

# MATERNITY LEAVE, POST MATERNITY PAY FREEZE AND THE CHILDCARE TAX



Minutes

<b>Date</b>	Monday 20 <sup>th</sup> of June 2022
<b>Time</b>	16:30 – 17:30
<b>Venue</b>	Portcullis House, Room P and Via Zoom
<b>Chair</b>	Jess Phillips MP
<b>Speakers</b>	<b>Stella Creasy MP,</b> Member for Walthamstow <b>Rosalind Bragg,</b> Director at Maternity Action <b>Neil Leitch OBE,</b> CEO Early Years Alliance <b>Victoria Benson,</b> CEO of Gingerbread
<b>Theme</b> <b>Background information</b>	In this session, we explored extended redundancy protection for women and new parents, co-parental leave, student maternity discrimination and also discussed how we can overcome the post-maternity pay freeze.  We also spoke about childcare costs being a barrier to women at work, forcing them to leave their posts, and the impact those costs have on single parents.

## NON VERBATIM - MINUTES

**Jess Phillips MP** welcomed attendees and opened the session, stating that it was unjust that bad government policy meant that too many women were unable to pursue their careers after having children. She thanked sponsors.

Phillips introduced **Stella Creasy**, MP for Walthamstow.

Stella thanked Jess and said government research showed that the vast majority of women had their career knocked by having a child – it is almost inevitable that a woman’s career will be set back by this. There are thousands of women experiencing maternity discrimination in this country – mothers have been first in line to take the pain from furlough, job losses and now maternity discrimination. Our workplaces do not allow for women to balance work with family life. Furthermore, men feel that they cannot spend time with their child as a result. She said this wasn’t going to change within the place that made the law – parliament. Parliament doesn’t properly understand how to provide a flexible workplace for new mothers. Where are the workplaces where we could all work? Flexible working needs to be

possible and desirable. We are one of the least productive economies in the world, and we could have been better and more resilient throughout the pandemic with a better policy towards new mothers. To fix this won't require a huge amount of new money – if you provide decent childcare, the economy reaps the benefits. There are schemes out there to help parents, but they need to be communicated better. She argued that we need to start with fundamental reform, as well as thinking about how we make it possible for women to have a better experience of motherhood by eliminating maternity discrimination. No-one is winning from the current scenario; how can we make it possible to both be a good mother and a good professional? It is possible to do both.

**Jess Phillips** thanked Stella Creasy and introduced **Rosalind Bragg**, director at Maternity Action.

Rosalind said there was often the idea of workers being pitched against each other by asking for flexible working. Different flexibilities can be built into different work systems, and we need to think more about this. She noted the advantage of the French system and its subsequent advantage in productivity.

Rosalind said Maternity Action speak to around 3000 women each year, and that the cost-of-living crisis is hitting new mothers particularly hard, who are in no position to pay back childcare costs when they return to work. The flat rate of maternity pay is less than half the minimum legal wage for a 35-hour week, and we shouldn't have women saying in a Maternity Action survey, 'the drop in maternity leave made me feel anxious to go back to work ASAP, my mental health was deteriorating'. 54,000 women lose their jobs each year from maternity and pregnancy discrimination. The same research found three quarters of new mothers and pregnant women face some sort of discrimination. We need stronger redundancy protection – the current ones just don't work, nor will government plans to extend them. Rosalind argued that we need to adopt the German model which prohibits redundancy due to pregnancy. The current model of shared parental leave is disgraceful and need to be reformed. The new model needs to be based on individual entitlements rather than just shared ones. The new model needs to reflect the different purposes of leave – understanding these will make it easier to build a model that works properly. Maternity Action have a London outreach project working with migrant and low income BAME women to embed maternity advice into the health service. These models that deliver legal advice are an important part of a future maternity leave plan.

**Jess Phillips** said the current model was madness and handed over to **Neil Leitch OBE**, CEO of the Early Years Alliance.

**Neil Leitch OBE** said that Government papers had admitted that the current system is underfunded by over two billion pounds per year. The solution they offered was to make early years providers work to maximum ratios to balance the books. He said he was tired of listening to ministers say that they regretted the current state of childcare entitlement. Why do we have higher costs compared to other OECD countries? We invest far less. We only lead in how much of a woman's own money is spent on childcare. The way we view early years and childcare in this country has to change, and it can't just be seen as a babysitting service. Until we get the rhetoric changed, we'll lurch from one crisis to the next; this is about education, not just childcare.

**Jess Phillips** said that the constant argument over funding from the government betrayed a lack of understanding from them, and a belief that it was just a babysitting service rather than a development opportunity for children. She then introduced **Victoria Benson**, CEO of Gingerbread.

**Victoria Benson** explained gingerbread's role in supporting single parents – one of the most disadvantaged groups in the workforce. Nearly half of single mothers worked in routine occupations compared to mothers in relationships. Single parents have nearly double the unemployment rate of coupled parents – 5% to 3%. The major driver of single parents' unemployment is the high cost of childcare. Since March 2020, the number of single parents on universal credit has increased by 500,000, and 90% of single parents will be on universal credit by 2024. Single parents face the difficulty of meeting childcare costs off only one salary. Single parents have to fit jobs around childcare rather than other way round. Many single parents are increasingly limiting themselves to jobs that work during school hours, which are rare and poorly paid. The next stage of research in autumn will be looking at the government's *Way to Work* campaign. In any debate about parents and work, the needs

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of single parents must be reflected. She added that now compared to the past, child benefit has not kept pace with inflation or growth.

**Jess Phillips** thanked Victoria Benson and invited questions from audience.

**Sarah Hes** from Bubble said that we needed more childcare providers and asked how we make that happen.

**Jess Phillips** said expansion of creches was one option.

**Stella Creasy** added that employers such as Aviva also encouraged fathers to take additional paternity leave and encouraged flexibility for them, as increased flexibility for fathers means increased flexibility for mothers. She said there seemed to be a misconception in government of it being either full time or no time. Part time flexibility needs to be part of the conversation.

**Neil Leitch OBE** argued that there is simply no flexibility in the current system – people just don't work like that. If we're not careful, the government will grab hold of this and deregulate to lower the standard for those allowed to administer childcare. He added that the term 'childminding' doesn't reflect the quality needed to do it properly.

Moving on the topic of shared parental leave – **Rosalind Bragg** said when you look at it through the legal framework, maternity leave is not just for childcare but also for health and safety. In Europe you commonly see a split between maternity and parental leave, which we should follow. Employers need to be there for women who have struggled post-childbirth and need more time off. Individual entitlements are also critical, to encourage men to take more time off so that women can work towards resuming their careers. Germany gives additional paid leave if both parents take time off – this is another policy that we should be following.

**Neil Leitch OBE** said that we need a cabinet minister for early years to centralise control of the policy within government, before adding that good childcare has significant benefits further down the line.

**Victoria Benson** added that women need further support for returning to work, such as specialist work coaches, etc.

**Jess Phillips** said that they would continue to push for adoption of the German model with Maria Miller through a private member's bill. She thanked attendees and ended the session.