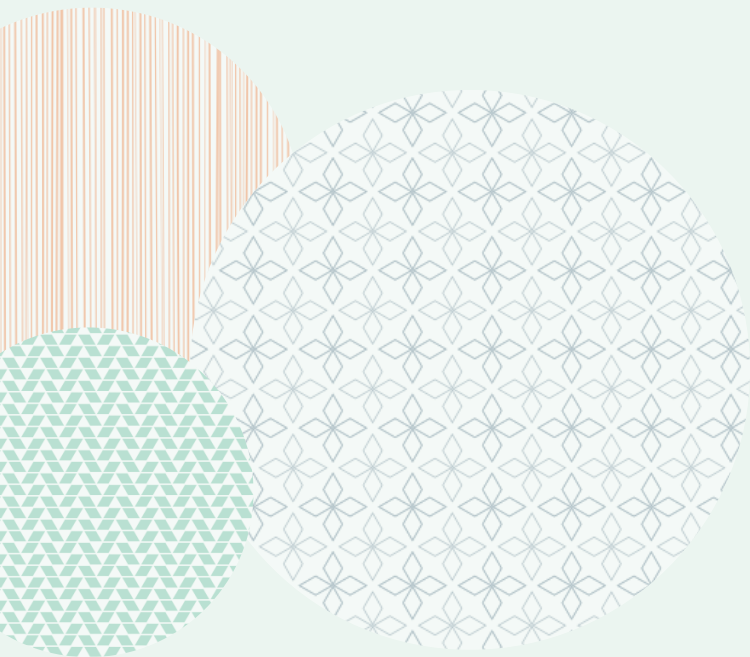


How Boards can drive equal opportunities for working parents

Insights into the different challenges of becoming a working mum and working dad

WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby), in partnership with Hult International Business School



WOMBA
WORK, ME AND THE BABY
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Insights into the different challenges of becoming a working mum and working dad

This report will provide Boards and organisational leaders with a better understanding of the experience of working mums and dads to equip them with insight based actions to drive equal opportunities for working parents.

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1. A note from the authors

At times we hear inspiring stories from parents who work in inclusive cultures, with empathetic managers and supporting policies. But too often we hear a different narrative, one of parents feeling isolated, discriminated against and unsupported.

Often these parents find their only option is to stop working.

We find it startling, even shocking, how little has changed in the thirty or so years since we started our own families. It has caused us to reflect on the struggles of being a working parent: firstly, through our lived experience of being working parents ourselves. Secondly, through our attempts to drive strategic change in our executive careers, particularly during our time on Diversity & Inclusion Boards. And most recently, through our coaching practice, WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby).

WOMBA was set up in 2015 to help organisations support their employees through specialist coaching programmes as parents start and grow their families. But we've found the pace of change frustrating.

A few years ago, one of our children challenged us to do more and it lit a fire in our bellies.

We felt compelled to act but to move the dial on the working parents' agenda we needed to understand the facts.

We revisited research and evidence around working parents. We were astounded by how little research had been undertaken in the UK and by how much research focused on working mums only and disregarded the experience and role of working dads - perhaps reinforcing the notion that this is a 'woman's issue'.

We have started with a unique, binary gender equal piece of research to explore the perspectives of both working mums and working dads.

We support and embrace different, diverse family identities and recognise the multifaceted roles of primary caregivers. We've taken the first step using the binary roles of 'mum and dad' and as we progress in our research and insight, our commitment/purpose is to understand the experiences of the range of family set ups and routes to parenthood.

The aim of our research is to help parents returning to work thrive - for the benefit of the organisation, the individual, their family and wider society.

We've been incredibly fortunate to partner with Dr Carina Paine Schofield and Dr Lee Waller from Hult International Business School. They are both as passionate as us about improving the lives of working parents through an evidence-based approach. We're indebted to their expertise and commitment.

And to every individual who has given their time and shared their personal and professional experiences with us - thank you. The insight you've given us and the stories you've told are incredibly valuable and moving. Without them, this report would not be possible.

We're delighted to share the first step of our research journey with you in this paper.



Alison Green & Helen Sachdev
Directors at WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby)

2. Why this Report?

2.1 Introduction

More than 80% of parents in the UK are in employment and yet, this significant demographic in the workforce remains severely underserved and unsupported.

The reality is that social and organisational policies, support provided and attitudes towards working parents have long been flawed. Despite glimmers of change and progression, the UK's approach has made it nearly impossible for two working parents to both achieve a fulfilling career.

In recent years, the situation for working families has dramatically worsened as existing gender inequalities were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis that followed.

The UK's crippling childcare costs - the second most expensive in the world - have made working financially pointless for a large portion of mums. Despite the majority wanting to work, many - as the assumed primary caregiver - have been forced to sacrifice their careers in lieu of childcare responsibilities. In fact, 85% of women leave the full time workforce within three years of having their first child and 19% never return.

The challenges are also plentiful for mums who remain in the labour market; many face discrimination, disadvantages such as no or slow progression and stagnant or decreased wages. The gender pay gap remains stubbornly wide at 14.9% and it's no coincidence that it expands at the point women become parents - the 'motherhood penalty' is now the most significant driver of this difference.

Where do working dads fit into this? Well, despite wanting to take on a caring role - 85% of men agree they should be as involved in all aspects of childcare as women and over 90% of men believe it is equally acceptable for both women and men to take time out from employment in order to care for their family - shared parental leave (SPL) provision is so complex and poorly paid that taking time out of work is financially unviable for most. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that utilisation of SPL is still hovering between 2 and 8% in the UK.

In addition, ongoing economic instability, the persistence of societal gender norms and psychologically unsafe workplace cultures make it even more difficult for dads to take on caring responsibilities.

There is much that needs to change for working parents to have equal opportunities.



2.2 Why now?

The current generation of Boards and leaders need to urgently lead change

Our economy and your organisation will continue to pay a high price unless we make it financially and practically possible for working parents to share caring responsibility for their children.

The economic impact is crystal clear:

- Retaining women in the workplace could result in a 10% GDP increase to the UK economy¹⁰
- Universally accessible and affordable childcare would boost the economy by £13bn a year. It would generate £8bn for the Treasury.¹¹

Moreover, the organisational benefit is unquestionable:

Leaders that invest in considered, family-friendly policies - ones that ensure both parents can continue to progress their careers will:

- Attract a diverse talent-pool and increase retention amongst existing employees - more employees are attracted to their current role for the work-life balance than the salary.¹²
- And, in turn, reduce recruitment outlay - the estimated cost of hiring one new staff member can total up to £62,890.¹³
- Close the gender pay gap - encouraging more female leadership is one of the key levers for increasing gender equality in the workforce¹⁴
- Increase productivity - employees that feel happy are around 12% more productive¹⁵
- Boost profitability - companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile.¹⁶

The question is not, 'should you invest in your working parents', rather, 'can you afford not to'?



2.3 Why you?

As a leader, the culture of your organisation *and* therefore the experience of your working parents is your responsibility.

Today's working world is poorly set up to support the professional growth and family life of working parents. Many employees find it practically, financially and emotionally impossible for both parents to continue progressing their careers when they start a family.

You have a real opportunity to make a positive difference to the lives of the employees in your organisation, whilst reaping the rewards.

It is undeniable the current working parents' crisis is complex, and requires a timely and thorough response. This report aims to outline the support needed to make this a reality.

By outlining both the working parent and the organisational perspective, this report aims to equip Boards and leaders - those who have ultimate responsibility of their organisational culture - with a better insight into the experience of working parents, and how best to drive equal opportunities for mums and dads in their organisations.

For those leaders driving a strategic Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) agenda, this paper offers practical recommendations to improve the situation for a significant, but often overlooked segment of your workforce.

Specifically, this report aims to:

1. Give Boards and organisational leaders a better understanding of the experience of working parents
2. Equip organisational leaders with insight based actions to drive equal opportunities for their working parents.

2.4 What next?

The next phase: get involved in groundbreaking research

The overall aim of our research at WOMBA and Hult is to help parents returning to work to thrive - for the benefit of the organisation, the individual, their family and wider society.

However, we can only achieve this if we understand the experiences of today's working parents, including the challenges faced by those from a broad range of family setups. This includes, but is not limited to, blended families, single-parent families, same sex families and grandparent families; as well as those who have experienced alternative routes to parenthood.

With that in mind, we're extending the study that we have presented to you here and will be conducting quantitative research to gather more information about today's working parent experience. The more parents that provide details of their experiences, the more inclusive and useful the findings will be, and the more likely these are to positively resonate with a wide range of employees and organisations.

We welcome and invite your participation in this next phase. If you, your organisation or any of your networks would like to get involved, please reach out by email on info@wombagroup.com.

We'll be back in touch with more information and a link to an online survey.

Thank you!

3. Summary of Research Findings

3.1 Introduction

To shape and inform our recommendations, we first needed to understand the lived experience of dads and mums as they transition from worker to working parent in an organisational context. With this in mind, in 2021, we collaborated with Dr Carina Paine Schofield and Dr Lee Waller at Hult International Business School, on a ground-breaking research project that would bring these experiences to light.

But the working parents' study was just the start of our research journey. We soon recognised that we needed an organisational lens on our insight.

This was the basis of our second phase of research, during which we invited people leads (HR, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), people management and working parent leads) from organisations across the UK to roundtable discussions. As part of these conversations, we asked these leaders to share their own experiences of trying to drive equal opportunities for working families and, in turn, of building more equitable workplaces.



3.2 Working Parents' Qualitative Research

Methodology

For the first phase of the research project, we invited working parents - who had recently returned to work within the same organisation and in the same or similar role following the birth or adoption of their child - to share their experiences of transitioning from worker to working parent in an organisational context.

Together with our research partner, Hult, we undertook in-depth interviews with 28 working parents, 14 mums and 14 dads, and spent more than 100 hours transcribing and analysing the data. Five themes emerged from this analysis. In this section we use these five themes - Choice, Identity, Balance, Role Models and Organisational Management - to explore and highlight the reality for working parents today.

Although the working parents we interviewed were primarily in nuclear families, we recognise that there are many types of families and family set-ups (extended families, blended families, solo-parent families, and so on) that face these challenges. We understand that, while some of these findings will be applicable to most set-ups, there will be some variation across different types of families.

“Whilst there is no shortage of media coverage of the challenges working parents face, there is very limited academic research in this area, particularly in the UK, or including working fathers. This study, listening to working mothers and working fathers’ stories, was just the start of our research journey. We want to ensure that the voices of both parents are heard by managers, leaders, and organisations, to ensure that parents can be retained and supported in the workplace.”

“We have huge gratitude for our cohort of working parents. We thank you for sharing your stories, being vulnerable and opening up to us about the triumphs and challenges you experienced as you journeyed through one of the biggest challenges life can bring. Your stories were both powerful, and in some cases harrowing.”

Dr Carina Paine Schofield, senior research fellow at Hult International Business School

Summary: The Working Parents' perspective

Mums and Dads: similar hopes, but divergent experiences

The major theme that arose from the research was the - sometimes extreme - difference in the experiences of mums and dads once they began their journey to working parenthood. With often similar desires, including spending time with their children and becoming role models for them; the ways in which mums and dads interacted with the workplace and family life had some stark and noticeable variations between them.

A range of complex pressures from different sources - including social, professional and cultural - seem to weigh heavily on mums in particular. This resulted in challenging outcomes that complicated the mums' experience of working parenthood. Overall, many mums felt they were at breaking point, and were being forced out of the workplace. Whilst some felt supported by their organisation, others faced shocking, discriminatory and undermining experiences. Mums are often in a constant battle to balance time, boundaries and identity and ultimately, when the pressure of managing parenthood and work becomes untenable, it is usually mums who are forced to sacrifice their careers.

Many dads want to take on a greater parental role but struggle to do so, both practically and emotionally. Formal policies are difficult for dads to navigate and many are frustrated and angry at the system that has not been designed to support equal parenting. Dads often challenge the system to get what they want, and they are more creative and resourceful in circumventing policies and people that do not fit with their plans. They are more willing to step outside the formal system and use their relationships with managers to negotiate paid time off and the flexibility they need to help with childcare.

The analysis below explores the five themes shared for both mums and dads, and shines a light on some of the very real challenges facing working parents today.

Choice: gender norms remain in full force

The decisions that we make are often based upon our perception of the options that we have available to us.

This is played out in choices around parenthood, and with a frustrating lack of options available, mums are often the parental figures who sacrifice their careers. This is caused by a myriad of factors, namely, outdated working cultures, expensive and inaccessible childcare, and inflexible contractual arrangements that play out to their disadvantage. This lack of choice led to the conclusion that compromise was unavoidable, which gave rise to feelings of being stuck, frustrated, angry and disappointed among this group.

By contrast, dads felt that career and parenthood could comfortably co-exist in their lives. They had expectations of being able to make their own choices, which were reflected in their approach to confidently taking on the system, tackling barriers and asking for what they wanted.

A unifying factor across parental roles was, however, the concern that taking parental leave or childcare responsibility might ultimately negatively impact their career.

“Tokenism plays a big part. Everyone's aware [of] what they should be saying. But saying things is one thing. Actually doing it is a very different matter. So people say, ‘we're going to support you as a parent’, but then they don't actually do it.”

- James

Identity: for working parents, responses vary from concealment to pride

The impact of wider social narratives around parenting and parental responsibility is not absent from the workplace. In a similar way to other themes in this report, the impact of this on mums made their experience of working parenthood more challenging, with some feeling trapped by narratives of needing to meet the unattainable 'supermum' stereotype. This actively shifted behaviours for mums, with impacts ranging from attending meetings with camera off, to a fear of being seen as incompetent or incapable. Confronting these wider narratives in everyday work scenarios led to mums feeling like they had something to prove, and wanting to conceal part of their identity.

Conversely, the reaction of colleagues to dads taking on more parental responsibilities, resulted in benefits for dads. In some cases, dads were seen as heroes for shifting their working patterns to look after their children. For dads, there was a greater perception of control of their identities and a pride in sharing. In addition, a strong theme that emerged from the cohort of dads was the way in which becoming a working parent increased their understanding and empathy for mums, and the challenging experiences that women faced with this transition.

“There’s a perception that I’ve gone from being someone who really cared and was good at work to someone who doesn’t care. And that’s really not true. I love my job.” - Amy

Balance: juggling responsibilities is a constant challenge

Both mums and dads found the parental juggle difficult - how to balance existing or shifting work responsibilities and spend time with their new baby or parenting as their children grew up. Again, the approaches towards this varied, dependent on whether the parent was a mum or dad.

In common with the struggle around the 'supermum' identity and the expectation to do it all, mums often found themselves working very long hours. Some reached the conclusion that it was impossible to work in this way, while also being present for their children; and this was particularly challenging for those just returning from parental leave. Mums felt they had to make a choice between childcare and work. This was a repeating theme when discussing balance.

While dads also wanted to better balance work and family, they rarely mentioned needing to adjust their working pattern. Their approach primarily came from a place of practicality. This position centred on managing finances effectively to enable maximum time with the new arrival, which also sometimes resulted in mums reducing their working hours to balance childcare with income.

“I didn’t appreciate how challenging it is. I didn’t appreciate how much women give up.”
- Krishna

Role Models: changing ambitions and realities

This generation of parents are, on the one hand, confronting existing societal narratives around parenting, while on the other, they are forging new paths which did not exist before.

When thinking about role models, we saw mums looking towards those who fit into the mould of 'having it all', but feeling themselves unable to meet this unattainable model. Conversely, dads felt as though they were stepping into the unknown when taking extended parental leave, unable to identify role models who had explored this route previously. While some dads looked towards their own parents for inspiration, many hoped that they would be seen by their own children as leading the way and as inspiring the next generation to be involved in bringing up their children more.

“I’ve just always imagined that you could be all these things [a reliable, competent colleague and a parent]... it’s become clear to me that it’s not possible to work a million hours a week and be ever present for your child... you can’t be all of those things and I find it dissatisfying that you have to choose.”

- Amy

Organisational Management: navigating frustrations and obstacles

Many parents were not given, and could not access, the support needed from their employer. Attempts to do so were often blighted by outdated working models and practices, inadequate parental leave policies, complex systems and deeply embedded gender stereotypes.

Some mums had positive experiences in this area, citing flexible HR teams or managers who had had children themselves. Mums' relationship with their manager was crucial, particularly in cases where challenges had been experienced around communication with HR. This played out both positively and negatively, with more supportive managers influencing systems on behalf of their employees, and difficult managerial relationships resulting in employees feeling unsupported.

The approach of dads was again in contrast to that of mums. Whereas mums were generally more likely to adhere to rules, dads often used their managerial relationships to negotiate additional benefits. Dads were also affected by some of the gender stereotypes at play around childcare. It is still widely assumed that women take on most caring responsibilities, so senior managers sometimes lacked understanding that dads needed time off to look after children too.

“It was quite an unhelpful distraction really to have essentially a whole team of people that are set up to try and stop you doing what you wanted to do.” - David

Concluding: parenting today remains a complex interface between societal and workforce norms

Our findings from this qualitative research present a clear need to improve the lives of working parents. There are important issues to address. Both dads and mums experience a wide range of challenges in their day-to-day lives, which are worsened by organisational cultures that are not adapted to meet parents' needs.

While the causes of these lived realities are undeniably complex, there is a need to intervene from an organisational perspective. Action is needed to tackle the areas upon which organisational leaders and change-makers can exercise influence.

It is with this goal in mind that we conducted the second phase of our research: working closely with organisations to understand current practice and couple these stories with advice on best practice and change that can be taken forward.

For the research and results findings in detail, please refer to [Appendix a](#).



3.3 Organisational Qualitative Research

Methodology

To inform how to best improve the lives of working parents, it's important to understand what's happening on the ground now. With that in mind, WOMBA and Hult invited people leads (HR, DEI, people management and working parent leads) to share their perspectives at roundtable discussions and explore:

- How their organisations are responding to the lived experience of working parents
- The policies, initiatives and support most valued by working parents
- The barriers to increasing support for working parents
- The action they want to see the government take

24 people leads took part in two discussion groups (one virtual and one face to face). Conversations were all recorded, transcribed and analysed. Participants attended from public and private sector organisations across multiple industries including: professional services, transport, infrastructure, education, government departments, construction, health, tech and finance. Organisations varied in size from start-ups and SMEs to multinational corporations.

A few participants and organisations wish to remain anonymous. Direct quotes from these attendees are therefore labelled 'anonymous'. When interpreting the findings, it is important to remember that they are based on the opinion and experiences of those who took part.

Roundtable attendees included:

- Soraia Santos, global employee engagement and communications manager, Hult International Business School
- Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O'Rourke
- Tracey Sedgley, deputy director, Department for Transport
- Thomas Bruno, senior programme manager, Network Rail
- Danielle Dickens, project manager (diversity and inclusion), Network Rail
- Jess Hardy, D&I manager, AXA UK & Ireland
- Sarah Summerill, head of talent management, University of Warwick
- Clare Phillips, employee relations and policy manager, University of Warwick
- Gita Banerji, HR equalities lead, Suffolk County Council
- Holly Taylor, people director, Public Digital
- Dr Gauri Seth, The London Bladder Clinic and Brain-Based Connection
- Syirin Mohamed, Communications Officer, Training Lead & Chair of Chubb (EMEA) Parents & Carers Network
- Anya Smirnova, executive coach, Mindful Return UK Chapter Lead
- Lizzie Martin, head of coaching and training, founder Work Life Mother

Despite invites to the roundtable discussion that formed this research being distributed 50:50 to men and women, only one man attended - we will continue to invite men to take part in our research. The working parents conundrum is not just for women to solve.

Summary: The Organisational perspective

Change is being made, but barriers still remain

People leads tell us that models and practices that support working parents are creating positive change. A growing number of organisations at the roundtable recognised the value in creating equitable workplaces and are shifting their approach, with almost two in three of the attendees ranking this as a high or very high priority. These organisations are best-in-class examples of moving towards more progressive models that actively support working parents. Having made changes, they are reporting positive outcomes such as higher well-being levels and improved productivity.

Despite the people leads recognising the immense value in supporting working parents, a multitude of barriers stand in the way of change. Many of these come from within their organisation, such as complex policies, inflexible working models, ill-equipped line managers, outdated mindsets, gender stereotypes and an absence of psychological safety.

The attendees want to see change in these areas: addressing skills and confidence gaps with managers; creating psychologically safe workplaces; communicating openly and effectively; challenging gender stereotypes; and offering working parents more specialised help.

Support for working parents needs to be coupled with government policy change to be effective. The people leads would like to see a reduction in the cost of childcare, an evolution of related social policies to make parenting more gender neutral, and a simplification of parental leave policy.

The internal forces for change also have huge influence. In cases where the Board is driving this from the top, it has a profound impact on company culture and progress that can be made. Adopting such an attitude is key for C-Suite leaders to empower those working within their organisations to thrive as working parents.

The landscape is undeniably complicated and nuanced, but some of the organisations are making headway in this area. The analysis in this section shares their perspective on how this is resonating with their working parents currently, and potential for greater future impact.

The progressive policies that are valued highly by working parents

The people leads cited flexible working as the most valued policy by their working parents. Also cited were hybrid working, enhanced parental leave, and equal parental leave. Progress was reflected in a range of flexible working initiatives, such as a greater emphasis on remote working to financial adjustments and flexibility in hours worked.

A positive flexible working development is the increasing introduction of job-sharing schemes. These serve to meet the needs of both employees wishing to work part-time, while also effectively filling the position for the organisation. When managed correctly, these are great opportunities for working parents to maintain a work-life balance whilst being in a role that matches their skillset and seniority.

Hybrid working was also discussed by the people leads. This included the increased ability to work from home - largely influenced by working practices during the COVID-19 pandemic - which has enabled many parents to return to full-time work.

“If parents are supported with that balance... they’re feeling less guilty, because they are managing to calibrate things in a way that works for their home life and their career progression.”

- Anonymous

Enhanced parental leave, was a key priority for the people leads. Organisations that are extending or adapting their parental leave policies beyond legal minimums are not only supporting parents through a financially challenging time, they are also improving their own cultures in the process. A policy at the University of Warwick was introduced to include a condition of repayment of enhanced maternity leave only if the employee left within six months of returning, which has increased retention significantly. Other organisations are increasing access to financial benefits, including making parental leave policies an entitlement upon joining the organisation.

Equal parental leave for all parents, regardless of their route to parenthood and their gender, is also being practiced by organisations to ensure that there is greater uptake among dads. At Laing O'Rourke, this has led to 75% uptake from their working dad cohort, in comparison to 2 - 8% of SPL nationally. The impact of this goes beyond measure, in terms of giving all parents the opportunity to bond with their children, challenging gender stereotypes, and enabling both parents to continue progressing up the career ladder.

Policy must be underpinned by an aligned culture

Policies are important. But the working culture in the organisation is critical. Dr Gauri Seth (Brain-Based Connection) highlights the importance of managers being able to tune into the needs of their working parents. How a manager reacts to parents experiencing childcare issues is key. For example, being understanding if a parent has to miss a meeting, or reacting quickly when needed, is critical to ensure that parents are able to manage their working day effectively.

While some leaders' attitudes towards working parents are helpful, others can be a hinderance. This can often take the form of out-dated mindsets, particularly around flexible-working or part-time roles. Examples cited include organisations where working parents are in the minority, employees being expected to attend events outside of business hours; majority male organisations where norms are hard to shift; and organisational benefits which are predominantly tailored to younger employees. These attitudes from those at the top of the organisation can have a cascading, negative effect throughout the culture that creates everyday challenges in the lives of working parents.

Successful outcomes for working parents often hinge upon the driving forces behind them. When full support comes from the Board in an organisation, leaders are likely to be looking towards best-in-class policies that stand out against their competitors.

This leads to better experiences and more progressive approaches for those working in these organisations. This was also true for some organisations subject to mandatory gender pay gap reporting, who harnessed this data to focus on the cause of their pay gaps and to develop targeted strategies to improve this.

Numerous obstacles can stand in the way of making impact

Perhaps unsurprisingly, childcare and its respective costs topped the people leads list of barriers to improving the workplace for working parents. With childcare in the UK remaining expensive, it can be prohibitive for both parents to return to work from a financial perspective. For organisations that do provide childcare support, they can struggle to find the requisite number of professional staff available to deliver this; which adds another hurdle for parents requiring this support.

This was closely followed by inflexible working policies, with the people leads believing that policies have not kept up with the pace of change required by culture at large. Working parents are affected by systems that do not reflect their day to day realities, a changing policy landscape and a reduction of flexible and remote working commitments made during COVID-19 and unstructured hybrid working that can negatively influence career progression.

“A total year of support, regardless of whether you are male or female, whether you have created your family through giving birth, adoption or surrogacy. The only criterion is that you have to take the leave from day one. Because, we wanted to create the same experience for men and women.”

- Rae Avatar Barnett, Laing O'Rourke

Managers and HR teams, as well as parents, also struggle to navigate this policy landscape. For HR teams, they can feel under pressure to know the detail on all policies, which are often complex. Managers often have a decisive influence over their employees' experience of parental leave. However, their training is typically limited, ill-timed and fails to equip them with the knowledge on how to support their employees effectively through this transition. They may make assumptions that they believe to be in the best interest of their working parents, or be taking decisions they believe to be 'safe', through fear of disciplinary action. These fundamental miscommunications have a profound impact on the individual employee.

Another key element to organisational change is the norms that exist in society outside of the workplace. The attendees discerned that psychological safety is paramount to improving the experience of working parents, but norms still exist that prevent parents speaking up for fear of judgement. Dads are discouraged from taking parental leave through a fear that this may affect their career progression. Caring responsibilities are often still seen as the responsibility of women and they face consequences for this, but men are complimented for taking time out of their day to look after their children.

In conclusion: the moment is now for the Board to champion change

This research shows green shoots of hope that organisations are committed to championing change for working parents. There is real progress being made, even in some sectors where this is more challenging.

Boards and organisational leaders must seize this opportunity to understand what other organisations are undertaking in this space, and direct change from the top down by modelling meaningful actions.

Working parents need to see forward-facing thinking from the C-Suite in their organisations, and the positive change shared in this research offers a key starting point to make this happen.

“Being in the minority, any minority is always challenging. And being in the minority as a working parent is no different.”
- Helen Sachdev, director, WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby)

For the research and results findings in detail, please refer to [Appendix b](#).



Recommendations

How the Board can drive equal opportunities for working parents

4.1 Introduction

Society is changing: organisational and public policy needs to catch up

Gender gaps in employment, working hours and wages widen after workers become parents.¹⁷ Leaders need to focus attention at this stage by introducing equal and extended parental leave policies and flexible working models. These need to be introduced within an aligned culture and supported by organisational practices. Both parents need to feel they can use the arrangements without detriment to their careers. It's critical that leaders widen access to what has traditionally been regarded as 'policies for mums' and create a culture in which all parents can fulfil their caring responsibilities and progress their careers.

Boards: driving this forward should top your agenda

Many organisations commit huge amounts of time and resources to supporting working parents but fail to see significant or lasting change. One of the critical issues is that the working parents' agenda does not get sufficient buy-in from, or backing from, its Board and leaders.

As a Board member, the culture of your organisation, and therefore the experience of your working parents, is your responsibility.

We recognise how complex this is and it's important to acknowledge there is no quick-fix or one-size-fits all approach to the working parent experience.

To unlock the return on your investment from your parental leave policies and practices, it's critical to set a clear direction and measurable goals for the executives in your organisation.

Combining our extensive experience at WOMBA with invaluable insight from working parents and the people leads, we've prioritised 12 actions. Owning, implementing and embedding these will lead to positive and significant change, both for working parents and your organisation.



12 Priority Actions to Drive Change



4.2 Priority actions for the Board

- Take ownership for leading the working parents' agenda
- Enhance and equalise parental leave
- Encourage a culture of openness and trust
- Listen to the voices of working parents



4.3 Priority actions for the people leads

- Introduce structured hybrid working
- Develop a flexible working culture
- Provide specialist support for working parents
- Tailor, flex and promote policies
- Provide line managers with additional support and training



4.4 Priority actions for government

- Reform parental leave
- Evolve social policies to make parenting more gender neutral
- Reform childcare provision

4.2 Priority actions for the Board: Drive impact from the top

• Take ownership of the working parents' agenda

Why?

Your position as a Board member, carries the weight to drive change in culture, policy and behaviour. Being heard by the Board will help working parents feel valued, supported and secure. Prioritising to drive equal opportunities for mums and dads in your organisation as a strategic imperative will help to build trust and confidence across the wider workforce.

How?

- > Audit your organisation's current working parent policies, initiatives and support. Honestly assess the gap between expectations and declarations made, and the reality for your working parents on the ground
- > Outline your organisation's ambition - what is your desired competitive positioning and what does 'good, better and best' look like for your organisation?
- > Provide clear strategic guidance and communication to functional heads and ensure they are aligned with your intent
- > Close the 'say-do gap' - ensure your actions match your words and align your behaviour with the principles and values you articulate.

• Enhance and equalise parental leave

Why?

Making it financially possible for both parents to have extended time with their baby during the first year comes with a plethora of benefits for individual employees and the organisations in which they work:

- Equitably supporting the work of being a parent ensures both mums and dads - particularly mums who are most likely to sacrifice their careers for childcare - can return to and continue to progress their careers
- In turn, equalising and enhancing parental leave will help close the gender pay gap
- Removing financial stress, gives dads the time to bond with their new child and provide support to the family unit
- Shifting the gender stereotype that looking after children is a woman's responsibility

How?

- > Equalise parental leave entitlement and make it accessible to all employees, irrelevant of gender, sexual orientation, route to parenthood or length of service
- > As a minimum, enhance parental leave for dads and mums to 26 weeks at 100% pay
- > Document the parental leave policy so those trying to access and administer it can do so with ease
- > Publicly disclose your organisation's parental leave policy and promote it internally.

• Encourage a culture of openness and trust

Why?

Building a culture with psychological safety at its foundation - where working parents feel they can speak up and speak out without judgement - will help to break down the barriers to equality within the workplace. When working parents feel psychologically safe they are more likely to use the initiatives, benefits and support mechanisms that have been put in place to support them. Encouraging working parents to be open until it becomes the norm will ensure they feel able to raise concerns and discuss their individual needs.

How?

- > Lead by example and be a role model for employees at all levels - your position carries huge weight
- > Share your own experiences and the difficulties you've faced as a working parent
- > Encourage this experience sharing in those who are one level below you in the organisation to cascade behaviour in the organisation

• Listen to the voices of working parents

Why?

Working parents' networks are invaluable. Listening to working parents within your organisation helps to uncover the alignment (or lack of) between the espoused culture and the reality for mums and dads in your place of work. They can be used as a sounding board to help you identify gaps in your support and barriers to change. Becoming and being a parent can feel isolating - particularly where working parents are in the minority. A working parents networking group can feel like a place of safety for working parents to share their experiences and challenges.

How?

- > Give your working parents a platform and listen to their voices, particularly where working parents are in the minority. If your organisation does not have a working parents' network, make establishing one a priority
- > Tap into your organisation's working parents' network and gather insight and feedback - find out what the mums and dads in your workplace value the most, what they don't, what they expect from you and how you can improve their experience.

4.3 Priority actions for people leads: Adjust structures to support parents to thrive

• Introduce structured hybrid working

Why?

Whilst hybrid working enables parents to achieve a better work-life balance. They do not come without their challenges and unintended consequences. There is growing concern that remote-first hybrid models and those with no in-person requirement, are having a negative impact on the careers of working parents, particularly working mums who are missing key moments to promote themselves. A structured hybrid working model - one that integrates in-person presence and ensures parents can calibrate home and career in a way that works for them - will ensure working parents feel supported, and still have opportunities to be seen and heard amongst management and senior leadership.

How?

- > Integrate in-workplace presence into hybrid working models and allow for considerable flexibility - set the expectation that all employees plan in-person time with their colleagues
- > Work with working parents on an individual basis to deliver a structured hybrid working model that meets their needs - support parents with that balance
- > Clearly define what structured hybrid working means for your organisation and explain the reasons behind the in-person expectation.

• Develop a flexible working culture

Why?

Embedding flexibility into a working culture enables all employees to work effectively and efficiently, whilst meeting the needs of their families. As a result, workplaces with genuine flexible working cultures anecdotally report increased employee retention and attraction rates and reduced employee absenteeism and turnover. All too often flexible working can lead to a 'second track' career. Having a culture in which flexibility is the norm removes the stigma that may be associated with part time working. In particular, job sharing - as opposed to a more traditional part-time role - benefits both the organisation and employee, with greater role resilience for the organisation and career progression for the employees.

How?

- > Make flexible working a day-one entitlement, regardless of the reason, seniority or length of service
- > Allow individuals to adapt flexible working patterns that meet their needs as a working parent - for some this could mean flexibility in start and finish times, for others it may mean reduced hours
- > Promote a range of flexible working models including job sharing and advertise all job roles as fully flexible
- > Work with talent and recruitment managers to design roles as job shares vs part time only roles
- > Encourage parents to include family commitments, such as school sports day or nursery pick-up, in their work diaries
- > Proactively reduce the workload of your employees who are working flexibly, to ensure that this is appropriate for the amount of time that they are working
- > Normalise flexible working in your organisation, reducing stigma around this working style

• Provide specialist support for working parents

How?

Designing a clear package of benefits and specialist support focused specifically on working parents can help to ease an individual's experience during one of life's most challenging times. Support such as external coaching and working parents' champions can help parents to: proactively and confidently navigate their transition from worker to working parent; boost their confidence and take the lead in conversations with their line manager; become more aware of their strengths and how to use them to develop their career; develop healthy boundaries; and learn delegation and prioritisation skills to effectively manage their time.

Having access to role models and case studies can also help remove the stigma and judgement that may be attached to using this support.

How?

- > Ensure specialist support is available and easily accessible to working parents at all levels before, during and after parental leave. This support could include:
 - Parental leave coaching. Provide external coaching to support employees with their transition in and out of work around the time of parental leave. Extend coaching support to parents as they continue to manage and progress their careers
 - Internal working parent experts or champions to help working parents navigate change
 - Emergency childcare (providing a strong supply of childcare professionals)
 - Staged return to work on full pay
- > Ensure employees have access to a range of authentic and successful role models across all levels of the organisation
- > Highlight a broad mix of successful case studies representing both working mums and dads and different family types

• Tailor, flex and promote policies

Why?

Consistency is important in policy - particularly to avoid the unfairness that may arise through individual interpretation - but also recognising difference, for example in job roles or family configurations, is key to ensuring every individual can benefit from the policy that's in place. Creating generic policies that cover 'everyone' risks alienating working parents, particularly where they are in the minority. Promoting policy internally and externally will help existing and prospective employees understand your commitment to working parents.

How?

- > Provide clear and consistent policy but ensure they can be tailored and flexed to meet the individual needs of working parents
- > Promote working parent policies, support and initiatives internally and disclose them in the public domain.

- **Provide line managers with additional support and training**

Why?

Equipping line managers with the skills and knowledge needed to support working parents can be game changing for mums and dads. Enabling managers to better understand individual circumstances and the needs of working parents - particularly those who have not experienced parenthood themselves - can help to squash negative stereotypes and change attitudes towards working parents. Overall, upskilling and supporting line managers to have open and honest conversations helps to create a more positive experience for working parents as they transition to parenthood.

How?

- > Ensure line managers understand exactly how they are expected to support employees before, during and after parental leave
- > Offer timely parental leave training to managers at all levels to up-skill them to:
 - have positive and open conversations with employees
 - communicate in non-judgemental and empathetic ways
- > Ensure line managers have access to well-documented parental leave policies, but allow manager discretion and flexibility in the application of policies



4.4 Priority actions for the government: Policy reform enables organisational success

• Reform parental leave

Why?

The complexity of the UK's parental leave system and inadequate funding only exacerbates the existing inequalities within our society. Simplifying the parental leave process for parents and organisations will make support more accessible and, in turn, help to increase the uptake of policies such as shared parental leave. Simplification will also help to reduce stress on working parents who are forced to navigate the maze of bureaucratic parental leave policy.

Enhancing and equalising parental leave ensures the responsibility of childcare can be shared and will help to prevent a parent - mainly the working mum - from being forced to drop out of the labour market. Ultimately, properly paid parental leave will help to close the UK's gender pay gap, build a stronger economy and break down the deeply entrenched gender inequalities in our society that lead to the stereotyping and discrimination of both mums and dads. Evolving childcare and social policy to make parenting more gender neutral will help to shift the gender stereotypes that prevent change.

How?

- > Enhance and equalise parental leave regardless of gender and route to parenthood
- > Invest resources to simplify shared parental leave for parents and HR departments. It is not enough to simply say shared parental leave is available.

• Evolve social policies to make parenting more gender neutral

Why?

While parental leave and childcare are both clear areas where improvement is needed, much of the social policy surrounding parenting remains more hidden from view. For example, it is often the mum that schools will call if a child is registered ill or absent; and dads may not even be registered with their child as part of their NHS records. Areas like these, among others, have huge impacts on biases around parenting and should be a key area for governmental reform.

How?

- > Adopt more inclusive policies within public bodies or organisations: encourage asking, rather than assuming, which parent should be an emergency contact
- > Ensure government record keeping (including medical record keeping) is linked to both parents

• Reform childcare provision

Why?

Keeping women in the labour market is crucial to the functioning of any healthy economy. Reforming childcare provision, which includes reducing the cost of childcare and increasing the availability of, and access to, childcare will ensure parents can not only continue to work, but also continue to progress their careers - both key factors in closing the gender pay gap.

How?

- > Reduce the cost of childcare in the UK
- > Bolster plans to increase availability and accessibility of childcare with significant financial investment and ensure delivering quality provision is central to the strategy.

5. Who we are



WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby) is an organisational and coaching practice that specialises in building inclusive cultures and programmes for working parents. WOMBA was founded in 2015 and was born out of the need to support the professional growth and healthy family life of working parents and eliminate the negative association between parenting and career progression.

WOMBA partners with organisations across the private and public sectors and has worked with clients including Tesco, AND Digital, Universal Music Group and The Government Legal Department. In 2022, WOMBA was recognised as a top 10 diversity and inclusion services provider for its work in helping organisations support working parents at critical stages in their careers.

WOMBA's approach is simple yet effective - it understands each organisation's unique culture and needs and tailors coaching programmes to create meaningful change. In doing so WOMBA helps organisations to build progressive, inclusive cultures in which diverse talent can thrive.

To find out more please contact info@wombagroup.com or visit www.wombagroup.com



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Appendix

Research and Results in Detail

a. The working parents' perspective



Choice: gender norms remain in full force

Mums lack the freedom to make their own choices

When the pressure of managing parenthood and work is untenable, mums are often the ones who ultimately sacrifice their careers. Many mums have felt forced to choose between being a mother over having a successful career, a decision provoked by their employer's inflexible and outdated working policies and cultures.

Some mums, for example, have had to choose lower-paying roles or a 'lesser' organisation because it offered flexibility or was closer to home or childcare. Other mums spoke about having to limit their career development and work in roles that did not allow them to use their skills or achieve their full potential:

"I knew that I wasn't shining, or fulfilling my potential or doing really what I wanted to be doing." - Sarah

One mum shared how she had to work long hours to balance both the role of worker and parent, starting her day at 5am and finishing at 11pm. Another interviewee said she felt forced to quit her job after contractual conditions stipulated her only option was to return to work full time after maternity leave.

Many mums were left feeling stuck, frustrated, angry and disappointed that they had to compromise to be a working mum:

"I guess I find it dissatisfying that you have to choose and I'm disappointed sometimes that I have to give up bits of work" - Amy

Dads feel able to make some choices

Unlike mums, dads did not have to choose between career and parenthood, instead feeling the two could co-exist. They assumed, and expected, to be able to make their own choices:

"My commitment is to make sure [my children] have a pleasant upbringing, not daddy being busy at work, because that's what he chose to do... If I chose to have these children at home, I've got to work out and de-prioritise certain things in my life and I think now's the time for me to put a brake on my career." - Krishna

When dads did face barriers in their transition to parenthood, they felt confident and able to take on the system, push back and ask for what they wanted. Dads frequently challenged the formal HR system and inadequate parental leave policies to negotiate paid time off and the flexibility they needed with childcare.

In common with their female counterparts, some dads were concerned about the impact taking parental leave, or playing a bigger role in childcare, might have on their current role or future career prospects:

"[my perception is that] being away from work equates [to] me failing at my job... and that was the driver of [a]lot of my fear [and] anxiety... [I feel like] I'm not gonna do well, it's gonna be bad, and I'll be de-skilled, I'm not gonna be good at my job anymore. It's gonna reflect poorly on my job performance to take that amount of time off." - James

Identity: for working parents, responses vary from concealment to pride

Mums struggle to integrate identities

All mums shared the importance and challenge of trying to balance the identity of a working mum and a parent. They questioned whether they should bring their parenting identity into the workplace and if so, how much is appropriate.

One mum said she keeps her camera off during remote meetings because she fears being perceived as disengaged from work. Another mum worried about the need to prove that she can do everything and be a 'supermum'.

Despite understanding the importance of bringing one's whole self to work, several mums described the need or want to conceal their parenting identity and the parenting challenges they face through fear of being judged negatively, for example as incompetent or incapable:

"There's a perception that I've gone from being someone who really cared and was good at work to someone who doesn't care. And that's really not true. I love my job." - Amy

Mums also found that coaching had helped them to find their new identity as a working mum:

"I could just have space to think [in a coaching session]... to remind myself of who I was and what I did. And what I really enjoyed doing at work." - Zara

Dads are proud of their parenting identity

Dads did not have to think too much about how much of their fatherhood identity to share in the workplace. In comparison to mums, dads found their new parental identity was a benefit, often being praised, and in some cases, seen as a hero by colleagues when they took parental leave or adopted a flexible way of working to care for their children.

Dads were more confident in their role as a worker and parent and felt in control of which parts of their identity they shared and with whom - a notion exacerbated by society's expectations of women as the primary caregiver:

"I think it's also different for men... As a man, you're not necessarily seen as the parent, you're seen as a person who has children." - James

Over time, some dads developed a new-found respect and empathy for the challenges working mums face:

"I didn't appreciate how challenging it is. I didn't appreciate how much women give up." - Krishna



Balance: juggling responsibilities is a constant challenge

Mums are exhausted by the constant battle to balance time, boundaries and identity

Mums have been trying to do it all, often to the detriment of their own health and at the expense of time with their children:

"I was working from 8am until 8, 9, 10pm at eight and a half months pregnant and it was really really hard... I was getting really stressed. I couldn't do that stuff that your doctor asks you to do... all the maternity stuff... It really hit home to me that it wasn't working well when I actually had to work out when the baby's kicking." - Kate

Many mums have found it hard to go from spending 24 hours a day with their babies to having very limited time when they return to work:

"It's quite hard for a person to go from being off and spending literally 24 hours a day with your baby to, on some days, [spending] half an hour a day. Yesterday... I was out of the house by five am... It was nine o'clock by the time I got home so I didn't see [my baby] at all yesterday because he was still asleep when I left and he goes to bed at half six." - Jennifer

For some mums, the reality of balancing parenting with a career is different to what they had anticipated:

"I've just always imagined that you could be all these things [a reliable, competent colleague and a parent]... it's become clear to me that it's not possible to work a million hours a week and be ever present for your child... you can't be all of those things and I find it dissatisfying that you have to choose." - Amy

Dads focus on balancing finances to get maximum time with their family

Unlike mums, dads' initial experiences of balancing life as a worker and working parent tended to come from a place of practicality, specifically focusing on finances. Dads' concerns were about proactively balancing the books and ensuring finances stretched as far as possible, to allow the maximum time with the new baby:

"You want to make sure that you're spending time with your child and I guess that's always the balance that you have in life... trying to make sure that you're keeping a roof over your head and you're keeping your children happy." - Andrew

In some cases, dads worked out how to maximise money - and to some extent, play the system, to ensure maximum money available:

"If my wife worked full time as well as me, we'd end up losing money because of the childcare [cost]. By her being part time and me being full time means we earn more than if we both work full time. Which is quite ridiculous." - James

Many dads described how much they value spending time with their children and are eager to better balance work and family:

"I'm a bit naive, but I don't think there's too many dads that if they were told they could spend time with their kids that they would say no." - John



Role Models: changing ambitions and realities

Mums see role models as the ones who 'have it all'

For many mums, the reality of shifting from worker to working parent is in sharp contrast to the 'superwoman' ideology that many perceive as the standard they feel they need to meet. Mums have come to feel pressured by its unattainability:

"I still, at times, feel like I sacrifice my child for my career. Because I still feel like I'm constantly having to prove myself that I can do everything and be the supermom" - Mila

Despite many mums acknowledging that it is impossible to effortlessly manage everything, they still saw their role models as the ones who 'have it all', without the scars to show it:

"[My ideal role model is someone] who manages to do well in work, to meet their career goals, is very clear about what they want from their career. But also, feels like they're meeting their children's needs as well." - Nicole

In addition, mums saw how important it was for dads to be role models, ensuring it is not always the maternal parent at the forefront of the journey:

"I want to see men showing they're prioritising their families, it's not always the maternal parent at the forefront of this journey... I don't think it's just women demonstrating being role models - it's men being role models, that they are equal parents." - Anaya

The next generation of dads are becoming role models

Dads couldn't easily identify role models and they felt the challenges transitioning from worker to working parent were compounded by the fact that few others had trodden the path before them and had taken extended parental leave:

"I don't know.....you just find your way in the dark without having other people to sort of show you what to do." (Andrew)

When dads did identify their role models, they tended to think about their own parents and have used their childhood experiences to inform how they manage their balance with family and work:

"I remember my childhood. I had a very hands-on father and I think he was forced to be hands-on because of the dynamics of the household we lived in... from what I remember, my mother wasn't there raising us in early stages, as [much as] my dad. And I always said to myself... I want to be that kind of figure as well." - Krishna

With a lack of role models to learn from, dads who had challenged the system saw themselves as 'pioneers', paving the way for others in their organisations:

"For the majority, it's my generation who are leading this... we will be the role models in the future." - Will

Some dads hope the way they have navigated career and family inspires the next generation:

"I hope when my children look back, I'm their role model, and their mother's their role model." - Krishna

Despite the barriers, there was a shared belief amongst dads that it was very important to be involved in their children's care:

"I think getting men to do childcare is absolutely crucial... For the kids, for the dads, for the mums, for the workplace, for the economy... it just needs to happen as soon as possible." - Justin



Organisational Management: navigating frustrations and obstacles

Mums are highly dependent on the system and their managers

Mums' experience as they transitioned from worker to working parent was significantly related to - and largely impacted by - their employer's organisational system, including HR policies, team dynamics and managerial relationships. Plus, mums were highly dependent on the system during this personal and professional transition.

Mums' experience of HR varied widely from flexible and supporting to shocking examples of discrimination. Where communication with HR was challenging and parental leave processes confusing, mums became frustrated and stressed. Where this was the case, mums spent days or even months seeking clarity on policies:

"During the course of that [HR] conversation, which was obviously on Zoom, they kept telling me that it was an informal conversation. And that really confused me because I thought, hang on, this is a formal process..." - Kate

As the first point of contact in the workplace, in many ways the manager set the tone for mums' experience as they transitioned from worker to working parent. A manager's influence on systems was particularly beneficial for mums navigating unclear leave policies.

Some mums felt able to confide in their manager and speak openly about their challenges and needs, often relying on their manager, rather than HR, for support:

"When I got pregnant my line manager at work was the first person other than my husband that I told... from the beginning I felt supported to go to any appointments, to work from home when I needed to, to tell people when I wanted to." - Melissa

Other mums described how managers who had children were better able to relate to their experience:

"We got a really wonderful woman in...when I returned back to work it was still like no pressure. That definitely made it easier for me. She was great because she understood the entire journey. She'd done it twice. So it was helpful." - Zara

Mums who found the relationship with their manager to be challenging often felt unsupported and found it harder to navigate the transition. For some mums, this had a lasting negative impact:

"My one wish for myself is that I get to a point where I can have honest conversations with my manager without feeling the need to get upset. I'd like to talk to her about my career " - Jennifer

Dads are largely creative and resourceful in circumventing policies and people that don't fit with their plans

Many dads found formal policies around parental leave difficult and frustrating to navigate, and that effective communication with HR was challenging:

"It was quite an unhelpful distraction really to have essentially a whole team of people that are set up to try and stop you doing what you wanted to do." - David

As a result, dads frequently stepped outside of the 'formal' system and used their relationships with managers to negotiate both paid time off and the flexibility they needed to help with childcare. This approach was in direct contrast to mums who were more likely to adhere to rules and persist with dealing formally with HR.

When dads reflected and compared the differences between parental leave policies for mums and dads, many were left feeling frustrated, under pressure and unappreciated:

"Tokenism plays a big part. Everyone's aware [of] what they should be saying. But saying things is one thing. Actually doing it is a very different matter. So people say, 'we're going to support you as a parent', but then they don't actually do it." - James

Some dads also said they had come up against generational biases in the workplace around the division of childcare responsibilities. There was still an unspoken (and, in some cases, spoken) expectation that women should shoulder the majority of the caring, with some senior managers likely to raise an eyebrow if their male employees had to miss meetings or take time off to deal with a childcare issue.



The working parents' perspective - summary of key findings

THEME	MUMS	DADS
CHOICE	Mums want the power and control to choose to have a career and be a parent versus having to compromise and make sacrifices.	Dads assume and expect they will make their own choices and are confident in challenging the - often frustrating - system.
IDENTITY	Mums are fearful of being judged as 'less than' - for example, less capable and less committed, so they often hide their parental identities at work.	Dads are confident in their role as worker and parent and feel in control of what they share and to whom. Over time, they develop a new-found respect and empathy for the challenges working mums face.
BALANCE	Mums are trying to do it all - they are in a constant battle to balance time, boundaries and identity.	Dads proactively balance the books - ensuring financials stretch as far as possible to allow them the maximum time with the new baby.
ROLE MODELS	For mums there is an idealised role model of 'superwomen' mums, perpetuating the idea that it is possible to 'have it all'.	Dads couldn't easily identify role models - rather, they saw themselves as working dad 'pioneers'.
ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT	Mums are highly dependent on the system and their manager at this time of massive personal and professional transition, but it's a lottery. Support varies from great, flexible, helpful, to shocking, discriminatory, undermining.	Dads get what they want in spite of the system - they are creative and resourceful in circumventing policies and people that don't fit with their plans. They also seek equality of 'discriminatory' parental pay.

b. The organisational perspective



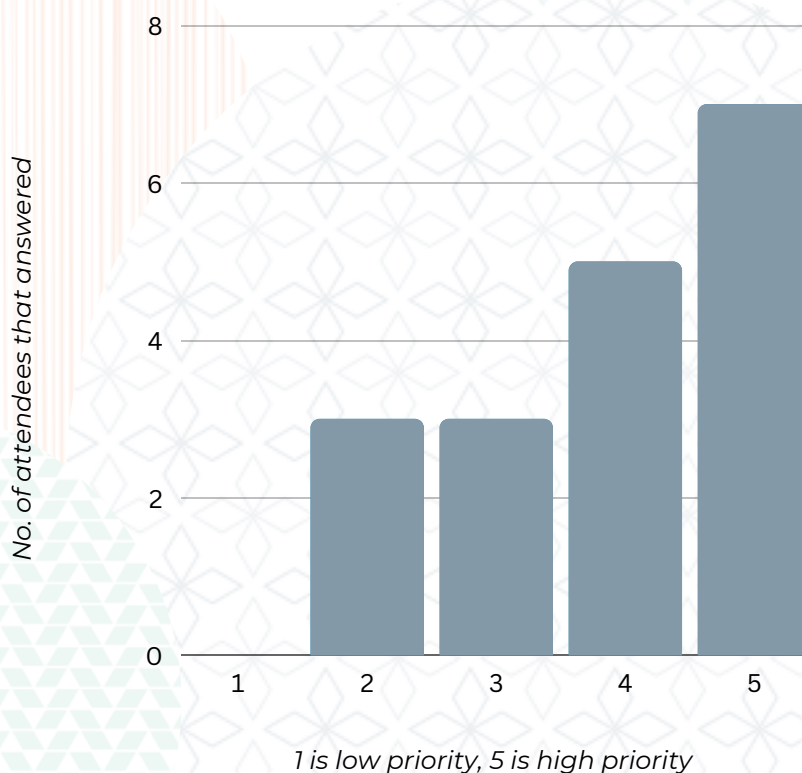
How are organisations responding to the challenges of today's working parents?

The status quo work culture no longer works for most families - particularly those with very young children. In response, more and more organisations in the UK are shifting their approach, moving away from outdated models to those that are more progressive and actively support mums and dads with both the emotional and practical challenges of becoming a working parent. Having done so, these organisations have reported significant competitive advantages in employee attraction and retention, improved wellbeing and higher productivity.

Is supporting working parents high on the priority list for organisations?

Whilst supporting working parents is now a key focus for many public and private sector organisations, for others it still sits near the bottom of the priority list

Considering all your DEI priorities, how important is supporting working parents to your organisation?



What policies, initiatives and support are driving the biggest changes?

> Enhancing and equalising financial support

Many of the employers are providing additional financial support for working parents, in addition to equalising parental leave policies. Those organisations that have enhanced their parental leave policies beyond what's legally required of them are reaping the rewards from both an organisational and working parent perspective.

In one example, the University of Warwick has seen an increase in employee retention after introducing a condition that enhanced maternity leave has to be repaid if parents leave within six months of returning to work:

"[It was] quite controversial at the time... but actually it was based on a lot of research that showed it takes around six months for parents to get into a rhythm and establish a balance for their working lives... it's made a real [positive] difference in terms of people staying on." - Clare Phillips, ER and policy manager, University of Warwick

Some organisations are also making access to financial support more accessible for working parents. In another example, one public sector organisation has made parental leave policies 'day one entitlements' and has removed its minimum time in role requirement.

> A flexible return to work

Those organisations with a higher level of understanding of what their working parents need are putting support mechanisms in place to help mums and dads ease back into the workplace after parental leave:

"One of the challenges is that you end parental leave on Friday, then you start back on Monday and it's a really blunt transition. So when parents return, we pay 100% of their pay for doing 80% of their hours." - Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O'Rourke

> Structured flexible and hybrid working

Many of the organisations that have introduced flexible and hybrid working practices since the COVID-19 pandemic reported these models have had a positive impact on both working parents and productivity. Notably, many organisations report that flexibility and hybrid-working provisions have enabled their working parents to achieve a better work-life balance.

For one professional services organisation, its empowered flexibility policy - the ability for employees to make their own choices about where and when they work - has enabled many working mums to return to work full time. Since introducing this new policy, the number of partners moving from 80% to 100% contracts has significantly increased:

"If parents are supported with that balance... they're feeling less guilty, because they are managing to calibrate things in a way that works for their home life and their career progression." - anonymous

> Job sharing

Job sharing tends to better serve the needs of both the organisation and the employee, compared to part time working.

Working parents who have taken on a job share report feeling more supported and better able to manage their careers. Planned well, with the right match of people and division of responsibilities, both workplaces and working parents can benefit from job shares.

In one example, a public sector department reported 'better success' enabling people to work part time through finding job share partners, compared to part-time only roles. The department has worked hard to ensure job sharing is accessible in any role - irrelevant of seniority. Working with HR, the department has drawn up guidance on job sharing and part time working to help recruiting managers understand how to assess applicants looking for a part time or job share roles:

"There are an increasing number of roles that are advertised as half of a job share and that's really helped in people progressing their careers, because you're getting 1.2 of a person and you're bringing in all these different skills" - anonymous

In one private sector organisation, job sharing offered two working dads in senior roles a gateway to part time employment. Both reported that this working model gave them a better work-life balance and they felt more effective - two minds vs one was particularly useful when solving complex problems.

> Challenging stereotypes and encouraging equality

Many of the organisations are enhancing and equalising parental leave policies and in doing so are enabling equal responsibility of childcare, giving both mums and dads the opportunity to bond with their newborn and become confident in parenting skills, as well as ensuring both parents can continue to progress in their careers. Equal provision is helping to challenge the gender stereotype of mums as the primary caregiver.

Laing O'Rouke - a UK-based multinational construction company - introduced an equal parenting approach for all staff across the UK in October 2022, in which every employee - any gender, any birth, any child - has access to six months' parental leave on full pay. Notably, Laing O'Rouke's workforce is majority male. Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, told us that the organisation is currently seeing around a 75% uptake from working dads - a remarkable difference from the national uptake of shared parental leave at 2-8%:

"A total year of support, regardless of whether you are male or female, whether you have created your family through giving birth, adoption or surrogacy. The only criterion is that you have to take the leave from day one. Because we wanted to create the same experience for men and women." - Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O'Rouke

> Leadership-driven support and best-practice sharing

Support for working parents appears to be most progressive and successfully adopted when clear direction and full backing comes from the C-suite.

"I presented all the work. My CEO asked if this makes us the best in the industry? I told him -frankly - No. He told me to go away and come back with something that does." - Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O'Rouke

Organisational leaders can also look towards best-practice sharing as a means of encouraging proactive progress across their industries, fostering healthy competition among employers to attract candidates. A great example of this is the [**Working Families Gold Standard Best Practice Guide**](#), which provides best-in-class advice for the financial services sector.

> Taking action on the gender pay gap

The organisations for whom gender pay gap reporting is mandatory appear to provide more support for working parents and as a result are likely to achieve better outcomes.

One public sector organisation, for whom gender pay gap reporting is mandatory, has a wide range of policies, benefits and initiatives for working parents in place, some of which have always existed or have been in place for some time. These include: enhanced shared parental leave at the same amount as maternity leave, four weeks paternity leave on full pay, early birth leave for parents of premature babies and a buddy scheme to help returning parents:

"We've done a lot [with regards to support for working parents], and this has been driven by the gender pay gap legislation, which was a catalyst and made a difference"

- Gita Banerji HR equalities lead, Suffolk County Council

The organisations that are acting on the underlying issues causing the gender pay gap, instead of simply reporting their gender pay gap, are the ones who appear to be providing better strategic support for their working parents.

> Attuning to the needs of working parents

Young organisations appear to be more attuned to the needs of their employees, are more accepting of individual circumstances and can react quickly to issues.

Dr Gauri Seth, Brain-based Connection, believes the autonomy that comes from being a start-up has enabled them the opportunity to think about their values from scratch, consider what kind of organisation they want to be and work out how they want to support working parents.

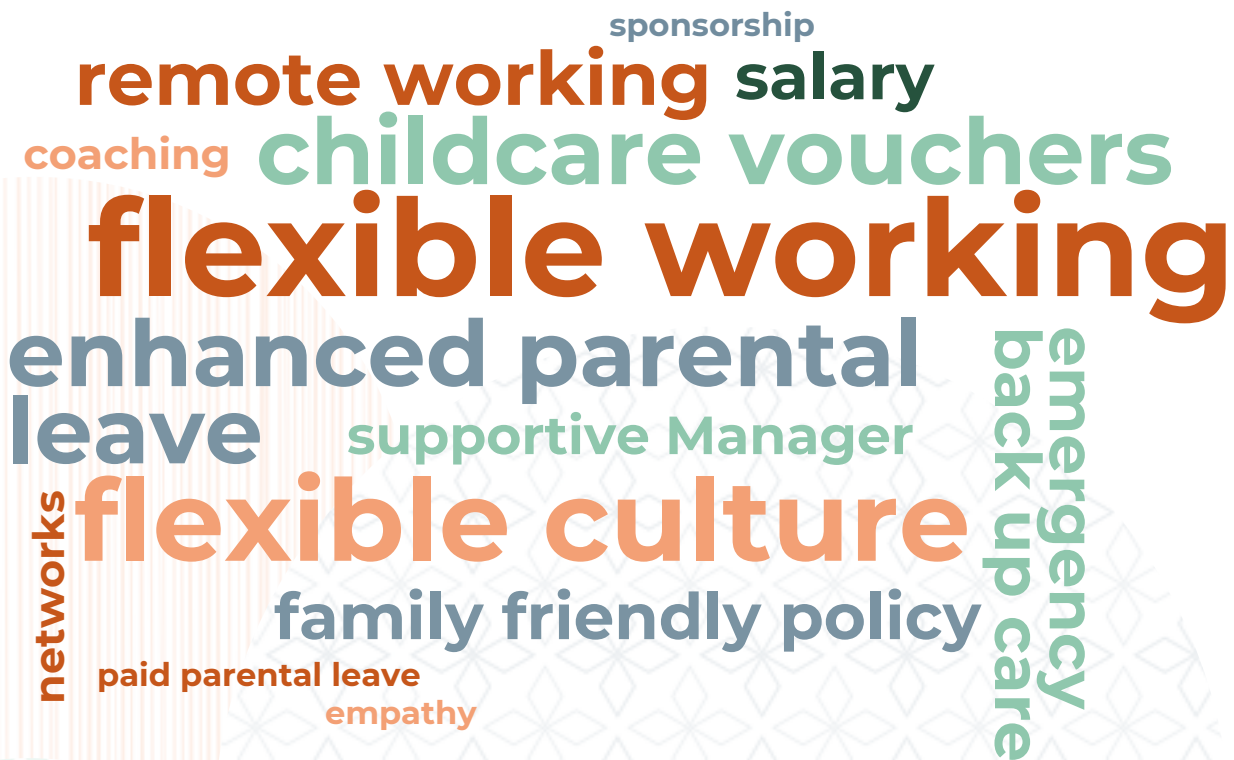
In addition to the above, Dr Seth shared her view that majority working parent workforce has enabled the organisation to create a culture of acceptance:

"... when one of our colleagues, for whatever reason, can't attend a meeting because it's childcare related, there is no problem with that. We're trying to just be very reasonable about that... It's kind of communicating that non-judgmental language and it can just sort of help people feel less guilty"

- Dr Gauri Seth, Brain-based Connection

What policies, initiatives and support are valued most by today's working parents?

Of the additional policies, initiatives and support organisations offer, the people leads believe working parents value flexibility, hybrid working and financial support the most. Having an empathetic manager, access to parenting networks and the availability of coaching and sponsorship also ranked highly.



What's standing in the way of progress?

Despite many of the people leads' best intentions to improve the experience for working parents and ultimately create equitable workplaces, there are many barriers that are standing in the way of progression. Whilst many of the barriers come from within the organisation itself, others are outside of the organisation's control.

The biggest barriers to improving the workplace for working parents



> Attuning to the needs of working parents

It's more likely the needs of working parents will be disregarded where they account for the minority in the workforce:

"Being in the minority, any minority is always challenging. And being in the minority as a working parent is no different" - Helen Sachdev, director, WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby)

In many instances, working parents are often expected to attend social events outside of business hours, with little regard to the negative impact this could have on caring responsibilities and commitments. An advertising agency said this is common practice, particularly where there is an emphasis on attracting and retaining young talent.

Employee benefits packages tend not to be designed with working parents in mind where there is less attunement with the needs of this group. Organisations find it challenging to balance the values, needs and wants of an entire workforce demographic:

"Feedback I get from some of the younger generation is, 'where is my free gym membership – and fun benefits – income protection is boring', but working parents are asking, 'where's my life insurance, and other benefits that will protect me and my family?'" - Holly Taylor, people director, Public Digital

Working parents are less likely to raise issues in a work environment where they are in the minority. Whereas those in the majority tend to feel more able and willing to talk about their needs and find solutions that work for them.

> Majority male workforces

Whilst there are examples where organisations with majority male workforces have put progressive initiatives, policies and working models in place, these appear to be rare.

One of the UK's leading infrastructure firms pinpointed its majority male workforce - at around 97% - as a key reason it has not traditionally embraced working parents. It suggests that progress will involve 'shifting the whole diversity of the industry':

"The industry doesn't encourage a culture that embraces this kind of stuff... and there's not much progress" - Danielle Dickens, project manager (diversity and inclusion), Network Rail

> Outdated mindsets amongst senior teams

Old-fashioned thinking about ways-of-working is leading organisations to miss out on talent pools of working parents, consequentially hampering efforts for greater diversity and equity:

"When you're just advertising full time nine to five, you're missing out on massive talent pools of working parents" - anonymous

In one example, many senior managers at a software company have been receptive to flexible working arrangements, whilst others have no interest in adopting new ways of working:

"I've had some that are just a flat out 'No', and I think it's a very old-fashioned mindset that all roles have to be full time." - anonymous

In addition, inflexibility amongst management is hampering access to new ways of working for parents. This is particularly true for one public sector organisation:

"We do struggle if people just want to work part time without a [job sharing] partner, because we still get that old fashioned mindset that a job is one unit." - anonymous

> Absence of psychological safety

Many of the organisations agree that psychological safety - the theory that employees can be their whole, authentic selves without fear of being judged or punished for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes - is critical to improving the lives of working parents:

"In HR... we sort of slice things up and make them all into different things. But actually underpinning it all is - can you bring your whole self to work and be authentic?" - Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O'Rourke

Despite this, many of the people leads believe that a lack of psychological safety in the workplace is preventing both working mums and dads from speaking up and speaking out through fear of being judged.

Although more working dads are now offered extended and enhanced parental leave, a high portion do not take it. Some organisations believe their working dads are concerned that taking leave will impact their career progression because it is still not widely accepted as the cultural norm:

"... people can put [a policy] in place but unless the culture can move on, men won't take it as much." - anonymous

> Line managers ill-equipped to meet the needs of working parents

Line managers are a critical link between the organisation and employees and therefore have a significant impact on the experience of working parents:

"[It] always goes back to managers, and the role that a manager has and the influence that a manager has in peoples' experiences..." - Soraia Santos, global employee engagement and communications manager, Hult International Business School

However, line management training is often limited, ill-timed and fails to equip managers to support employees effectively as they transition from worker to working parent.

Unhelpful assumptions, including how and when a parent wants to return to work and how they want to be communicated with whilst on leave, can be consequential for working parents:

"I think, even when a manager is potentially trying to act in the best interests [of the working parent] they don't realise the negative consequences [of the assumptions they're making]. In trying not to overload the employee, the impact is that she is disappointed that she is not being given the big projects" - anonymous

Some managers are opting for what they believe to be the safest direction to take, rather than the right direction to take, through fear of disciplinary consequences.

Others believe that managers' lack of empathy and sensitivity for employees' individual circumstances is making the experience for working parents more difficult:

"I don't think we invest enough in training managers. We need sensitivity training for managers on how to have conversations on tricky subjects. Because somebody's employee experience shouldn't be dependent on who their line manager is." - anonymous

> Complex policies

Parental leave policies that are unclear and complex are difficult for organisations to administer and, in some cases, impossible for parents and their managers to understand:

“Shared parental leave still sounds like a mystery to many people and many organisations.” - Gita Banerji, HR equalities lead, Suffolk County Council

In one example, two parents who worked in the same organisation laid out paperwork to try and figure out how to make shared parental leave work for them:

“Despite the fact that shared parental leave is there, people don’t use it – it’s too complicated.” - anonymous

HR teams also feel under pressure when it comes to helping working parents navigate complicated policies:

“I’m not trying to take anything away from how stressful it is for parents, but the pressure on People Teams to have in-depth knowledge of statutory knowledge and organisational policies, and to know everything straight away, can be a real challenge.” - Holly Taylor, people director, Public Digital

> Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping - particularly the notion that caring for children and family is the responsibility of women - is still hampering the drive for gender equity in many organisations.

In fact, the stereotype of women as the primary caregiver is so deeply embedded that it guides the career decisions of many women from a young age:

“I do think women from a very young age opt out and make different career choices, because they know at some point they’re going to settle down and have children. So six steps ahead, they’ve already said ‘no’ to jobs.” - Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O’Rourke

Gender stereotyping is also reflected in society’s view of men as caregivers. In some organisations, dads are receiving praise from colleagues for minimal parenting input. While it is mums who, in most cases, still do most of the heavy lifting without acknowledgement:

“He gets applauded when he takes a day off – it’s seen as, ‘you’re such a great dad going to watch your child’s play today.’” - anonymous

> Unstructured hybrid working

Although the availability of hybrid working has enabled many parents to achieve a better work-life balance, one healthcare organisation is concerned that the lack of in-person contact time is negatively impacting career progression, particularly for working mums:

“There is research that shows that women are missing key moments to pitch themselves because they don’t come in the office as much – they’re not getting in the lift with the Chief Exec and saying, ‘Oh, I’d really like to work on that project.’” - anonymous

> Inflexible working models

Despite modern families taking many shapes and forms, some of the people leads believe HR policy has not caught up with the change. Most hybrid and flexible working policies are designed to meet the needs of the majority and not enough thought has gone into creating policies to cater to the full diversity and intersectionality of employees.

As a result, many working parents appear to be trying to navigate and work with policies that do not reflect their situation and meet their needs.

It's been reported that some UK organisations are now trialling new hybrid working schemes that row back on the flexible working models they introduced during or after COVID-19. Many of the people leads are concerned about the negative impact this will have on working families, particularly on how they will balance a career with childcare. An organisation in the healthcare industry agreed that it is ultimately working mums who will be forced to sacrifice their careers:

“Hybrid working has been amazing in terms of work life balance, but companies are trying to increase pressure on days back to the office. Ultimately, working parents are going to pay the price for that.” - anonymous

> Cost of childcare

The high cost of childcare in the UK has made it financially unviable for both parents to manage a career and raise young children. Most organisations acknowledge this, with one healthcare organisation saying:

“The cost of childcare is the one thing externally which is just crippling for people - parents earn a decent wage between them, but they live month to month because they really pay out double their mortgage in childcare.” - anonymous

> Shortage of childcare professionals

Whilst some organisations do offer additional childcare support, such as emergency back-up care or wrap-around care, many parents are unable to use the service because there are not enough childcare professionals to deliver the service.

“People value emergency backup care, but for every person who does value it, we have five that don't because when they've tried to access it, it's not available in their region.” - anonymous

Moreover, oversubscribed nurseries and the subsequent long wait lists make it unviable for some parents to return to work.

What do the people leads think organisations can do to improve the working parents' experience?

Most of the people leads want to see their leaders commit more support, initiatives and policies for working parents. Even the most progressive organisations acknowledge there is more they can do. So, what actions do the attendees think will make the most impact?

> Provide managers with more support

Invest in training for line managers on how to best manage employees who are making the transition from worker to working parent: *"I don't think that we invest enough in training managers when it comes to these things."* - anonymous

Ensure training is timely: *'Just in time training'* will ensure the skills managers learn are front of mind for managers working with employees who are about to become parents.

Equip managers with the courage to do the right thing: *"Managers are worried they are going to say something wrong and end up in an employment tribunal. So, the safest thing to do is inaction. For me, it's equipping them with the courage to do the right thing, the courage to take an individualised approach"* - anonymous

Develop guidelines for managers: *"[Develop guidelines for line managers to avoid working parents having] those negative experiences which may happen [for working parents] when the line manager is potentially not supportive of a specific request..."* - Thomas Bruno, senior programme manager, Network Rail

Encourage managers to communicate in a non-judgemental, empathetic way: *"When a parent has to pick up a sick child, use non-judgemental language – this can help parents feel less guilty about doing something they have to do".* - Dr Gauri Seth, Brain-based Connection

Ensure managers are sensitive to personal circumstances, particularly those who are new to managing working parents: *"We need sensitivity training for managers like how to have conversations about tricky subjects..."* - Soraia Santos, global employee engagement and communications manager, Hult International Business School

Allow for manager discretion in the application of policies: *"We did away with our formal process as we recognised that most flexible working conversations are managed informally."* - Gita Banerji, HR equalities lead, Suffolk County Council

> Communicate openly and effectively

Setup process of communication with working parents from the very beginning: *“a lot of the feedback we had from our parents is that it's a really steely corporate process, there is a document you can download, and you can fill out to say this is the contact you want. But... that might change throughout your maternity leave - you might become a little bit more needy, maybe you might become a lot less. So it's really about keeping that communication open...”* - anonymous

Use parental leave communication plans to negate problems: *“We use simple things like parental leave communication plans – a guide for a ten minute conversation around how you want us to stay in contact whilst you're away – it can iron out those assumptions. And is available if there is a change in manager.”* - anonymous

Inform parents of their right to take parental leave: *“We're actively looking at making shared parental leave a smooth process and talking about it more, because there are still people that don't realise that they have access to it.”* - anonymous

Make policy clear and consistent but recognise the need to address difference and personal circumstance: Policy needs to be well-documented, clear and consistent to remove individual interpretation of policy and reduce parents' negative experience when managers make decisions at their discretion.

> Provide focused support for working parents

Coach working parents to proactively manage conversations with their manager: *“We really encourage you to have a conversation with your manager about what your non negotiables are, so one of my non negotiables is that I don't want to travel on a Thursday night, because then, am I all singing and dancing for a two-year old on Friday morning (my day off)? No, I'm not”* - anonymous

Use Keep in Touch (KiT) days strategically: *“Keeping in Touch days are not used as strategically as they could be – keeping in touch days are beneficial for every single person rather than a nice to have.”* - Soraia Santos, global employee engagement and communications manager, Hult International Business School

> Challenge gender stereotypes

Make parental leave policies gender neutral: *“Parental leave needs to be gender neutral and it needs to be equalised”* - Rae Avatar Barnett, leader of the people function in Europe, Laing O'Rourke

Demonstrate a range of successful and authentic role models: *“We need more case studies of successful part time roles... and I think it has to come from the top down.”* - anonymous

What do the people leads think the government can do to improve the working parents' experience?

For many families, public policy and legislation determine whether they can manage a career and raise children. So, what do the people leads believe the government can do to better the lives of today's working parents?

> Simplify shared parental leave policy

"Sort out the shared parental leave system – why is it only 2% take up? It's almost impossible to work your way through the system... Despite the fact that shared parental [leave] is there, people don't use it – it's too complicated." - Alison Green, director, WOMBA (Work, Me and the Baby)

> Evolve childcare and social policy to make parenting more gender neutral

"Women expect to be holding everything and make it their job to make it all work. So there's something about social policy here... If you look at the NHS, at schools, it's always the mum who they contact. Men are not even linked to their child on the NHS system." - Lizzie Martin, head of coaching, and training, founder Work, Life Mother

> Reduce the cost of childcare

Learn from successful models and systems in other countries, such as France, whose policies make it easier for parents to balance family and work life: *"In France, the more children you have in a family the less tax you pay as a family."* - Thomas Bruno, senior programme manager, Network Rail, Senior Programme Manager

Remove the cliff edge that restricts financial support for working families: *"If your partner goes over the threshold edge by even £1, the financial support is lost – nobody can benefit"* - Anya Smirnova, coach, Mindful Return



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