this policy change could benefit up to 1,750 employees a year (estimated 5% of UK businesses have employees on parental leave at a given time).

7. Paternity Leave suitable to support Fathers with Care Giving responsibilities

| Leave Policies | | |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|
| PATERNITY LEAVE That Increases Time with Primary Caregiver(s) | | |
| Align paternity leave to the statutory maternity offer (6 weeks, at 90%) to support fathers to be more present for their child’s early years. This leave is “take it or leave it” so not part of the shared parental leave. | | |
| Cost of delivery: H | Implementation complexity: M | Impact for business: H |

7.1. What is the idea

Increasing paternity leave and pay to 6-weeks (with flexibility to when this is taken), at 90% of an employee’s full salary. This aims to provide the same baseline of leave provision for both mothers and fathers, providing choice to working families on how to spend the time. This is also intended to reduce any existing perceptions around existing differences in leave, pay and cost to the business.

7.2. Background to existing policy

The UK has the least generous statutory paternity leave policy¹¹⁴ in Europe, offering new fathers 2-weeks off, paid at £184.03 per week or 90% of their average weekly earnings, whichever is lower. As with maternity, the United States does not have a statutory offering, whilst Australia offer 2 weeks at national minimum wage, and in Canada and New Zealand fathers can benefit from shared parental leave, at around 50% of earnings.¹¹⁵ The UK’s period of 2-weeks leave has been unchanged since 2003 and the statutory pay is significantly lower than National Living Wage, at £427.35 per week.¹¹⁶

Only 18% of UK employees feel 2-weeks of paternity leave is long enough and a majority (66%) would support an increase beyond this statutory provision.¹¹⁷ From a sample of 435 UK businesses, 210 offer statutory paternity, whilst 10 offer the perceived gold standard of 12 months off, paid.¹¹⁸

Only around 31.6% of eligible-men received Statutory Paternity Pay (SPP) in 2023-24, compared to an OECD average, from 18 countries with available data, of 57%. This low take-up is largely due to affordability, with around 70% of fathers who did not take their full statutory leave entitlement cutting it short due to cost.¹¹⁹

7.3. Why is this idea proposed

Offering a minimum 6-weeks paternity leave at 90% of pay, will help both parents contribute to healthy early years development and support more mothers in their return to work.

Increasing statutory paternity leave to 6-weeks at 90 per cent of pay could boost the UK economy per year by £2.6 billion in the near term if funded by the government, according to research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.¹²⁰ This is driven by the gains achieved when more women move into work and work more hours. Evidence from other countries shows that uptake increases when generosity of pay increases. For example, take-up rose in both Spain and Iceland when much more generous pay was introduced. Almost half of employers support extending statutory paternity Leave and pay.¹²¹

7.4. How will a business benefit

- **Talent attraction and retention.** 43% of new dads look for paid paternity leave above a bonus (42%) and salary (27%) when looking for a new role.¹²² Across 138 UK businesses benchmarked by Working Families (2024), 74 % report turnover below their industry average after introducing enhanced family-friendly leave.¹²³
- **Reduced gender pay gap.** Research shows that offering fathers more than six weeks of paid paternity leave can reduce the gender pay gap by 4%, by enabling a more equal sharing of childcare and career breaks.¹²⁴ PwC research suggests that closing the gender workforce gap in the UK, often impacted by women leaving the workforce after having children, could add £43.5 billion to the UK economy by 2030.¹²⁵
- **Improved culture.** For businesses, increased paternity leave will contribute to a stronger culture, as fathers who take paternity leave often become more understanding colleagues and managers, which improves team culture and supportiveness. This will help to develop a reputation as a family-friendly workplace.¹²⁶

7.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Reduced stigma at work in taking time off.** Increased paternity can help towards normalising greater involvement of fathers in raising children and help families with the first few weeks. Finnish fathers have taken nearly double the length of paternity leave since the 2022 reform enabling shared parental leave, enhancing the amount of time fathers could take off. Those who have benefited from the change believe it will strengthen the bond they enjoy with their children, who on average now take 16-weeks leave compared with 9 before the policy change.¹²⁷ So despite this change being sponsored by government support, it illustrates how it is becoming 'normalised' for men to increase the length of leave they take.

7.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Does your business want to be considered as a follower, or early adopter?** There are active campaigns from charities, such as The Dad Shift, for paternity to be increased to 6 weeks at 90% Pay,¹²⁸ with a government review expected. If this is agreed and becomes the new norm, will your business look to align or go further, in preparation of possible future changes?

7.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. How do you benchmark your maternity pay against your industry peers?
2. How would your business react if the statutory entitlements were increased in the UK?

7.8. Case Study

Aviva's paternity leave offering - In 2017, Aviva became one of the first UK employers to introduce an equal parental leave policy, offering new parents 12 months parental leave, with 6 months at full basic pay.¹²⁹

Following the change the average length of paternity leave taken has increased by 3-weeks; in 2021 it was 24-weeks, compared to 21-weeks in 2018.

Dannielle Harmer, Aviva's Chief People Officer, commented following the change that *"Men taking parental leave have a better understanding of the choices female colleagues have to make when balancing parenting with their career which makes them more empathetic colleagues and leaders too."*

Over 1,200 new fathers have now benefitted from the change in policy, meaning 3,600 more hours have been spent looking after new borns by Aviva employees as a result.

A 2020 McKinsey survey found that 99% of eligible fathers at Aviva (a UK insurer with an equalised parental leave policy) took shared parental leave, with 84% taking six months. Employee satisfaction and engagement increased, and the company reported higher loyalty and reduced turnover.¹³⁰



8. Trusted Information Hub: Businesses as a Platform for Expert Early Years Guidance

Culture and Information Improvements

TRUSTED INFORMATION HUB

Share expert-created parenting content on internal platforms to guide and support families.

Cost of delivery: L

Implementation complexity: M

Impact for business: M

| ILLUSTRATIVE DELIVERY MODEL | TRUSTED INFORMATION HUB |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Partner | Kindred ² or similar trusted early years business ¹³¹ |
| Business Role | Host branded intranet portal or app with editable internal sections |
| Expert Role | Curate and update guidance; ensure evidence-based content |
| Audience | All parents; customisable for pregnancy, return to work, and child age |

8.1. What is the idea

A hub of information, offered by businesses to their employees, containing guidance from experts on all aspects of childcare. This can include parenting seminars, webinars, coaching sessions, or resource libraries – often as part of wellness or employee assistance programs.

8.2. Background to existing policy

Many parents do not have access to clear, practical information about how early experiences shape lifelong outcomes.

8.3. Why is this idea proposed

The business case for such programs includes improved productivity, engagement and loyalty. Hosting expert parental guidance (on topics from newborn care to teenagers and beyond) helps working parents feel supported and reduces family-related stress that can spill over into work.

8.4. How will a business benefit

- **Increased engagement, inc. uptake in hard to reach groups.** Strengthens trust and touchpoints during key life stages, reinforcing connection to employer. Increases use of internal resources by linking to relevant employee support, benefits and networks. Trusted delivery through the workplace increases uptake among hard-to-reach groups.¹³²

8.5. How will working parents benefit

- **A trusted, single source of information.** The idea addresses a trust gap by providing parenting information through a familiar, trusted workplace source, compared to having to navigate a disparate, local ecosystem. The information can also be tailored to consider nuances of each business; e.g. shift patterns, supporting parental decision making.

8.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **The process and responsibility for managing the updates: Business vs External Partner?**

Information evolves as trends impact the workforce and government policy adapts. For any information source a business must agree the frequency with which resources are reviewed and updated where required. If a business reviews policies annually, does it fit into that process? Or does the business fully empower and trust any third party partner which is engaged to provide the information to employees.

8.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. Do you have an understanding on how your working parents currently access information to support their parenting journey?
2. What level of usage currently exists on internal applications, such as your intranet? Do behaviours already exist or will employees need to be nudged to change behaviours?

8.8. Case Study

Kindred² provision of information to businesses - Kindred² is a charitable foundation working to improve early education and early child development offer a white-label platform, enabling businesses to host curated, expert parental guidance tailored to each child's age and stage.¹³³

Kindred² are responsible for curating and updating the information available, to ensure it is evidence backed and relevant. Businesses can upload their own internally relevant guidance.

It is structured to engage parents at key moments: preparing for leave, welcoming a baby and returning to work. By ensuring parents have access to the right information at the right time, the project will help employers better support their workforce while improving outcomes for children in the critical early years. Early adopters benefit from higher engagement and improved employer-parent communication.



9. Service Connector: Businesses as a Gateway to Early Years Support

Culture and Information Improvements

SERVICE CONNECTOR

Offer tools, services, or vouchers through workplace benefits to ease parenting processes. Employers become a conduit for essential parenting services, from digital tools to physical items.

Cost of delivery: M

Implementation complexity: M

Impact for business: M

9.1. What is the idea

Reimagining workplace benefits to include delivering early years services directly to families. These can include:

- a) Digital Toolkits: Company-paid access to parenting apps like EasyPeasy or BabyBuddy. Offers milestone prompts, expert tips and bite-sized parent-child activities.
- b) Physical Support Kits: Branded “Baby Boxes” containing essential items, positive parenting material and capability-based guidance
- c) Class & Care Vouchers: Vouchers for childcare, local parenting classes, healthy food boxes or play groups—moving beyond gym perks to real-world parenting help.
- d) Financial Education: Financial inclusion training, with a view to making this mandatory or included within development plans. This can cover support to help employees manage their debts, deal with budgeting, get their savings on track and to better understand their pension.
- e) Practical Parenting Training for Staff: Training can cover a range of topics from parenting skills, to emotional health and well-being, to educating managers and colleagues on how to support new parents in the workplace.¹³⁴
- f) Rent and Property Subsidy: Housing support to provide stability. Get Living for Business adds a service to employers – supporting employees manage a relocation and making access to a home part of a business’s workplace benefits.¹³⁵

9.2. Background to existing policy

Workplace benefits have traditionally focused on areas such as health insurance, gym discounts, cycle to work schemes and pensions. But as work-life boundaries blur, there is a growing opportunity to offer practical, everyday parenting support as a workplace benefit. Businesses can now act as gateways—not just funders—to deliver valuable early years services directly to their employees.

9.3. Why is this idea proposed

Employee benefits work best when they reflect the needs of all employees. The precedent has been for businesses to offer benefits such as private medical insurance or gym discounts, however benefits specific to the needs of working benefits will offer more value. Providing an offering that is aligned with employee needs is likely to build the most engagement.

9.4. How will a business benefit

- **Improved engagement from employees.** Offering childcare support shows employees that their employer values their contributions and understands the challenges they face as parents. This can boost morale and create a more engaged and positive work environment.¹³⁶

9.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Reduced Stress and Improved Well-being.** Knowing that their employer supports their parenting responsibilities—through benefits like childcare vouchers, flexible schedules, or parental leave—reduces the daily stress of balancing work and family. This support can lead to better mental health and overall well-being.¹³⁷

9.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **Balancing benefit offering between parents and non-parents.** Benefits should be tailored and representative of a business's employees. There could be an impact if benefits are perceived to become too focused around this topic, compared with providing a range for all employees. This includes the benefits on offer, alongside any communications around changes to the benefits.

9.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

1. What is the level of benefits provision currently offered by your business?
2. If already offering benefits through a third party, is there an opportunity to add benefits applicable for parents, or even influence their offering such benefits are not available?

9.8. Case Study

EasyPeasy is a mission-led social enterprise committed to supporting parents, carers, and early years practitioners in giving babies and young children the best possible start in life and closing the gap in school readiness.¹³⁸ EasyPeasy runs evidence-based, integrated, and scalable support programmes in partnership with Local Authorities and select businesses to enhance early years development. Barnsley Council provided app access and tracked significant impact across disadvantaged families. Their personalised parenting app provides tailored tips and activity ideas.¹³⁹ Premium access to the app was made available free of charge to their entire community and promoted via their Family Hubs centres and resources, as well as early years teams and settings. Access to the app builds parenting confidence to support a child's early development. In Barnsley, 88% of parents reported increased confidence in speech development, and 94% saw behavioural improvements.



10. Cultural and Environmental Improvements

Culture and Information Improvements

CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENTS

Foster family-friendly culture with peer support, KIT days and manager training.

Cost of delivery: M

Implementation complexity: M

Impact for business: M

10.1. What is the idea

There are a set of initiatives that businesses can implement to maintain engagement, ease transitions and support working parents while benefiting businesses. These include:

- Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), to:
 - a) Review and suggest policy.
 - b) Act as a network for prospective and new parents.
 - c) Provide information for prospective parents and managers of prospective parents.
- Management training and supportive culture.
- Effective and tailored Keeping in Touch (KIT) days.

10.2. Background to existing policy

Creating a family-friendly workplace includes employee policies and benefits – and also, importantly, the culture and work environment. A supportive culture shapes how policies are implemented and perceived. Policies and procedures provide the what – the formal entitlements and resources. Culture and environment provide the how – the way those policies are implemented, perceived, and experienced by employees.

10.3. Why is this idea proposed

The business case here relates to employee engagement, inclusion, and smoother transitions back to work. The combination of these proposed ideas helps connect employees with shared experiences and challenges. Such initiatives are often led by groups of passionate volunteers, with diverse representatives from a wide range of caregiving backgrounds, including single parents, fathers, those undergoing fertility or adoption journeys, young carers, 'sandwich carers'¹⁴⁰ and many more. These efforts ensure that parents feel connected and represented, and that policies are aligned with their needs

10.4. How will a business benefit

- **Improved connection and enhanced relationships between employees.** For new parents who may experience loneliness,¹⁴¹ connecting with colleagues through employee networks can be crucial in fostering a sense of support. This can reduce stress and sickness, and minimise the need for time off due to increased support.¹⁴²

10.5. How will working parents benefit

- **Shared experience leads to greater engagement and connection between employees.** By sharing knowledge and lived experiences, employee parent groups provide a platform for parents and caregivers to share knowledge and lived experiences of balancing family and work with their peers. This can also be a platform for offering practical help and guidance. This can include information on company policies, local resources and tips for managing work and family life.

10.6. Key consideration for businesses when implementing

- **How access to and outcomes from the initiatives are communicated.** The access to, and outcomes from, these initiatives need to be communicated effectively, so all working parents are aware of their existence. If this does not happen, feedback may suggest that the initiatives are only accessible to certain teams or employees. Communication around the outcomes from ERGs should be embedded into wider organisational communications to provide recognition of where ideas have impacted company policy, as well as acknowledging ideas that have not been implemented.

10.7. Questions to be answered by businesses

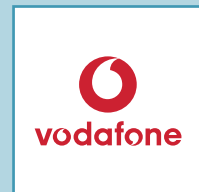
1. Do you have an understanding of how your employees consider the support and attitudes towards working parents?
2. What level of influence do employees have on policies and procedures, either through employee resource groups or other channels?

10.8. Case Study

Vodafone's Mental Health and Wellbeing Services (e.g., mental health first aiders, 24/7 GP access) are complemented by several internal networks for Vodafone employees, helping to support and connect them. One example is the Ready Parents & Carers Network.¹⁴³ Vodafone also trains its line managers to provide optimal support to new parents and caregivers. This training likely covers Vodafone's parental leave policies, the challenges faced by returning parents, and best practices for maintaining contact and facilitating a smooth return.

The internal networks serve more than 700 members as one of Vodafone's core Diversity & Inclusion employee networks, offering employees practical help, policy guidance, and wellbeing signposting. The networks have helped to create guidance for line managers on fostering a culture of compassion and inclusivity within their teams.

Emily Hutchison, Co-founder & Chair of the Ready Parents & Carers Network & Vodafone Marketing, commented: *"We first set up the Ready Parents & Carers Network in 2019 as a grassroots initiative to provide holistic support for our caregiving colleagues. The network is led by a group of passionate volunteers, with representatives from a wide variety of caregiving backgrounds, such as single parents, fathers, those going through fertility or adoption journeys, young carers, 'sandwich carers', and many more."*



CONCLUSION - KEY TAKEAWAYS

The evidence is clear: supporting working parents during their children's early years is not just a moral imperative—it's a strategic business advantage. With 73.9%¹⁴⁴ of families with under-5's having both parents in work, businesses have an opportunity to strengthen their workforce while contributing to improved outcomes for the next generation.

The 10 employee policy ideas presented in this report offer a choice for businesses, from enhanced maternity and paternity leave to innovative solutions like banked family hours and '80 for 90'. These initiatives deliver measurable returns: 86% of businesses¹⁴⁵ report decreased unplanned absences, while family-friendly policies can boost productivity by up to 20% and reduce costly employee turnover.¹⁴⁶ As the UK faces declining birth rates and mounting childcare challenges, businesses that act now will position themselves as employers of choice, attracting and retaining top talent while building a more resilient, engaged workforce.

Next Steps: A suggested framework for business action

Phase 1: Assessment and Planning (Months 1-2)

1. Conduct a workforce audit to understand your current parent demographics and existing family-friendly policies
2. Survey employees to identify the most pressing childcare challenges and preferred support options
3. Benchmark against competitors and industry leaders to understand market positioning
4. Calculate baseline costs of current turnover and absenteeism related to childcare issues

Phase 2: Quick Wins (Months 3-4)

1. Implement low-cost, high-impact changes such as banked family hours or expanded caregiver definitions
2. Establish ERGs (employee resource groups) for parents and caregivers to build community and gather ongoing feedback
3. Launch manager training programs to ensure consistent, supportive leadership for working parents
4. Create a trusted information hub using existing internal platforms

Phase 3: Strategic Implementation (Months 6-12)

1. Prioritise 2-3 higher-investment policies based on your workforce needs and business model (e.g., enhanced leave policies, 80 for 90 arrangements)
2. Pilot alternative working patterns with willing participants to test feasibility and impact
3. Explore partnerships for childcare solutions or service connector benefits
4. Measure and communicate results to build internal support for continued investment

Phase 4: Continuous Improvement (Ongoing)

1. Regularly review and adapt policies based on employee feedback and changing needs
2. Share learnings with industry peers to drive broader change
3. Advocate for supportive government policies that complement business initiatives
4. Integrate family-friendly metrics into business performance dashboards
5. The journey toward becoming a truly family-friendly employer requires commitment, but the destination—a more productive, loyal, and engaged workforce contributing to healthier child development—benefits everyone.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

| | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Business | A business is primarily a commercial entity focused on producing goods or services for profit. (Systemic Leadership Institute) |
| Child Poverty | Children experience poverty when they do not get the nutrition, water, shelter, education or health care they need to survive and thrive. This is called "multidimensional poverty" and describes a deprivation of multiple basic rights. (UNICEF) |
| Early Childhood Development | Early Childhood Development (ECD) encompasses the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth of children from before birth until around 5 years of age. (UNICEF) |
| Engagement (at work) | The level of emotional commitment and enthusiasm an employee has towards their work, their business, and its goals. It is about employees feeling connected, motivated, and passionate about their work and the business's mission. (CIPD) |
| Family-Friendly Business | A business which understands and supports its employees' needs as parents, caregivers, and individuals with family responsibilities. (ICAEW - Institute of Chartered Accounts in England & Wales) |
| Financial Resilience | The extent to which different types of households have sufficient savings to cover an unexpected fall in their household employment income. (Office for National Statistics) |
| Financial Security | The ability to afford your expenses, live comfortably on your income and save for the future. A big sign of financial security is having enough emergency savings to cover yourself when times are tough. (Experian) |
| Maternity Leave* | A woman's right to take maternity leave prior to and after the birth of the child. (Lexis Nexis) |
| Organisation | An organisation, is a broader term encompassing businesses, but also including non-profit groups, charities, clubs, and government agencies. (Systemic Leadership Institute) |
| Paternity Leave* | When you take time off because your partner's having a baby, adopting a child or having a baby through a surrogacy arrangement. Paternity leave entitlement is available to the partner of the birth parent (or main adopter). (Gov.UK) |
| Pilot | Pilots are a specific type of testing that focuses on real-world implementation and evaluation within a limited scope, usually after the main development and testing phases are complete. (Association for Project Management) |
| Testing | Testing encompasses various approaches to evaluate a product, service, or system, often with the goal of identifying defects and improving quality. |
| Working Parents | A woman/man/parent who has a job and takes care of his or her children. (Cambridge Dictionary) |

* It is acknowledged that for certain family structures Primary and Secondary Caregivers, rather than Mothers and Fathers, will be the beneficiaries of these employee policies, and as such the terms should be used interchangeably, where mentioned

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