



A mumifesto for working mothers

Foreword by Joeli Brearley CEO and Founder

The next general election poses a huge opportunity for change. 40% of the UK population are mothers and evidence shows that they will vote for the political party which best understands their needs. This means our community represents massive democratic power. According to data from the Fawcett Society:

- 84% of women in red wall constituencies say that taking action on the gender pay gap is important to them when deciding which party to vote for in a general election.
- 36% of women in red wall constituencies would like to work more (paid) hours than they currently do but are being prevented by reasons including a lack of flexible work (33%), their caring responsibilities (23%), and affordable childcare (23%).
- 75% of women in red wall constituencies said that affordable childcare is important to them when deciding which party to vote for.

Meanwhile, our data consistently shows that mothers will vote with their feet when it comes to: Affordable, high quality childcare; properly paid parental leave for all parents; flexible working; and an end to pregnancy and maternity discrimination.

Pregnant Then Screwed has been conducting qualitative and quantitative research with UK mothers for the last 8 years. We have built a community of 400,000 parents. We deliver support to almost 10,000 mothers a year who are experiencing discrimination and disadvantage, in part due to antiquated legislation. The PTS mumifesto draws on this unique insight to offer policy makers tangible solutions to reduce the motherhood penalty, win votes, and improve the outcomes for families and the economy.

Childcare and Early Learning

Who cares?

- 96% of families with a child under 3 were likely to vote for the political party with the best childcare pledge¹
- 76% of mothers who pay for childcare say it no longer makes financial sense for them to work²
- Mothers miss out on £9.4 billion in earnings every year and the economy loses 1% in GDP as a result of unaffordable, inaccessible childcare³
- The average cost of a full-time place for a child under two in England is £14,000 per year⁴
- Just 18% of local authorities have enough provision for children with special needs and disabilities⁵
- Private sector nurseries reported a staff turnover of 28% in 2022, with 41% of staff saying low pay is their reason for leaving⁶
- 49% of childminders have had to use their personal savings to meet the rising costs they are incurring⁷

Overview

Please note that as childcare is devolved, this is for England only. We will be setting out policy recommendations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in due course.

The measures announced in the Spring Budget of March 2023 were a welcome turning point in the campaign for affordable childcare and early education. In October 2022, 15,000 parents from our community marched across the UK to demand the Government take action on a crisis that has pushed so many brilliant mothers out of work and, in some cases, into poverty. We marched and the Government listened - well, sort of.

The expansion of funded hour schemes will support lots of mums to return to work after maternity leave. Reforms to the way the childcare element of Universal Credit is paid is a great way to help some of the most disadvantaged parents back into work, and something we've been calling for for years.

These are both important building blocks, but not a silver bullet. The crisis in childcare is not just one of funding, it is also one of eligibility, availability and flexibility. These are not issues

that can be fixed in isolation of each other, they require full system change. The general election poses an exciting opportunity for radical reform of our childcare and early years sector, something that is desperately needed if we are to give our children the best possible future, whilst closing the gender pay gap and improving our economy.

The key factors we are calling for are:

- 1) The Government must take immediate steps to shore up the sector including increasing funding rates, particularly for the 3-4 year old entitlement whilst removing nonsensical work search requirements
- 2) Scrap the recent ratio changes for two-year-olds
- 3) Consolidate the 8 benefit schemes available to parents into one benefit scheme which ensures no family pays more than 5% of their household income for childcare and early learning
- 4) Providers to receive funding from the Government based on fulfilling certain criteria which include decent pay, working conditions, and progression opportunities for staff
- 5) Take measures to prevent private equity investment and move towards a system where any profit is invested back into providing the best care and education for children
- 6) Invest in training for the workforce to ensure qualifications in childcare and early learning are affordable and of a high quality

*Please note that although we use the term 'funded hours' in this report, we understand that these hours are not fully, but part-funded by the Government. The money given to providers by the Government does not cover the cost to deliver those places in many cases.

Short-term and long-term:

The many problems with our childcare sector will not be solved overnight. Capacity has decreased over the last few years, the workforce is on its knees and costs have skyrocketed. It is imperative that the new government commits to short-term measures to shore up the sector now, while also setting out a longer term programme of reform that will transition the sector away from the current 'funded hours' model to a system that delivers for all families.

Short term

Increase the funding rates

In the short-term, the new government must commit to fair and sustainable levels of funding for the sector by immediately addressing the current shortfall in funding. Despite the expanded offer of 'free hours' from nine months old, the funding rates for the existing '30 hours' for three-and-four-year-olds remain critically low. This will continue to place unsustainable financial pressures on providers who may be forced to close.

Funding must meet the true cost of provision, and the incoming government must provide transparency on how those rates are calculated, ensuring they are indexed to inflation and rises in National Living Wage. It should also provide enhanced levels of funding for settings in deprived areas in order to incentivise providers to open in communities where the benefits for both parents and children are evidently higher but sustaining a business is far more challenging.⁸

In September 2023 the government increased the staff: child ratio in early years settings for two year olds. This means one staff member can now be asked to look after five two-year-olds at once. Increased ratios have been widely opposed by the early years sector and parents. The new ratio is likely to increase the pressure on staff, at a time when there is already a staffing crisis in early years and decrease the quality of care given to children. We call on the next Government to scrap these ratio changes so that staff care for a maximum of four two-year-olds at once.

Remove work search requirements

The new government must also remove the recently imposed work search requirements on parents of children over the age of one who are claiming childcare costs through Universal Credit. Sanctions have been proven not to work and often have negative impacts on the claimants' mental health;¹⁶ this is a particular risk for new mothers who are more prone to perinatal mental health issues. The childcare element of Universal Credit must also be indexed to inflation and other increases in National Living Wage and National Minimum Wage.

Long term

Means-tested childcare

Early education and care supports a child's cognitive and emotional development, helping to close the attainment gap, particularly among disadvantaged children. However, the 30 funded hours are only available to children whose parents are working a specific number of hours. This entrenches educational inequality early on in a child's life with many of the most disadvantaged children starting school well behind their peers as a result.¹⁴ It also penalizes parents who are training or studying and those who are job hunting.

We're calling on the new government to immediately equalise access to childcare benefits. That means addressing the gaps in eligibility to ensure that all parents are supported to work if they want to and that all children can access vital early education and care. The 8 different benefit schemes currently available create barriers to access and are costly to administer. We believe that radical reform of the sector includes streamlining these schemes to create a means-tested approach where no family pays more than 5% of their household income on childcare and early learning. Those eligible for Universal credit should be able to access childcare and early learning for free.

The funding rates for providers must cover the costs to deliver those places, whilst ensuring there is enough money to pay workers a decent salary. To prevent local authorities from top slicing different amounts from this funding, creating a postcode lottery for providers, the government must provide guidance on what percentage is reasonable for local authorities to keep for administration charges.

This funding can only be accessed if parents are using a provider which fulfills certain criteria and is therefore eligible for government support. These conditions have to include better pay for a workforce that is 97% female and among the lowest paid in the labour market - some of whom are mums themselves using food banks or are unable to pay for their own childcare. It must also include better progression opportunities and working conditions for staff.

The sector is in the midst of an acute recruitment and retention crisis with 1 in 6 providers saying that staffing challenges may force them to close within a year.¹² Two-fifths (41%) of staff say low pay is their reason for leaving the sector.¹³ Providing decent pay and improve working conditions will support the sector to recruit and retain the staff needed to meet increased demand, whilst also improving the quality of early years education.

Pay, qualifications and progression for staff:

- Every childcare setting must have one lead practitioner who is qualified to degree level. Pay at this level should be commensurate with a primary school teacher
- All entry level practitioners must be trained to at least level 2 with pay starting at the national living wage and increasing depending on qualifications and experience
- Every childcare practitioner must undertake professional development on an annual basis
- In return for government funding, providers must ensure that all staff are paid at least the National Living Wage regardless of age and that trade union membership is recognised.¹¹

Parents with children who have special educational needs and disabilities are particularly disadvantaged by the crisis of availability. Less than one in five local authorities currently has enough places for children with a disability.¹⁵ The new government must commit to investing in specialist skills training for early years and childcare staff, with higher pay for those staff who are qualified to educate and care for children with a disability.

Market reform

In the longer term, the new government must set out a framework that will transition the sector away from its current reliance on private equity investment to more maintained, not for profit, or social enterprise settings. To secure Government funding, providers must demonstrate that any profit is invested back into the care and education of the children.

At the heart of any programme of reform must be the overall social good that early education and childcare provides to children, their parents and the economy as a whole. Private-for-profit providers have been shown to be heavily indebted;¹⁰ they generally use profits to repay that debt rather than reinvesting it to grow or improve staff pay and conditions.

As we've seen in other sectors and other countries, highly indebted financial models like this are more prone to collapse - and if that happens, it'll be working mothers left to fill the care vacuum and pick up the pieces. Moreover, there is evidence that outcomes for children are better in not for profit [settings](#).

Flexible provision for all types of families

For shift workers, including frontline employees, finding flexible childcare that fits their working hours can be difficult and costly. The In-Work Progression Commission has previously identified a lack of flexible childcare as a cause of mothers becoming stuck in low-paying jobs.¹⁷ The £289 million of start-up funding announced in Spring 2023 will support primary schools to pilot wraparound care. The new government should build on this and extend funding beyond 2025, providing grants to schools in areas where there are high levels of unemployment and underemployment among mothers. These facilities should also be used to create more affordable holiday club care for children in a setting with which they are familiar. Additional funding must be provided to create more holiday care for disabled children. In addition to this, the new Government must commit to continue the holiday activities and food programme, which provides free activities and healthy food for children eligible for free school meals.

Case Study: “I stopped training as a nurse because I couldn’t afford childcare”

“I’m a student nurse. Studying full time hours plus more and my partner works 45 hours a week. Our household income is low yet I don’t qualify for any childcare help. We get no universal credit. We get no free hours or tax free childcare because I’m a student so I’m classed as not working! We can not afford childcare, which means I am behind on my University work and this is negatively affecting my chances of qualifying. We are drowning in debt, struggling to feed our son and are unable to afford basics such as petrol, food, and utilities. I’ve had to go back on antidepressants because I just can’t cope any more. We are being pushed into poverty because the system does not work for us.”

Parental Leave Reform

The lowdown on leave

- 66% of the public support an increase to statutory paternity leave; that rises to 81% among parents of children under 12
- Evidence from other countries shows that increasing paid paternity leave to at least six weeks narrows the gender wage gap and increases labour participation among mothers

- When Sweden introduced a ‘father quota’ of 90 days of non-transferrable paternity leave paid at 78% of earnings, take up of paternity leave rose from 12% to 30%
- 20% of dads and partners in England said there were no parental leave options available to them in their workplace following the birth or adoption of their child

*Source: Centre for Progressive Policy, Pregnant Then Screwed, Women in Data (2023)*¹⁸

Overview

Whether a family has two mums or one, triplets or a longed-for adopted child, every parent should have access to a parental leave system that supports them to bond and care for their children without financial penalty.

Our current parental leave system fails to do that. It is predicated on outdated gendered stereotypes of the mother as primary caregiver and the father as breadwinner. Moreover, it hasn't evolved alongside the modern British family; in its current form it contributes to unfair distribution of domestic labour, exacerbates the gender pay gap and undermines both the economic resilience of mothers and the desire of fathers and partners to play an active role in raising their children. It also fails to support an inclusive economy by not accounting for the complexity of caring for a child with special needs or disabilities.

It has removed choice for parents - the choice about *how* to care for their children and about *who* should care for them, particularly in their early years. Our campaign work has helped to address some of the gaps with the recent passing of the Neonatal Care Bill, but there is still much work to do to create a fair and equal parental leave system. We're calling on the new government to take up that challenge and commit to the following asks.

Reform parental leave to promote equality at home and work

Our [research](#) with the Centre for Progressive Policy (CPP) and Women in Data found that countries that offer six weeks of well-paid paternity leave have a smaller gender pay gap and labour force participation gap. This could have huge benefits for our economy. The CPP found that closing the gender employment gap across the UK would increase economic output by £23 billion. The report also found that increasing paternity leave would likely have huge benefits for the mental and physical health of both parents, reducing the burden on the NHS. We want

the incoming government to introduce a new parental leave system that enables the equal distribution of care at home and supports the return of mothers to work.

Accounting for the period that is for physical recovery from childbirth, a reformed parental leave system should seek parity between mothers and fathers as much as possible. Paternity leave entitlement should be non-transferable and ring-fenced for use by dads and partners. To incentivise uptake and ensure that mothers are supported to return to work, all leave should be taken in the first year. Our modelling with the CPP estimates that the cost to deliver this new entitlement for all working dads and partners at National Living Wage is between £1bn and £1.6bn.

A new parental leave system	
For mums	For dads and partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 weeks of maternity leave paid at 90% of salary, with at least six of those weeks taken immediately after the birth or adoption of the child • Access to a further 27 weeks of shared parental leave paid at national living wage • An additional 13 weeks of unpaid shared parental leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 weeks of paternity leave paid at 90% of salary • Access to a further 27 weeks of shared parental leave paid at national living wage • An additional 13 weeks of unpaid shared parental leave

We’re also calling on the new government to build a parental leave system that works for all types of families. Parental leave entitlements should be extended to self-employed and adoptive parents. Currently self-employed fathers have no statutory support to care for their new child and support their partner’s return to work. All working parents should have access to parental leave and pay.

It should also create an option for single parents to nominate a ‘caring partner’ such as a grandparent or other relative that would be eligible for the equivalent paternity leave entitlements so that single parents, the majority of whom are women, are supported to return to work.

Bring all parental leave pay in line with the national living wage

Our research also found that financial hardship was forcing parents to cut short their parental leave with wide-ranging consequences for parents, children and our public services.¹⁹

More than four in ten (43%) dads and partners who did not take their full parental leave entitlement said that the low statutory pay was their reason for cutting their leave short. Among mothers that figure is higher with 54% saying it was the main reason for not taking their full parental leave entitlement. The statutory rate of pay for parental leave is £172.48 per week or 90% of your average weekly earnings. A survey of new parents carried out by YouGov on behalf of PTS and CPP found that just 18% of parents could afford to take six weeks at that rate of pay.

We also found that 17% suffered a new mental health problem within the first two years of having a child. Among this group, it was the lowest earners that were more likely to be affected with 36% earning less than £10,000 per year. Perinatal mental health problems cost the NHS £1.2bn a year and the social costs are estimated to be in excess of £8bn per year. Increasing all parental leave pay will reduce these impacts and incentivise take-up of leave among fathers.

Reasonable adjustments for parents of disabled children

We know that the motherhood penalty is even more severe for parents who have a child with a disability or a child with special educational needs. A lack of support for children with a disability and a lack of legislation to protect this group from discrimination, compounds this issue.

According to the Papworth Trust it costs three times as much to raise a child with a disability as it does to raise a non-disabled child.²⁰ The Family Fund found that 9 in 10 families who are raising a child with a disability are struggling, and falling behind on their household bills²¹ while research by Contact showed that 61% of parents with a disabled child said they or their partner had given up paid work due to caring responsibilities with 33% quitting paid work due to childcare issues.²² The impacts of this are also gendered. A third of parents with a disabled child are single parents, a group that is predominantly made up of mothers.²³

We are calling on the new government to amend the Equality Act (2010) to allow for reasonable adjustments to be made for parents who have a child with a disability so that they can be supported to work in a way that suits the greater care needs of their child.

Flexible Working

Flex fairness

- Parents on low incomes are twice as likely to have a flexible working request rejected. But when their request is approved, they are a third less likely to quit their job to manage childcare and 25% less likely to fall into debt²⁴
- Rejecting flexible working requests costs employers £2bn a year in staff absence and turnover²⁵
- 66% of organisations believe that advertising flexible working options is important in attracting talent and addressing skills shortages²⁶
- The number of people who have left their profession in the last year due to lack of flexible working has increased by a third²⁷
- 58% of over 55s considering a return to the workforce cited ‘flexible working hours’ as the most important aspect of any new job²⁸

Overview

Our flexible working laws do not go far enough to support employees in managing their work and home lives. As estimated 2.2 million employees are unable to make flexible working requests²⁹ while 86% of mothers reported experiencing discrimination when they did request flexibility³⁰. More than half (58%) of the workforce had no access to flexible working, increasing to 64% for people in working-class jobs.³¹

This impacts workforce participation, particularly among parents, disabled people and older workers, and, consequently, has an impact on economic output. A 2023 global review of working time practices by the International Labour Organisation found that where employees were not able to work the hours that suited them, productivity was lower.³²

Expanding flexible working rights would also mean employers can recruit from a wider and more diverse pool of workers. When global insurance firm Zurich advertised all jobs as flexible by default it saw a 20% increase in the number of women applying for management roles and a 33% increase in the number of women hired for senior roles.³³

We recognise the recent Employment Relations Bill as a welcome opportunity to improve access to flexible working but we call on the new government to build on this and go further in its reform of working time practices.

Extend flexible working legislation

We welcome prior commitments to introduce a day one right to request flexible working, but this will not be enough to give employees the flexibility and certainty they need.

Current laws place an onus on employees to make the case for flexible working while giving employers a wide range of 'business case' reasons to veto their request. Negative workplace attitudes can mean that employees don't feel able to make their request for flexibility and when they do the same negative attitudes can mean it's likely to be rejected. Further research by the TUC found that two in five mothers did not request the flexible working they needed for fear of being discriminated against.³⁴

We are calling on the new government to implement an advertising duty which would require employers to list flexible working options in job adverts, unless they have a good business reason not to do so. Every job ad would include details of the potential flexible working arrangements available in that role and the successful candidate would then have the right to take up those flexible working arrangements from their first day on the job.

To support better work-life balance, extended flexible working legislation should follow the example set by France and Ireland and provide a right to disconnect from work communications outside of working hours. We are calling on the new Government to consult on this within their first 100 days in office. Research by Ipsos found that 6 in 10 employees support a legal right to disconnect.³⁵ For parents who are usually managing caring responsibilities, the pressure to respond to work-related emails while looking after children is an unreasonable imposition on their time. Given that caring responsibilities usually fall on mothers, the right to disconnect is likely to be of most benefit to working mums.

The Right to Disconnect refers to the right of employees to disconnect from their work and to not receive or answer any work-related emails, calls, or messages outside of their normal working hours. According to the Irish government, it hinges on three key principles:

1. "The right of an employee to not routinely perform work outside normal working hours"
2. "The right not to be penalised for refusing to attend to work matters outside of normal working hours"

3. “The duty to respect another person’s Right to Disconnect (e.g., by not routinely emailing or calling outside normal working hours”¹

“Normal” working hours may be different for different roles and different workers – for example many mothers benefit from being able to work outside typical “office” hours, while being unavailable for calls or emails at other times of the day. The “Right to Disconnect” should be about expectations being fair and boundaries being respected.

Trial the four-day-week

A shorter working week is good for the economy, it's good for gender equality and it's good for the environment.³⁶ We want the new government to be ambitious and innovative in its approach to how we work in modern Britain. That’s why we’re calling for a national trial of the four-day working week.

The recent UK pilot conducted among 61 companies with 2,900 employees found that when dads worked a four-day week without loss of pay, they performed more than double the amount of childcare they had done on a five-day week.³⁷ Employees participating in the pilot were able to reduce their childcare costs by an average of 21%.³⁸

The four-day working week also boosts productivity with companies reporting increased revenue of 35% on average when compared to previous years. The number of staff leaving decreased by 57% during the trial.³⁹ Access to justice

Judge for yourself

- A government survey found that 33% of those who withdraw tribunal claims did so because it was too expensive, while 23% did so because of the stress it caused⁴⁰
- The backlog of Employment Tribunal cases has grown by 170% since 2017⁴²
- Our research found that 86% of women who signed an NDA felt they had no choice⁴¹
- 72% felt that signing an NDA had a negative impact on their mental health
- 78% felt that their employer had used NDAs routinely to hide wrongdoing
- 99% of women think the Government should take further action to prevent the misuse of NDAs

Access to justice

Overview

Employment law is not just about morality, it is also about stability - for workers and for the economy. It ensures decent work and clarity which in turn improves employee engagement and productivity. Part of growing the labour market is improving and protecting the experiences that we have when we participate in it. Upholding employment laws and ensuring justice is done is good for all of us.

The Motherhood Penalty is created by structures and systems that reinforce gender stereotypes about who performs care, paving the way for discrimination in the workplace and beyond. Our employment laws are designed to prevent that discrimination and when they don't, our tribunal system is there to provide restoration.

But for thousands of women subjected to pregnancy and maternity discrimination, justice is as far out of reach as a good night's sleep. It is the preserve of those who have the money, energy and time to pursue it. For pregnant women and new mothers, there are often as many barriers to justice as there are to employment. We want the new government to commit to removing those barriers.

Extend the time limit to raise a tribunal claim from three months to six months

Since 2015, Pregnant Then Screwed has been campaigning for an extension to the time limit to bring a tribunal claim. In 2017 we tabled an Early Day Motion with the support of 103 MPs from across the house.⁴³ As the law stands, from the point at which you have been subjected to any kind of workplace discrimination you have three months less one day to raise a tribunal claim. For women who have experienced maternity discrimination, those three months usually coincide with the final exhausting stretch of pregnancy or the even more exhausting early days of motherhood.

Furthermore, bringing a claim to employment tribunal is incredibly stressful. The tribunal experience coupled with the experience of being discriminated against places undue pressure on pregnant women and new mothers, and in the case of high-risk pregnancies, it also endangers the health of the unborn baby. Bringing a claim within this time is an unreasonable expectation of discrimination victims and is one of the reasons why less than 1% raise a claim.⁴⁴ We're calling on the new government to adopt previous recommendations by the Law Commission to extend the time limit for bringing a claim to at least six months.⁴⁵

Remove tribunal costs for victims of pregnancy and maternity discrimination

In employment tribunals individuals generally pay their own legal costs. This has allowed workers to bring cases without the threat of being financially ruined if they are unsuccessful. However, where a claim is particularly complex it can result in high legal fees, making it unaffordable for a new mother, particularly if she is on statutory maternity pay.

Justice should not be the preserve of those who can afford it. That's why we are calling on the new government to remove tribunal costs for employees where an employer is found to have discriminated against them. This could be done by applying the personal injury claim model used in the civil courts. In effect this would mean that if an employer was found to have broken the law they would be required to pay the employee's legal costs. If the claim was unsuccessful the current system of no costs would stand.

Make NDA's unenforceable in cases of bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination

Justice may be blind, but she is also gagged. Non-disclosure agreements, originally used to protect corporate knowledge and products, have increasingly been weaponised by unscrupulous employers against victims of discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment.

The women we support - often dealing with the challenges of new motherhood - tell us they feel they have no choice but to accept a token settlement and capitulate to the pressure to sign an NDA. Our research shows the toll this takes on a victim's mental health, often resulting in self-blame for 'allowing' her employer to 'get away with it'.

The misuse of NDAs has become an epidemic in our labour market and only serves to conceal and reinforce toxic organisational cultures. We are calling on the new government to make NDA's unenforceable in cases of alleged bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination.

Case Study: I became ill soon after the birth of my child and could not face the prospect of fighting my case

"I was working as a patient's services manager with five years' experience of NHS

strategic management. One of the consultant surgeons spotted my engagement ring and told me that I was not to have a baby. I found out I was pregnant a few years later. During advanced pregnancy I found myself in the position of having to reapply for my own job and was unsuccessful.

As a consequence of stress and the hormone imbalances of childbirth, I became ill soon after the birth of my child and could not face the prospect of fighting my case. Once I started to feel mentally and physically well again, it was too late. I have never worked in the NHS since.”

About Pregnant Then Screwed

Pregnant Then Screwed is the UK's leading charity working to end the motherhood penalty

Our Vision

A society where care is valued and in which pregnant women and mothers in all their diversity are enabled to fulfill their potential; creating a stronger, happier, better future for us all.

Our Mission

We are the voice of working mothers in the UK. We have a strong and deep connection with our beneficiaries. We provide world-class advice and support to mothers to help them improve their confidence and wellbeing, to give them the tools they need to challenge discrimination in the workplace and to support them to find work that works for them. We advocate for change and raise awareness of the specific challenges faced by working mothers. We challenge deeply entrenched stereotypes about the role of mothers in society. We work with employers, politicians, women and men to make change happen. We publish compelling research to educate, inform and lead the debate.

For more information about the asks contained in this manifesto contact Lauren Fabianski lauren@pregnantthenscrewed.com

Endnotes

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