



Bectu Submission: Parental pay and leave review

Bectu briefing • August 2025

The UK government's review of the parental leave and pay system led by the Department for Business and Trade and the Department for Work and Pensions, seeks to assess the existing parental employment support framework, including maternity, paternity, adoption, shared parental leave, neonatal care leave, parental bereavement leave, unpaid parental leave, and Maternity Allowance. The Government are assessing what needs to change in regards to parental leave and pay according to four objectives:

- **Supporting maternal health** — enabling physical and mental recovery and wellbeing during pregnancy and post-partum.
- **Supporting economic growth through labour market participation** — helping parents, particularly mothers, remain and progress in the workforce, thereby reducing the “motherhood penalty” and closing the gender pay gap.
- **Ensuring the best start in life for babies and young children** — granting time and resources for parental wellbeing and early childhood development.
- **Supporting balanced childcare choices** — promoting flexibility, co-parenting, and arrangements that reflect modern work and family realities

The following briefing sets out the response to the review from the Bectu sector of Prospect.

Providing sufficient time off work with adequate pay to support maternal health

While statutory parental leave and pay arrangements offer a foundational level of support for many, there are significant gaps in how these entitlements address the realities of different kinds of employment.

Those in non-traditional or insecure roles, such as freelancers, the self-employed, or those on short-term or project-based contracts, often find themselves excluded from meaningful support. The unique demands and working practices of the creative sector – the need for highly specialised skills, the short-term project-based nature of work that is often reliant on inconsistent funding, and tight turnaround times have all led to a situation where freelancing or short term contracting is often the norm, and is a growing section of the workforce as a whole. These workers tend to work intermittently, moving between short term contracts.

However, for these workers, the eligibility requirements for statutory maternity pay are simply unattainable. To qualify for statutory maternity pay, workers must have been working continuously for 26 weeks for the same employer before their 'qualifying week' – 15 weeks before the expected birth of the child. Although technically entitled to statutory maternity pay, in the creative industries, contracts under 12 weeks are often the norm, meaning that most workers and employees in the sector remain excluded from eligibility.

In a recent Bectu survey of 424 working parents and carers in the screen industries, more than seven in ten parents had not made a request for statutory maternity, paternity or adoption leave or pay, generally because their employment structure meant they were ineligible.

While short term contract workers, alongside the many self-employed workers in the creative industries, may be entitled to maternity allowance, there are still significant barriers to access. In the same survey, just 18% of parents had applied for and received maternity allowance, while 7% had applied for this but been unsuccessful, and 77% had not applied.

A lack of awareness of maternity allowance, as well as complexities in the application process serve as barriers to access, but the intermittent nature of work in the creative industries also complicates the application process. Despite the qualifying period of 26 work out of 66 weeks before the due date, where earnings are averaged over any 13 weeks in the test period, creative workers often face long spells without work interspersed with intense jobs with very long hours. This feast or famine model of working can mean that some creative workers are disadvantaged in their maternity allowance calculations, deterring them from applying.

Moreover, the available pay does not adequately offset the costs or loss of income associated with taking leave. This creates barriers not only for maternal health and family well-being, but also to equal participation in the workforce.

Additionally, maternal health outcomes are inhibited by a lack of access to paid time off for antenatal appointments and childcare leave. Self-employed and limb b workers do not currently have the right to time off for antenatal appointments or 'time off for dependants' in the same way as employees.

In the same survey, 43% of parents had not requested time off for antenatal or medical appointments, while 18% who had made requests had these rejected or were only given some of the time they had asked for off work. Some respondents told us how they found making requests for medical appointments or to care for a sick child often resulted in dismissive and even punitive responses from employers and engagers:

"having to take my daughter to a hospital appointment was met with contempt. I was told "I'm not putting another mum on another contract so she can go off sick with her kids."

"I've never had any support as a single mum as a director. I can never take time off. I even went into hospital poorly overnight when i was pregnant and went back to work the next day. No one cares."

"At my level, I can't take time off for appointments/ family emergencies or it's held against me"

In order to prioritise maternal health, support must meet the needs of self-employed and freelance workers and enable mothers to put their health first, without fear of repercussions.

Supporting economic growth through labour market participation by enabling more parents to stay in work and advance in their careers, including reducing the gender pay gap

There is a disconnect between entitlement design of parental employment rights and the realities of modern working patterns. A failure to fully support self-employed and freelance parents is a missed opportunity to better support families and empower parents to remain active and progressing in their careers. The creative industries is one of the Government's priority sectors for growth, but provide a clear example of where this undermines efforts to close the gender pay gap but also perpetuates structural inequalities within the labour market.

In a recent Bectu survey of 424 workers in the screen industries with parenting and caring responsibilities (conducted between 22nd April and 10th June 2024), 56% said that the impact of their parenting and caring responsibilities has driven them to consider leaving the industry.

Respondents told of the hidden penalties that workers face, with many choosing not to disclose their parental responsibilities in order to continue working and to progress:

"I think the lack of support for parents and carers is the biggest reason for loss of experience and talent from the industry, especially women. It's too often I hear of people leaving because they have become parents, or women having long gaps in their careers and returning at a lower grade or pay because they wanted to have a family. I know so many people who hide or don't talk about their families, as if it should be a secret"

"I tend not to admit to having a child in case I don't get a job."

Only 7% of all respondents said that they had felt fully supported by their employer to balance work with caring or parenting responsibilities. This sentiment was widely shared in relation not only to employers, but also co-workers, where many shared a sentiment that the industry needed a bigger culture shift to be fully inclusive of those with parenting and caring responsibilities:

"It's common for co-workers to balk at the fact I have children ' how do you manage?' like having children and working in TV don't mix."

"As a man, my parenting responsibilities are never considered by employers. I feel a strong duty to see my kids in the morning and evening but as a freelancing director, even on long contracts, it feels like they do not want you to have any kind of life outside work. During long edits especially I do not feel I need to be there in person for 10 hour days. We need to think much more holistically about freelance employees - treat them humanely and they will deliver"

"There is a culture (seemingly across all departments/sectors of TV & Film) that everyone is expected to always give 100% of their time and energy to working. Long hours, long travel, and trips away from home are the norm - and anyone who wants to limit that for themselves loses out on work to others who are either single, or happy to abandon their family for days or weeks at a time. Being female I am often asked by colleagues (many of whom are dads!) who is looking after my kids when I am at work. But equally I can often get a negative reaction from people if I turn down work, or question the hours, on the basis of childcare."

And for those who were returning to work after a period of time off for parenting or caring responsibilities, 31% overall, and 36% of parents, say that they have struggled to return to the industry.

The result of this is clear in wider labour market trends, as PEC's 2024 State of the Nations report¹ highlighted persistent inequalities in arts workforce participation. Only 34% of creative industry managers/directors are women, an indicator of how parenthood, caring roles, and career progression are linked.

The sector's reliance on short-term, freelance contracts (e.g., in performing arts, fashion) makes it harder for parent-carers to maintain participation and progress after having children. Moreover, a long hours culture in sectors such as film and TV make working impossible to balance with childcare arrangements.

Another Bectu survey, of 5,594 creative workers in non-performing roles from March 2025, found that just 22% of freelance women have been able to access job shares and flexible working arrangements. And more than a third of all freelancers (34%) say that that their work has impacted their reproductive choices (e.g. choosing to have children).

The lack of support afforded to creative industry workers with parental responsibilities has a profound impact on their ability to stay in work and advance their careers. Due to the freelance nature of much of this work, this can often be obscured in official figures that focus on employees. There are positive steps being taken by employers in the industry, such as the growth of job shares in the screen industries. However, as a freelance model of working becomes a larger subset of the working population, the impact of this for gender equality must be addressed at a national policy level.

¹ <https://pec.ac.uk/state-of-the-nation/arts-cultural-heritage-audiences-and-workforce-2/>

Ensuring adequate resources and leave for parents to facilitate the best start in life by supporting the healthy development of young children

As already covered, for self-employed parents, there is no right to paid time off work in the same way as there is for employees while for freelance parents who are workers or employees, qualification periods act as a significant barrier.

Without paid leave, many freelance parents must return to work soon after birth to maintain income or to maintain their working portfolio. Alternatively, the lack of support offered to freelancers can lead to parents, and especially mothers, dropping out of the industry altogether.

This results in widespread exclusion for parents whose contributions to the economy are no less vital, yet whose working patterns simply do not align with rigid statutory frameworks. The cumulative effect is a system that privileges certain forms of employment while marginalising others, compounding disadvantage for those already at the fringes of secure work.

Furthermore, the lack of tailored support or flexibility in statutory leave policies has a ripple effect beyond the financial: it erodes the sense of security and stability that is essential for new and expecting parents. Without comprehensive and inclusive policies, many are forced to make untenable choices between their family's well-being and their livelihoods, undermining both long-term health outcomes and broader societal goals.

Providing parents the flexibility to make balanced childcare choices, including co-parenting

Self-employed workers in the UK are not eligible for Shared Parental Leave or Statutory Shared Parental Pay. While if their partner is employed, they can potentially take shared leave and shared pay if they meet the eligibility criteria, self-employed parents cannot access these schemes directly.

The eligibility requirements to access shared parental leave and pay also restrict this option from freelance parents who are employees or workers. The parent who is to take shared parental leave must be an employee who has worked for the same employer for 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before their baby is due or their adoption match date, which for many creative industry workers is incompatible with the norm of short-contract working.

With Maternity Allowance for the self-employed the only statutory support available for self-employed and freelance parents, this places the entire burden of childcare onto the mother and offers no financial support for self-employed fathers or same-sex partners, making it impossible to balance childcare choices between parents.

This systemic oversight not only leaves a significant portion of the workforce unsupported, but also runs counter to principles of fairness and equal opportunity. By failing to account for the diverse realities of contemporary employment, current parental leave and pay structures risk entrenching existing inequities. Parents in non-traditional work arrangements, whether through freelancing, self-employment, or short-term contracts, are consistently sidelined.

Addressing these disparities requires a fundamental reimagining of eligibility criteria and a commitment to redesign statutory entitlements so that they reflect the varied and flexible nature of modern work.

Further areas for review

While the review has stated that fairness and equality will be one of the three cross-cutting considerations, of which different employment statuses (such as employee, worker, self-employed) is a core component, we urge that the review understands the lived complexities of employment status in how it assesses this.

Freelancing is not the same as self-employment but instead refers to people working through a mixture of engagements as self-employed or employed, usually on a series of short-term contracts. There is very little data available on this workforce because of irregular patterns of employment and engagement, but freelancing is a mainstream and growing subset of the working population. The review must look at freelancing within its assessment of fairness, so that eligibility is not prohibitive to those who operate as workers or employees on short contracts. This would not only promote equity but also future proof the system against the evolving nature of work.

The review should consider portable models of work eligibility, such as the Künstlersozialkasse in Germany² to account for short term contract working.

Equally important is the need to embed greater flexibility within statutory entitlements. Policies should allow parents to tailor leave arrangements to meet their family's specific circumstances, such as enabling self-employed parents access to shared parental leave or creating mechanisms for splitting or staggering leave between co-parents in a way that is responsive to non-linear earnings and variable workloads.

Additional objectives that should be considered include strengthening support for parents of children with disabilities or additional needs and ensuring that parental leave and pay policies are accessible and inclusive for all family structures, including adoptive and same-sex parents. It is also crucial to address the adequacy of parental pay rates so that financial barriers do not deter eligible parents from taking the leave to which they are entitled.

² <https://www.kuenstlersozialkasse.de/>