

Evaluation of Shared Parental Leave and Pay scheme

Qualitative workplace case study research

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a qualitative study on the motivations, barriers and perceived effects of the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (SPL) policies on employers and employees in a range of workplaces. Interviews took place between August 2019 and February 2020.

The research adopted a qualitative case study design, using in-depth interviews. Case studies were based in workplaces who either had staff who had taken up SPL or had no staff who had taken it up. Six case studies were conducted in total, five at workplaces with take up of SPL and one at a workplace without take up. All workplaces were large employers in both the private and public sector. Three were female-dominated (more than 60 per cent female employees) and three were male-dominated (more than 60 per cent male employees).

A total of 19 in-depth interviews were conducted with senior managers (N=6), line managers (N=4) and employees (N=9) across the six case studies. Six male and three female employees were interviewed. Length of SPL taken ranged from two weeks to six months and it was taken in continuous and discontinuous blocks. The employee who took Maternity Leave instead of SPL took nine months' leave. Interviews were either conducted face-to-face at participants' workplaces or by phone. Interviews took place between August 2019 and February 2020.

Views and attitudes towards parental leave and pay policies

In terms of their views and attitudes towards shared parental leave, participating workplaces fell into three categories: supportive, receptive and hesitant. These categories take into account workplace culture, parental leave policies and practices and staff members' attitudes and take up of shared parental leave:

- In **supportive workplaces**, staff at all levels were highly supportive of men and women sharing parenting roles and leave, and senior managers saw the positives of SPL as outweighing negatives. They offered enhanced ShPP including a period of full pay (16-18 weeks) to encourage take up.
- **Receptive workplaces'** senior leadership were also supportive of SPL, but they voiced concerns about financial costs of take up. Other staff had mixed views about gender roles in parenting, with traditional views still common among some older or male employees. Workplace policies varied from statutory ShPP to enhanced ShPP with 24 weeks' full pay
- Senior leadership at **hesitant workplaces** were supportive of the idea of SPL, but in reality were more comfortable with women taking time off to care for a new child and were not familiar with men wanting to do this. The negatives of SPL were seen as outweighing the positives, due to financial costs and the challenges of covering workload over leave periods. Therefore, statutory ShPP was offered without any enhancements.

Understanding parental leave and pay policies

Participants understood that the government had introduced SPL to improve gender equality and to enhance work-life balance. These aims were widely supported by participants and employers aspired to achieve these aims in their workplaces. However, it was also widely felt across staff roles and workplaces that the policy was complicated and difficult to understand in

terms of how SPL and ShPP worked alongside Maternity and/or Paternity Leave and Pay and how to co-ordinate SPL when parents worked at two different organisations (among other things).

Workplace SPL and ShPP policies were designed in a way that managers felt was fair to employees but also affordable for the organisation. When employers offered enhanced ShPP, reasons included a desire to attract and retain staff and a perception that it was fair to offer enhanced ShPP alongside enhanced Maternity Pay. However, promotion of workplace SPL policies was limited (though this was described as typical of policy dissemination more generally). ‘Supportive’ workplaces had done some promotional work with employees, but other types of workplaces (‘receptive’ and ‘hesitant’) had not actively promoted SPL.

Decision making and take up

Across workplaces, take up of SPL was described as low. An exception to this was a workplace that saw an increase in take up following a policy update to include enhanced pay.

When making decisions about taking parental leave, employees consulted their partners and employers, but had little discussion with wider family, friends or colleagues. Discussions with partners happened earlier and for longer among employees who shared SPL in more equal portions or took SPL for Adoption Leave than those who took Maternity Leave or who shared parental leave less equally.

Employees considered which type of leave to take and then, if taking SPL, what pattern of leave each parent should take (such as discontinuous or continuous and consecutive or simultaneous). Four key factors influenced employees’ decision making: work-life balance, finances, approach to parenting, and workplace culture. Work-life balance was driven by the desire to balance time spent with children and time spent away from work. For employees who felt finances were important, access to enhanced ShPP was described as “crucial”. Approach to parenting influenced the length and type of leave taken: employees with a desire to share parenting responsibilities equally with their partner took SPL and split it equally with their partners. Finally, employees considered whether or not SPL was “the norm” in their workplace. Where this was not the case, employees took shorter periods of SPL or opted for Maternity Leave instead.

Employees’ decisions were informed by a combination of these factors rather than any one single factor. The ways in which these factors intersected varied for each employee depending on their family’s needs and circumstances and on their (and their partner’s) workplace contexts. For example, the desire to spend time with children could be in direct competition with the need to maintain an income, which made decision making less straightforward. A female employee in a same-sex relationship noted that, while she wanted to spend time with their new arrival, she was the primary earner in her household and her family could not lose such a large part of their income.

Senior managers and line managers observed similar factors at play in the decision making of their staff. They also offered additional insights on the influence of workplace culture and norms and ease of finding cover on decision making. For example, it was noted that some roles were more difficult to cover than others and that employees were often aware of this.

Requesting and approving leave

Leave requests were handled primarily by line managers and HR departments. The request process consisted of formal to less formal discussions about leave types, leave periods and cover arrangements, and written notifications of leave decisions. Employers were aware

continuous blocks could not be refused. While they wanted to accommodate employees' preferences, discontinuous blocks were considered harder to manage organisationally as they were potentially more disruptive to staff resourcing arrangements.

Positive experiences of request and approval among employees were shaped by supportive, approachable and knowledgeable employers, simple and clear application processes and policies, and perceptions of equal treatment of adoptive parents. Employees' experiences were less positive when employers were less approachable and had a weaker command of the policy, when policies and paperwork were unclear or complex, and when employees experienced inconsistencies in the communication of approved leave.

Experiences of parental leave

SPL offered employees the flexibility to spend more quality time with their new arrival, to share parental responsibilities equally and to change the pace of their return to work according to family commitments. This was most notable among existing parents who contrasted SPL with other parental leave.

Three key elements of parental leave were discussed with employees.

- **Preparing to take parental leave:** some roles (e.g. teaching) required additional preparation, such as additional lesson plans, to minimise disruption to colleagues. Others (e.g. administrative roles) could more easily pause or be covered.
- **Being on SPL:** experiences exceeded employees' expectations. Fathers taking SPL felt that it was more rewarding despite being harder work than expected. Secondary caregivers, in adoptive parenting and same-sex couples, valued being able to spend longer with and bond with the new arrival than they would have otherwise.
- **Returning to work:** positive experiences were characterised by supportive measures being put in place such as phased return to work, KiT days,¹ handover periods with cover staff and support facilitating breastfeeding. Negative experiences included pressure to return to work sooner than wanted, unrealistic workloads on return to work and the need to adjust to changes made to employees' roles.

Employers who felt their support had led to smoother transitions back to work had used KiT days, flexible working arrangements and handovers with cover staff. Where employers felt they had not managed the return to work as effectively, a lack of staff resources and line manager training were thought to have created workload pressure and inconsistencies in how returning staff were supported.

Reflections on how the policies work

The experience of sharing parental leave was thought to have prompted a more shared approach to parenting, both during the leave period and afterwards, with parents continuing to share parenting responsibilities more equally. This was the case among parents who split SPL more and less equally and for opposite- and same-sex couples. Male employees in particular

¹ Women on Maternity Leave have access to 10 Keep in Touch (KiT) days whilst they are on Maternity Leave. For SPL, each parent has access to up to 20 Shared Parental Leave in Touch (SPLiT) Days. KiT and SPLiT days are days parents can work without bringing their parental leave to an end. KiT and SPLiT days are permissive, which means they can only be used if the employer and employee both agree to the employee working on those days (i.e. an employer cannot force an individual to work and vice versa). Employees in this study did not distinguish between KiT and SPLiT days, so we use KiT days to refer to any agreed working day taken whilst on parental leave.

felt better prepared for parenting and gained new perspectives on work-life balance, prioritising children over work.

Employees did not perceive any negative career impacts following SPL. Female employees did, however, note that returning to work was less challenging after a shorter period of leave. Employees also felt positive about being able to set an example for their colleagues in terms of how SPL could be used.

By contrast, employers noted a range of positives and negatives of having staff on leave. The positives included opportunities to develop and learn for cover staff, the new perspectives that cover staff could bring to a role and a perceived positive impact on the morale of staff who had taken leave. Negatives included the temporary skills gap while cover staff are being trained, the cost of finding and training cover staff and lower productivity whilst cover staff and their colleagues adjust to new arrangements.

Improving take up

Employees and employers from across the workplace types identified ('supportive', 'receptive' and 'hesitant'), felt that SPL policies were effective but there was room for improvement. Suggested changes illuminated three key ways that take up of SPL could be improved.

- **Awareness and understanding** varied greatly between workplaces and members of staff. Supportive workplaces that actively promoted SPL saw the highest take up, which suggests that other workplaces could improve take up if they too promoted the policy. Targeted promotion could also help in male-dominated workplaces or sectors.
- Better **guidance and support**, particularly where there are sector-specific challenges to facilitating shorter and discontinuous leave periods. Workplaces may benefit from seeing cover for SPL modelled by similar workplaces and employees could find it helpful to see examples of how SPL works for employees with similar personal circumstances.
- Offering **enhanced ShPP** to facilitate take up. Employees reported that lack of enhanced ShPP either prevented them from taking SPL or limited the length of leave they could take. Promoting the positive reported effects of SPL among employers, such as to staff morale, wellbeing, productivity, recruitment and retention, may be helpful in demonstrating the benefits compared with costs of offering enhanced pay.

1 Introduction

This report presents findings from a qualitative study on the motivations, barriers and perceived effects of the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (SPL) on employers and employees in a range of workplaces.

This research was carried out by NatCen Social Research on behalf of the Department for Business and Trade. Using a qualitative case study approach, it explores employers' and employees' views and experiences of these parental leave policies and contributes to the evidence base on the effectiveness of these policies.

Background to the policies

In 2011, the introduction of Additional Paternity Leave (APL) enabled fathers to take between two and 26 weeks of leave, of which 19 could be paid. This leave could be taken only after the mother had returned to work. Take up of the policy was low; less than one per cent of eligible fathers took APL in the first year.² Qualitative research has shown that the low rate of statutory pay, perceived workplace resistance, concerns about career impact, and gendered expectations around parenting roles all acted as barriers to use of the policy.³

Having committed in the 2010 Coalition Agreement to encouraging “shared parenting from the earliest stages of pregnancy – including the promotion of a system of flexible parental leave”, the UK Coalition Government introduced Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP) in 2014, taking effect in Spring 2015.⁴ The new policy had a number of aims: to encourage the father's role in caring during early childhood; to improve flexibility for both parents; to promote women's participation and progression within the workplace; and to contribute to closing the gender pay gap.⁵ Using SPL, parents can share up to 50 weeks of leave, of which 37 can be paid, taking their leave separately or together, in one go or in multiple 'blocks' (see Box 1 for detail).

Box 1. Shared Parental Leave

Since 2015, birth parents, adoptive parents and Parental Order parents⁶ have been eligible for Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and Statutory Shared Parental Pay (ShPP). Using the Shared Parental Leave and Pay scheme, mothers can take or commit to taking less than their full entitlement to 52 weeks of Maternity Leave and 39 weeks of Statutory Maternity Pay if they wish and share the remainder of their maternity entitlements (up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay) with the child's father or their partner.

² Trades Union Congress (2013). Just one in 172 fathers taking Additional Paternity Leave. London: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/just-one-172-fathers-takingadditional-paternity-leave>.

³ G. Kaufman (2018). [Barriers to equality: Why British fathers do not use parental leave](#). Community, Work, & Family. See also: M. O'Brien and K. Twamley (2017) [Fathers taking leave alone in the UK – A gift exchange between mother and father?](#) Life Course Research and Social Policies, Springer Open.

⁴ UK Government (2010). [The Coalition: our programme for government](#).

⁵ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (2013). [Modern workplaces: Shared parental leave and pay administration consultation – impact assessment](#), London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

⁶ Parental Order parents are individuals who have a child through a surrogacy arrangement who are eligible for and intend to apply for a Parental Order. A Parental Order makes an individual the legal parent of their child within six months of birth. Parents of surrogate children need to be eligible for a PO to qualify for Shared Parental Leave and Pay.

ShPP is paid at 90% of the parent's average weekly earnings or the statutory flat rate (£156.66 a week in October 2022), whichever is lower. The same principles apply to individuals who qualify for Adoption Leave and Pay.

ShPP is paid by the employer, who can 'claim' at least 92% of the cost of this back from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). SPL and ShPP can be taken by both parents at once or separately and fathers/partners can take SPL and ShPP whilst the mother is still on Maternity Leave. SPL can be taken in a single block or in up to three separate blocks (more if the employer allows) of at least one week.

Parents who wish to use the Shared Parental Leave and Pay scheme need to meet certain qualifying criteria (see 'What does the legislation say?' on pages 19-20 for further information). It is important to understand the main barriers to the use of paternal leave generally, and SPL in particular. Although research on SPL remains relatively limited, some consistent themes emerge from the wider literature.

There are **financial barriers** for fathers looking to take parental leave. Although Statutory Maternity Pay and ShPP are set at the same rate, there are two reasons why the rate of ShPP can be an obstacle for families. Firstly, ShPP is often not enhanced by employers with 'extra-statutory' top-ups⁷ in the same way as Maternity Leave is, meaning that if mothers transfer onto SPL the enhanced Maternity Pay is lost.⁸ Qualitative research indicates that extra-statutory payments can 'normalise' taking parental leave and their absence can make fathers feel that leave is not officially endorsed by their employer.⁹ Secondly, fathers are more likely to be the main earners in opposite-sex couples, meaning that most families would take a financial hit by taking advantage of SPL even when extra-statutory top-ups are equal. These factors are consistent with international evidence which shows that higher remuneration rates of parental leave are associated with higher take up rates by fathers, and that unpaid parental leave is used far less frequently than paid parental leave.¹⁰

In addition to rates of remuneration, there are features of the **policy design** that are thought to act as barriers to take up. Firstly, qualitative evidence suggests that some parents find the policy difficult to understand, experiencing the added flexibility as complexity.¹¹ Secondly, the policy makes the mother the owner of the leave; for the father to take SPL, the mother must first submit paperwork to her organisation so that they can 'deduct' leave and 'donate' it to their partner as SPL. Qualitative research suggests that this way of framing the policy encourages so-called 'maternal gatekeeping' behaviour, in which mothers are protective of their leave entitlements.¹² Thirdly, many families are ineligible for SPL

Some **employers** make take up of SPL more likely than others. Qualitative evidence suggests there is a lack of knowledge of the policy amongst Human Resources (HR) departments and line managers. Workplaces typically do not tend to promote SPL internally, meaning that if parents are not independently aware of the policy then by the time they approach their HR

⁷ This is when employers add to statutory parental pay with an earnings-related rate of pay, such as full or half pay for a defined period of time.

⁸ Swan (2016). [Shared parental leave: The perspective from employers January 2016](#). Working Families.

⁹ Koslowski, A. & Kadar-Satat, G. (2019). [Fathers at work: explaining the gaps between entitlement to leave policies and uptake](#), Community, Work & Family, 22:2, 129-145.

¹⁰ . Karu and D-G. Tremblay (2018). [Fathers on parental leave: An analysis of rights and take up in 29 countries](#). Community, Work and Family.

¹¹ Birkett, H. & Forbes, S (2019). [Where's dad? Exploring the low take up of inclusive parenting policies in the UK](#), Policy Studies, 40:2, 205-224.

¹² Ibid.

department they are likely to already have made decisions about leave.¹³ Workplace culture can make an important difference: more traditional attitudes about paternal involvement in domestic and childcare duties amongst co-workers can be a significant barrier, and are more prevalent amongst non-professionals. Parents who work in female-dominated workplaces or sectors are more likely to take leave, and female managers (or managers who have personally taken parental leave) are more supportive of fathers taking leave than male managers (or managers who have never taken parental leave).¹⁴ Men who work in large private sector firms or in the public sector are more likely to take parental leave, and men working in manufacturing and construction have been found to be least likely. There is some qualitative evidence that negative employer attitudes, or perceptions of negative employer attitudes, can play a role: fathers often believe taking leave sends the message that they are not committed to their jobs.¹⁵ The most common concern about SPL amongst employers relates to the option for parents to take discontinuous blocks of leave, although this is rarely taken.¹⁶

More broadly, traditional assumptions about **gender roles** are persistent and inhibit take up. There is qualitative evidence that both parents can feel an obligation to meet societal expectations, which portray a ‘good mother’ as one who is physically present whilst a ‘good father’ is one who provides for his family.¹⁷ In particular, mothers face significant external pressure to breastfeed for as long as possible and parental leave makes this easier.¹⁸ In addition, qualitative research suggests that mothers continue to be regarded as the primary ‘owners’ of parental leave, even when it is available to both parents.¹⁹ The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey confirms this: although the majority of people think that parental leave should be shared, 40 per cent feel that the mother should take most of the leave, compared to 34 per cent who think the leave should be equally shared (although attitudes are becoming more progressive).²⁰ BSA data confirms that attitudes to parental leave are consistent with wider views about gender roles and work, with people tending to believe that certain occupations are more suitable for either men or women.

In addition to external pressure on parents to conform to societal expectations, evidence suggests that these norms can be internalised, with both mothers and fathers engaging in **‘gatekeeping’ behaviours** to protect their gendered role. Women often want to take their full maternity entitlements,²¹ although this form of gatekeeping is more common amongst women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and middle-class women who earn significantly less than their partners, whereas professional women are more likely to actively encourage paternal participation. For their part, fathers who hold more traditional views around parental responsibilities often feel it is not their role to make decisions about leave and instead defer to the mother. Qualitative research suggests that fathers are also more likely to express concern about the impact of taking leave on their career development.²²

¹³ Birkett, H. & Forbes, S (2019).

¹⁴ R. N. Pettigrew (2014). [Parental leave use by male employees: Corporate culture, managerial attitudes & employees’ perceptions](#). The University of Manitoba.

¹⁵ Brandth, B. and Kvande, E. (2018). [Fathers’ sense of entitlement to ear-marked shared parental leave](#). The Sociological Review.

¹⁶ Swan, J. (2016).

¹⁷ Birkett, H. & Forbes, S (2019).

¹⁸ Diez-Sampedro, A., Flowers, M., Olenick, M., Maltseva, T. & Valdes, G. (2019). Women’s Choice Regarding Breastfeeding and Its Effect on Well-Being. *Nursing for Women’s Health*, 22:5, 383-389.

¹⁹ Brandth, B. and Kvande, E. (2018).

²⁰ Curtice, J., Clery, E., Perry, J., Phillips M. and Rahim, N. (eds.) (2019). [British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report](#), London: The National Centre for Social Research.

²¹ My Family Care, and Women’s Business Council (2016). [Shared Parental Leave: Where are we now?](#) London.

²² Birkett, H. & Forbes, S (2019).

Research aims

The overarching aim of this study is to develop a better understanding of the effectiveness of recent reforms to family-related leave policies among employees and employers in Britain. With this aim, this research gathers detailed qualitative evidence on the motivations, barriers, enablers and perceived effects of Shared Parental Leave and Pay (SPL) on employers and employees. The findings of this study will support the Department for Business and Trade's wider evaluation activity and evidence base for labour market policy reform around family-related leave.

The objectives of the research are to:

- Examine in detail the contexts, processes, and motivations that facilitate or discourage employers from offering, and employees from taking up SPL.
- Explore the experiences of, and impacts on, employers and employees of requesting and using SPL.
- Gather views on how well organisations' policies on SPL are working.
- Gather evidence on levels of awareness of the SPL policy reforms.

Research methods

The study adopted a qualitative case study design, using in-depth interviews lasting up to 75 minutes. A total of 19 in-depth interviews were conducted with senior managers, line managers and employees across six different workplaces, either face-to-face at participants' workplaces or by phone. Interviews took place between August 2019 and February 2020.

A purposive approach was used to design the case study sample of six achieved case studies. The sample was drawn from participants of the Management and Wellbeing Practices Survey (MWPS) who consented to take part in further research for the Department for Business and Trade. The fieldwork for MWPS was completed in early 2019 and the consenting sample was subsequently provided to NatCen by the Department for Business and Trade. From this sample frame, six workplaces were recruited: five workplaces employing staff who had taken up SPL and one organisation with no take up of the policies.

The sample was intended to achieve a mix of sectors, workplace sizes, and ratios of male and female employees. However, challenges in recruiting case study organisations led to only large employers agreeing to take part, less diversity in sector than intended and the recruitment of only one workplace in which no staff members had taken up SPL. Many of the organisations approached for the research, but particularly smaller organisations, found it difficult to dedicate time to identifying and organising interviews with qualifying staff and to release staff to participate in in-depth interviews. These were also key barriers to participating for workplaces in sectors where work is predominantly site-based rather than office-based. The findings should be interpreted with these limitations in mind. A breakdown of the sample is given in Table 1 below. Each interviewee received a £20 gift voucher as thanks for their participation.

Table 1.1 Case study sample

ID	Take up of SPL?	Workplace sector	Workplace gender-balance	Workplace size	Number of staff interviewed
1	Yes	Utility company	Male-dominated	Extra-large 5,000+	2
2	Yes	Information and communication	Male-dominated	Very large 1,000-4,999	4
3	Yes	Higher Education	Male-dominated	Very large 1,000-4,999	2
4	Yes	Higher Education	Female-dominated	Extra-large 5,000+	6
5	Yes	Local authority	Female-dominated	Extra-large 5,000+	2
6	No	Further Education	Female-dominated	Large Less than 1,000	3

The total of 19 in-depth interviews spanned six case studies, with 2-6 participating staff members per organisation. The case studies used a matched case design in which line managers of participating employees were interviewed in order to capture different perspectives of the same cases. Senior staff comprised HR managers and senior personnel with responsibility for HR issues and workplace policies. The sample was designed with the intention of achieving a gender mix. Appendix Table A1 shows the characteristics of individual participants for each case study.

Topic guides, designed in collaboration with the Department for Business and Trade, were used to guide interview discussions. The themes covered for both included:

- Contextual information about role, time in organisation.
- Understanding of SPL regulations and reforms.
- Organisation’s policies on SPL.
- Employee take up of SPL, including motivations, barriers, enablers.
- Perceived effects of take up on employees and employers.
- Concluding thoughts.

The data was analysed using NatCen’s Framework approach which allows in-depth exploration of the data by case and by theme.²³

²³ Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nichols, C.M. and Ormston, R. (2014). *Qualitative Research in Practice*. Sage: London. (2nd Edition).

Reporting conventions

The report avoids giving numerical findings, since qualitative research cannot support numerical analysis. This is because purposive sampling seeks to achieve range and diversity among sample members rather than to build a statistically representative sample and because the questioning methods used are designed to explore issues in depth within individual contexts rather than to generate data that can be analysed statistically. What qualitative research does do is to provide in-depth insight into the range of experiences, views and suggestions. Wider inference can be drawn on these bases rather than on the basis of prevalence.

Verbatim quotations and case illustrations are used to illuminate the findings. They are labelled to indicate participant gender, parental leave policy taken, workplace sector, workplace size and workplace gender ratio. Further information is not given in order to protect the anonymity of research participants, and for this purpose case illustrations contain pseudonyms instead of participants' real names. Quotes and case illustrations are drawn from across the sample.

Structure of the report

The findings from the research are presented in the following chapters:

Chapter 2: Understanding and views of parental leave and pay policies

Chapter 3: Decision making and take up

Chapter 4: Requesting and approving leave

Chapter 5: Experiences of parental leave

Chapter 6: Reflections on how the policies work

Chapter 7: Conclusions

2 Understanding and views of Shared Parental Leave and Pay

This chapter explores employers' and employees' attitudes towards Shared Parental Leave (SPL). It then examines participants' understanding of both statutory and workplace policies for SPL and Shared Parental Pay (ShPP), along with views on how SPL and ShPP policies are accessed and promoted within participating workplaces.

Key findings

A typology emerged around workplace culture and practice towards shared parental leave and of staff members' attitudes towards the principle of parents sharing leave. In this way, participating workplaces fell into three categories: supportive, receptive and hesitant.

Participants were aware that the government had introduced SPL in order to promote gender equality and to enhance work-life balance. The aims of the policy were widely supported by participants and employers aspired to achieve these aims in their workplaces.

While the aims of the policy were well-understood, the view that the mechanisms of the policy were complicated and difficult to understand was widespread across workplaces and among staff in different roles.

Overall, promotion of workplace SPL policies was limited, though this was described as typical of policy dissemination more generally. Workplaces that were more supportive of SPL had done some promotional work with employees. Other workplaces had not actively promoted SPL. This was sometimes due to employers finding SPL policy complex and difficult to explain.

Workforce benefits (e.g. attracting and retaining staff, staff morale), fairness and affordability shaped the design of workplace SPL and ShPP policies. When employers offered enhanced ShPP, reasons included a desire to attract and retain staff and a perception that it was fair to offer enhanced ShPP alongside enhanced Maternity Pay.

Workplace culture and attitudes towards Shared Parental Leave

This section sets out a typology of three different groups of workplaces around their culture and practice around shared parental leave. As explored in subsequent sections of this chapter and report, these groupings were connected with the design, promotion and take up of workplace SPL policies.

Across the sample of participating workplaces, senior managers aspired to being progressive workplaces with full gender equality. However, workplace attitudes, culture and practice towards sharing parental leave varied and fell into one of three types: supportive, receptive and hesitant.

Supportive

Key characteristics: staff at all levels highly supportive of men and women sharing parenting roles and leave; senior managers view positives of SPL as outweighing negatives

Parental leave and pay offer: SPL with enhanced ShPP including a period of full pay (16-18 weeks)

Promotion of policies: Some promotion of organisational policies

Take up: Higher take up levels

These workplaces were fully supportive of workplace policies that promote equality in gender and parenting roles. This was evident in staff members' accounts of their workplace culture, their own attitudes towards Shared Parental Leave and employees' chosen parental leave patterns. For example, an employee believed SPL supported gender equality in parenting roles as well as women's career progression and pay. In these workplaces, progressive views were reflected in the SPL policy, which included enhanced ShPP.

Senior managers and line managers noted a number of organisational and other benefits such as attracting and retaining staff, tackling the stigma attached to men taking family leave, and enabling families to bond. These benefits were felt to outweigh the potential negatives, such as the need to reorganise staff workloads to cover responsibilities of leave-takers during their period of absence. It should however be noted that in these organisations take up of SPL was less disruptive because work could be paused and resumed without the need to arrange cover.

Access to enhanced pay, alongside strong support for gender equality, meant that employees in these workplaces shared leave more equally than employees in other workplaces. Male employees took longer periods of leave (ranging from several weeks to several months), and female employees took shorter periods of six months or less. Adoptive parents chose to take SPL instead of Adoption Leave as it offered greater flexibility and enables joint adopters to share leave and pay entitlements more equally between them.

Case illustration 2.1: Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4

Sue,²⁴ an HR partner, felt that her workplace took a flexible and accommodating approach to SPL: they conducted interviews to better understand employees' views and experiences of SPL and they improved their SPL and ShPP offer to encourage take up.

Line manager, Joe, described the importance of supporting staff in preparing to take leave and returning to work, so that the employee gets the type of leave that they want and do not worry about taking time off.

The employee interviewed was Josh a male lecturer in an opposite-sex relationship. He took the longest period of leave of the male employees in this study: six months. His partner also took six months off. Josh cited progressive views on gender as a key motivator for this:

²⁴ This name is a pseudonym, as are all others used in case illustrations throughout the report.

“Both my partner and I are quite motivated about gender equality and we see [SPL] as one of the ways that we can enact that in our own lives for our own benefits but also potentially as a demonstration to others that it can be done, and it works... We're critical of standard gender roles and critical of just very basic things like household tasks and division of them.”

Receptive

Key characteristics

Attitudes: Senior leadership supportive of SPL but somewhat concerned about financial costs of employees taking it; mixed views about gender roles in parenting among staff with traditional views still common among some older or male employees

Parental leave and pay offer: Ranged from statutory SPL and ShPP to enhanced ShPP with 24 weeks' full pay

Promotion of policies: None

Take up: Low

Workplaces in this group were receptive of SPL overall but had contrasting characteristics, some more supportive of the policy than others. For example, generous ShPP enhancement was counterbalanced by more mixed support for the policy among senior management and employees compared with that in fully supportive workplaces.

Attitudes within workplaces in this category could also vary. For example, senior managers and line managers described some colleagues, particularly older males and male workers in manual roles, as holding more traditional views about gendered parenting roles. This observation was reflected by participating male employees who had taken SPL and noted that their views about gender equality in parenting were not always shared by colleagues.

Furthermore, positivity towards SPL was not consistently reflected in managements' attitudes. While participating employees' SPL requests were accepted, it was felt that requests for more time off might not have been well-received. In addition, in a local authority where enhanced ShPP was offered, the senior manager indicated that if take up increased, negatives (such as costs and the difficulty of arranging staff cover) would start to outweigh the positives:

“Although we don't, yes, we don't have an issue with people taking it. I guess I don't see we want lots of people to start taking it. I don't see why you would want to encourage it. I don't see what would be in it for the organisation. It's not to say in any way we're negative about it.” (Female senior manager, local authority, female-dominated extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

In contrast, staff interviewed at an information and communications company described strong support for SPL amongst management that was not reflected among employees. The senior manager reported that leadership viewed SPL as positive for employees and were committed to enabling new parents to take SPL if they wanted to do so, which was reflected in their enhanced ShPP offer of 24 weeks' full pay. However, this view was not reflected amongst the wider workforce: the senior manager described take up was nonetheless low and felt that, in a predominantly male workplace, staff perceived family-related leave as an inconvenience.

Case illustration 2.2: local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5

Bridget, a senior HR officer, felt her workplace was family-friendly as they supported parents who needed to work flexibly. However, while she felt that SPL had positives, she was concerned that if take up increased the negatives would outweigh the positives.

John, a male employee who had taken six weeks of SPL, said that while his immediate line manager and colleagues had been fully supportive, other colleagues were less understanding and had teased him about taking leave:

“There are a lot of people that's been here a long time, and there are a lot of very old-fashioned views, is probably the polite way to put it. There's a lot of jokey, 'Wife's job to bring up the kids. You should be out working. Why are you taking time off?’” (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

Hesitant

Key characteristics

Attitudes: Senior leadership supportive of idea of SPL but more comfortable with women taking time off to care for a new child and not familiar with men wanting to do this. Negatives of SPL seen as outweighing positives, particularly regarding financial costs and the compatibility of shared leave patterns with resource and workload management. Employees cite multiple barriers to take up.

Parental leave offer: Statutory SPL and ShPP

Promotion of policy: None

Take up: None

Workplace culture in this category was supportive of family-friendly employment practices, such as Maternity Leave or part-time hours, but this had historically focused on supporting mothers rather than fathers. It was seen as the norm for women to take Maternity Leave after having a child; in contrast, the workplace was unaccustomed to men and women taking shorter periods of leave, possibly in discontinuous blocks. Taking Maternity Leave was perceived as not optional for female employees, whereas taking parental leave was perceived as optional for men. For example, a line manager, who was male, expressed discomfort with the idea of taking a period of SPL himself:

“From my point of view, from a, in my role, I think taking that period of time off, I wouldn't - this is just personally - I wouldn't necessarily feel all that comfortable...” (Male line manager, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

Employees felt that management would be supportive if a man were to request SPL, but that other barriers took precedence such as reduction in pay and a lack of understanding of the logistics of coordinating leave. This was reflected by an employee, who took Maternity Leave rather than SPL. She stated that she and her husband would have taken SPL, but they

decided against it due to its complexity, the reduction in pay, and because she was wary of being the first person in her workplace to take it.

“In all honesty, it [SPL] sounded complicated. I couldn’t understand how my employer would communicate with my husband’s employer to cooperate to make that work. Also, finances seemed complicated... I assumed that it would mean we’d miss out financially... I get my enhanced maternity, so I didn’t want to lose that [...] I think if this was ten, 15 years down the line and I’d seen a few people do it prior to me, then I would’ve been much more intrigued by it. But it’s always scary, isn’t it, being the first one to try something different, not knowing how it’ll pan out.” (Female employee, Maternity Leave, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

Managers shared concerns about the logistical complexity of the policy and felt that this outweighed the benefits of SPL. A senior manager of a Further Education college for example, described the difficulty of covering a teaching post for a period of leave that was shorter than a teaching term. This barrier was compounded by the perception that SPL was complicated to understand and deliver.

Case illustration 2.3: Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6

Workplace 6 is a sixth form college with mostly female staff but no take up of SPL. Interviewees felt their workplace had always been very supportive of family-friendly employment practices, but this had historically focused on supporting mothers rather than fathers.

Senior manager Sandra felt that nobody had taken SPL because *“nobody understands it”*. She also thought that, because the college paid statutory ShPP, this presented a barrier to staff taking it up.

Janine is a teacher at the college who recently took nine months’ Maternity Leave. She agreed that, while her employer was supportive of her taking a long period of time off for Maternity Leave, if she had wanted to split leave with her partner this would have been challenging in terms of arranging cover and family finances. She also found the policy complex.

Understanding of government policy

Employees, line managers and senior managers were asked about their understanding of statutory entitlements and eligibility for SPL and ShPP. They were also asked to share their views of why the government had introduced these reforms.

Understanding of statutory entitlement and eligibility

What does the legislation say?

Amount of leave: Parents are entitled to share up to 50 weeks of leave between them. Mothers must take at least two weeks of Maternity Leave immediately following birth. This means that they cannot start their SPL until the start of the third week after birth at the

earliest. Fathers can choose to start SPL from the birth of their child, but if they do this they lose their Paternity Leave entitlement. In practice, this means that fathers are unlikely to start their SPL any earlier than the start of the third week after birth.

Amount of pay: Statutory ShPP of £156.66 per week is available for 37 weeks; any further SPL taken is unpaid.²⁵

Eligibility and qualifying conditions for SPL

Parents wishing to take SPL must meet conditions of the “continuity of employment test”. To meet this test and qualify for SPL, employees must have been continuously employed for 26 weeks by the same employer leading up to the ‘qualifying week’.²⁶

In addition, employees must still be employed by the same employer in the week before any period of SPL is due to start. They must also share the main responsibility for the care of the child that the SPL relates to with the other parent at the date of the child’s birth or placement for adoption.

Finally, for an employee to qualify for SPL, their partner (with whom they will share parenting responsibilities) must also meet an “employment and earnings test”. To meet this test, the other parent must have been an employed or self-employed earner in Great Britain for a total 26 weeks (not necessarily continuously) in the period of 66 weeks leading up to the week in which the child is due (or matched for adoption). This also must have earned an average of £30 a week in 13 of those 26 weeks (not necessarily continuously).

Eligibility and qualifying conditions for Statutory ShPP

In order to qualify for ShPP, an employee must meet the qualifying requirements for SPL and have a partner who meets the employment and earnings test. They also must not have earned less than the lower earnings limit (currently £120 per week) in the relevant period. This is usually the 8 weeks leading up to the qualifying week, which is the same as for SPL (described above).

Senior managers, line managers and employees across different workplaces stated that they found SPL complicated and therefore difficult to understand. The main principle of the policy was well understood – that two parents are entitled to share leave between them – but confidence in the details, particularly around leave and pay entitlements, varied by staff role.

Senior managers from across participating workplaces were familiar with the legislation and aware of the entitlements and eligibility criteria. However, they were at times unable to recall precise details such as the weekly statutory ShPP offer without referring to their written policy.

“I have to read it every time I want to explain it to someone because it is complex and difficult.” (Female senior manager, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

²⁵ Figure taken from gov.uk in May 2020.

²⁶ The ‘qualifying week’ depends on the parenting context. For birth parents, it is the 15th week before the week their baby is due to be born. For adoptive parents, it is the week the adopter is matched with a child for adoption. For a Parental Order Parent in a surrogacy arrangement, it is the same as birth parents: the 15th week before the week the baby is due.

Line managers and employees were unsure about SPL and ShPP criteria and offered different interpretations for how much leave and pay parents were entitled to. For instance, a line manager was confused about whether parents could take SPL simultaneously (they can). Employees' interpretations of statutory leave entitlements also varied, ranging from six months' leave to 50 weeks. For instance, an employee thought parents could share up to six months between them, when the statutory entitlement is 50 weeks. It seems possible that confusion arose because line managers and employees were conflating the total statutory leave entitlement (50 weeks) with how long ShPP is paid for (37 weeks). Furthermore, employees were unable to recall details about eligibility criteria because they already met them and did not need a detailed understanding of them when making a leave request.

"I couldn't really get my head around [eligibility] because there was no problem with eligibility for us. It just wasn't a problem." (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

Understanding of the policy aims

Senior managers, line managers and employees from across participating workplaces were asked for their views on why the government had introduced SPL. Participants fell into two groups: those who had thought about it and expressed views and those who had not thought about it and did not express an opinion.

Participants who articulated their views on the government policy were from workplaces with supportive and receptive attitudes towards SPL (as identified in the workplace typology outlined earlier in this chapter). They perceived three key aims:

- **To benefit family life and children:** SPL aims to give parents more flexibility and choice, enabling parents to share childcare responsibilities more equally. This in turn could improve family life as parents can choose to raise their children in a way that suits them, which for opposite-sex couples could mean encouraging a stronger bond between father and child.
- **To increase gender equality:** SPL has the potential to tackle gender inequality in the workplace by enabling opposite-sex couples to share time off for childcare more equally and therefore reduce negative career impacts for women.
- **To help same-sex couples:** by introducing SPL, the government made it possible for same-sex couples to access and share parental leave. This was noted by senior managers rather than employees or line managers, perhaps because staff in senior roles have greater oversight of the effects of the policy across the workplace.

Participants who reported not having thought about the policy aims came from workplaces with receptive (but mixed) and hesitant attitudes towards the policy. This suggests there could be a relationship between workplace culture and staff engagement with the policy.

Workplace policies

Each workplace had produced its own SPL and ShPP policy, which was either based entirely on statutory requirements or included additional enhancements. This section explores the nature and understanding of these policies, the rationale behind the policies, and how the policies were promoted and disseminated.

Nature and understanding of workplace SPL policies

Table A2 in the Appendix of this report provides a summary of the leave and pay policies offered by each of the participating workplaces. No policies offered more leave than the 50 weeks enshrined in the statutory policy. There was more variation with regards to pay, workplaces either offered statutory ShPP or went further and offered a period of full pay, followed in some cases by a period of statutory plus half pay. One employer offered a choice between half pay plus statutory ShPP for 12 weeks' or one third of pay plus statutory ShPP for 20 weeks while another stipulated that in order to qualify for enhanced ShPP, leave had to be taken in the first six months after the child was born or adopted.

To access statutory SPL and ShPP, a person must have worked for their employer for 41 weeks. Eligibility for enhanced ShPP was similar across participating workplaces that offered it: employees should have worked for their employer for at least 52 weeks prior to the birth or adoption of the child. The exception to this was Workplace 4 a Higher Education institution whose employees were eligible for enhanced ShPP from day one of employment.

As with understanding of the government statutory offer, degree of understanding of workplace policies varied by role: senior managers were familiar with their workplace policy (albeit needing to check written document for some details), while line managers and employees were less confident in their understanding and were at times confused about the difference between statutory and workplace entitlements, and SPL and Maternity Leave and Pay policies.

“I think it's clear, but the confusion arises from the fact that they think because they're sharing parental leave, they should be getting the same enhanced Maternity Pay as what, example, a mother would get or their partner would get... but that's our policy more than the actual legislation.” (Male senior manager, utility company, male-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1)

Developing a workplace policy

There were two key processes for senior managers when developing their workplace policy: internal and external. The combination of internal and external processes was determined by standard HR practices, which varied at each participating workplace. Internal processes included an HR staff member or team drafting the policy with sign-off from more senior staff or developing the policy with the help of a 'working group' of employees, trade union representatives and other non-HR colleagues. When workplaces sought external input, this included benchmarking the workplace offer against what similar organisations offered their staff or adopting a policy wholesale from an external sector association.

Rationale for the design of workplace policies

Employers took a range of factors into account when designing their workplace policies. Workplaces with policies based on the statutory requirements had two main motivators: compliance with the law and fairness. Senior managers at these workplaces stated that, as long as company policy followed government requirements, that was sufficient. In addition, it was considered unfair to have enhanced SPL pay when Maternity and Paternity Leave were not enhanced – although conversely, it was not considered unfair to offer enhanced Maternity Pay but not enhanced ShPP.

Employers who offered enhanced ShPP were motivated by two main factors: workforce benefits and affordability. Senior managers reported offering family-friendly benefits to motivate, recruit and retain staff. They believed that staff valued employers that promoted

policies designed to improve staff wellbeing and enhance their family life. However, these benefits were balanced with what was affordable. Senior managers designed enhanced ShPP policies in a way that balanced the perceived benefits to employers and employees (happy and motivated staff) and perceived drawbacks (financial cost).

Promotion of workplace policies

Within workplaces that were supportive of SPL policies, there was some active promotion of workplace policies to staff, which appeared to be limited in scope. The senior manager from workplace 3 said they had recently promoted SPL via an optional training course, open to all staff, about their family-friendly employment policies (she did not comment on how many staff had attended the course or whether it was a one-off). This senior manager also said that when a woman became pregnant, she would usually sit down with HR to discuss her options, at which point she would be told about SPL. However, this approach did not consider how men, same-sex couples, or those who adopt would find out about the policy.

Across workplaces that were receptive and hesitant about shared parental leave, senior managers reported that their workplaces did not actively or regularly promote their SPL policies. This was considered the norm: HR did not promote or encourage use of any particular workplace policy. One explanation for this was that it was unnecessary to promote any policy since all staff knew that the workplace policies could be found on the staff intranet. However, another explanation was that the SPL policy was very complex and difficult to explain.

“I think the complexity is the big thing that probably puts managers off trying to push it or promote it because you just think, oh God, don’t want to go there.”
(Female senior manager, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

These workplaces had not offered any training courses specifically about SPL. One reason given for this was that there were too many policies to provide a separate training course about each one, as this would be too time-consuming.

Across all workplace types, there was some ad-hoc promotion of SPL policies when the workplace offer changed or was updated, with information circulated by email. However, senior managers perceived that these emails were not read by most staff.

Line managers and employees from across workplace types commented that SPL was not actively promoted at their workplace and that there was low awareness of its existence among their colleagues.

Making changes over time

Since the introduction of SPL in 2015, senior managers reported three approaches to reviewing and changing their policies:

- **Substantial changes informed by employee feedback.** A workplace that was supportive of shared parental leave had reviewed its SPL policy to make it more generous in response to lobbying from staff. They improved their ShPP offer to include a period of enhanced pay and altered the terms of the policy so that, if both parents were employees of the same workplace, they were each entitled to a period of full pay rather than having to share it. This change was motivated by fairness and a desire to attract and retain good staff.

- **Small changes to improve clarity.** Workplaces across all three types reported having reviewed their policies and had made small changes. These centred around improving clarity as the policy documents were found to be complicated and confusing. These employers did not change the terms of their SPL policies, either because they believed their policy was sufficient or because they felt unable to go further due to financial constraints.
- **No review process.** A workplace that was receptive to SPL had not reviewed or changed its policy, because the policy was perceived by senior management as already clear and easy to use. However, this view contrasted with the experiences of the participating employee, who found the workplace policy difficult to understand and overly complicated.

3 Decision making and take up

This chapter begins by presenting employers' views on the take up of Shared Parental Leave (SPL). It then explores employees' decision making around opting for SPL (or deciding not to) and around patterns of leave. Finally, the chapter discusses managers' perspectives of the factors influencing take up.

Key findings

Across workplaces, take up of SPL was described as low. An exception to this was a workplace that had seen an increase in take up following a policy update to include enhanced pay.

When making decisions about taking parental leave, employees consulted their partners and employers, but had little discussion with wider family, friends or colleagues.

Employees who shared parental leave in more equal portions or took SPL for Adoption Leave reported having earlier and longer discussions with their partners about childcare, work commitments and finances than those who took Maternity Leave or who shared parental leave less equally.

Factors influencing decisions centred around work-life balance, finances, approach to parenting and workplace culture. Employees' decisions were informed by a combination of these factors rather than any one single factor. The ways in which these factors intersected varied for each employee depending on their family's needs and circumstances and on their workplace contexts.

Senior managers and line managers echoed the information given by employees about the factors influencing their parental leave choices. Employers did however offer additional insights on the influence of workplace culture and norms and ease of finding cover on decision making.

Take up across workplaces

In 2013, the government estimated that take up of shared parental leave and pay would be between two and eight per cent of all eligible parents.²⁷ In this study, take up was highest at a female-dominated Higher Education (HE) institution with over 15,000 employees: over a twelve-month period in 2018-19, approximately 20 per cent of those eligible for SPL took it up. Take up then increased in the latter part of 2019 as the university enhanced their pay policy in line with other universities. By contrast, a second HE institution that was male-dominated and employed approximately 3,500 employees reported that less than eight per cent of those eligible took up SPL. Workplaces in other sectors (IT and communications, local authority, utility company) reported levels of take up as less than five per cent.

²⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/110692/13-651-modern-workplaces-shared-parental-leave-and-pay-impact-assessment2.pdf

Employees' decision making when taking parental leave

This section reports the decision-making processes that parents went through when considering different parental leave options, including SPL, Maternity Leave and Adoption Leave. It explores key factors that influenced their decision making as well as facilitators and barriers for taking SPL.

Decision-making processes

Employees had conversations with their partners, their line managers, and HR staff as part of the decision-making process. Employees also consulted workplace policy information available online. Discussions with wider family, colleagues or friends was not something that employees of this study reported.

Discussions with partners

Employees' discussions with partners were either described as a joint process or as being led by one partner (typically the woman in opposite-sex relationships). It was not always easy for employees to recall details of these conversations, such as when they occurred or who initiated the conversation. This was particularly true when it was considered a mutual understanding that needed little discussion. The view that the decision was mutual was expressed by employees who took Maternity Leave, male employees who took SPL in shorter periods of six weeks or less so their partners (the mother) could take several months off, and employees who split SPL 50:50. In these cases, employees reported that they agreed with their partner about the best parental leave option for their family.

"I think it was a mutual decision. We were both aware of it, and it was just one of those decisions, that it was a logical thing for us to do. It just meant that my wife got the time that she wanted, I got time that I wanted, and it balanced out as much as we possibly could." (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

Employees who adopted children and took SPL could more readily recall details and reported having earlier and longer discussions with their partners. As there was no medical need for one parent to have time off due to childbirth, these employees reported discussing both parents' preferences for childcare, work patterns, work commitments, and finances. They described having discussions with their partners at least three months before the baby was due to be adopted.

Discussions with employers

Employees reported that discussions with HR centred around procedures for requesting leave, whereas conversations with line managers were focused on agreeing patterns of leave. These types of discussions tended to occur when employees had already decided with their partner what type of leave they wanted to take. These discussions are explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

When employees required advice to assist their decision, they reported proactively arranging meetings with HR or using resources on their workplace intranet. HR were able to provide guidance around leave entitlements and pay options available, which directly informed employees' decisions. When employees did not actively seek one-to-one advice, it was not proactively offered by HR.

Factors underpinning decision making

Four key factors emerged as having informed employees' decisions: work-life balance over the period of leave, finances and access to enhancements, approach to parenting, and workplace culture. The prominence of these factors varied for each employee and depended on family circumstances rather than workplace context, as each family had different needs for time spent with children, level of income and time off work.

Work-life balance over the period of leave

Decision making around work-life balance during the period of leave was driven by a) how much time was spent with the new arrival and b) how much time was spent away from work.

Male and female employees across participating workplaces reported wanting to spend time with their new born children in order to bond. Participating mothers took SPL or Maternity Leave for 16 weeks or more and cited wanting to spend time with their new born child as a motivator. Fathers reported similar motivations but, as fathers tended to take less time off, this view was held amongst those who took a block of SPL lasting six weeks or more. When these fathers took SPL for their second child, following Paternity Leave for their first child, they reported feeling they had missed out previously and wanted a different experience this time. Regardless of the gender of the employee, parents who took SPL when they adopted a child reported spending time with their child as a strong motivator for taking a longer period of leave.

Alongside wanting to spend time with their children, employees also considered the length of their career breaks when making decisions. For example, regardless of the length of leave, female employees who took SPL described a desire to get back to their careers. They noted two reasons for this: they enjoyed their jobs so did not want a substantial break from work; and their role at work was not easily replaceable so their projects could not continue in their absence. Male employees cited similar reasons for not taking SPL for longer than a few weeks. For opposite-sex couples, partners' careers were noted as a consideration for male employees who took SPL. Regardless of length of leave, male employees who took SPL did so in part to enable their female partners to go back to work sooner than if they had taken Maternity Leave.

Finances and access to enhanced parental leave pay

When considering finances, employees fell into one of two groups. The first group reported finances as a primary factor in their decision making. The second cited access to enhanced pay as a direct facilitator or barrier.

Employees who considered finances a primary factor reported a range of reasons for this, including the enhanced pay options available and their wider family circumstances. For employees who took SPL and stated that finances were a primary factor, the ability to receive full pay through enhanced ShPP was described as "crucial." This was particularly true when employees' household income largely depended on one salary. When employees were the main wage earner and they took SPL, they reported only taking SPL for the amount of time that their employer offered enhanced ShPP at full pay.

"If there was no shared parental pay, we could not afford to actually just live with my wife's salary or just part of my salary, so it was crucial." (Male employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 3).

Lack of enhanced ShPP could therefore present a barrier to taking SPL. For example, the employee who took Maternity Leave did not have access to enhanced ShPP but had access to enhanced Maternity Pay (see below case illustration for more detail). By contrast a male employee in Higher Education had not originally considered SPL an option. This changed when his workplace updated their policy to include enhanced pay during his partner's pregnancy; he changed his mind and took SPL in addition to Paternity Leave because he was able to get more time off at full pay.

“Well, to be honest with you we hadn't really planned to take it in the first place. It wasn't until they enhanced our entitlements that I thought oh, do you know what, this actually is not going to impact us or have any negative effect financially. Then it seemed to work for us. So, when initially my daughter was born we hadn't planned for... I think I'd mentioned it as kind of almost a joke and my wife was like, 'Yes, not a chance.' Then things worked out in terms of she could go back to work. She ideally liked to go back to work for a certain period just to carry out a certain task, so it just fell into place really.” (Male employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Case illustration 3.1: female employee, Maternity Leave, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6

Jo is a female employee in an opposite-sex relationship who took Maternity Leave. She works part-time in a Further Education setting with an annual salary of approximately £16,000, whereas her husband Martin works in the private sector with an annual salary of approximately £64,000. Whilst Jo had access to enhanced Maternity Pay, neither Jo or Martin's employers offered enhanced ShPP. Consequently, if Jo or her husband had taken SPL, their household incomes would have substantially reduced, so it made little financial sense for Jo to choose SPL over Maternity Leave.

Approach to parenting

As noted above, a key reason for taking SPL was employees' desire to spend time at home with their new arrival. Therefore, taking the parental leave option that facilitated the family's desired approach to childcare and parenting was a key factor. Employees described two different parenting approaches: a more traditional approach, with the mother spending the longer period at home; and a more progressive approach, splitting the leave more equally between parents.

Among those who took a more traditional approach, male employees reported wanting to spend more than two weeks' Paternity Leave at home but to still allow their female partners to have at least six months off. Female employees who were interviewed reported wanting to enable their partners to spend more time at home without losing out themselves. SPL was considered an effective way to facilitate this, and the additional pay fathers received through ShPP was viewed as a positive enhancement.

Employees who took a more progressive approach split time off at home more equally between both parents. For employees who took SPL for adoption, including an employee in a same-sex relationship, this was partly a consequence of there being no medical need for either parent to stay at home, and partly due to their already non-traditional family context. By contrast, employees in opposite-sex relationships who took this approach voiced a strong intention to model non-traditional, equal parenting responsibilities shared between mother and father.

Workplace culture

A view consistently shared among employees working in the utility company, information and communication, and Further Education sectors, was that taking SPL was not “the norm”. This was particularly true for male employees in operational and management roles.

Case illustration 3.2: male employee, SPL, utility company, male-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1

Bradley is a male employee in an opposite-sex relationship who took SPL. He works full-time at a utility company as an operational manager, which involves working on different sites. His wife Anna also works at the same company in an office-based role. Their household income is split fairly equally between them: Bradley earns approximately £46,000 and Anna approximately £41,000.

Bradley took two weeks’ Paternity Leave and two weeks’ SPL, which he reported feeling very positive about. He would have liked to have taken longer, such as a two-month block. However, he noted that it wasn’t “the norm” in operational businesses. He therefore felt it was not feasible for his workplace to cover his role for this length of time and stated that this feeling prevented him from asking for a more substantial block of leave.

Workplace culture at the partner’s employer was also a factor. For example, for the female employee who took Maternity Leave, it was the norm at her workplace (a Sixth Form college) for mothers to take one year’s Maternity Leave rather than SPL. In addition, it was considered very unusual for men to take SPL at her partner’s workplace. In combination, these attitudes deterred her from taking SPL.

“I just don’t think it fits with the culture of being a man or the culture of working in sales for you to take any sort of extended period of time off work, whereas a female teacher taking a year off after she’s had a baby, completely the norm, completely expected that that’s what you would do” (Female employee, Maternity Leave, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

How factors interact

Across the sample, employees’ accounts demonstrated the complex interaction between the factors discussed above. Although one factor may have been a primary concern, as described above, employees also noted the desire to maintain a balance between spending enough time with children, maintaining sufficient income and taking an appropriate length of time off work.

The desire to spend time with children could be in direct competition with the need to maintain an income, which made decision making less straightforward. This was true for employees whose household income was generated predominantly by one earner and for employees who earned a similar income to their partners, resulting in different decisions depending on family context. For example, a female employee in a same-sex relationship was the primary earner in her household. She took a shorter period of leave (16 weeks) than her partner as she would receive enhanced ShPP at full pay for that period. She noted that, while she wanted to spend time with their child, her family could not lose such a large part of their income. Similar views were expressed by a male employee in an opposite-sex relationship who earned a similar amount of money to his wife and took three months’ SPL as he received enhanced ShPP at full pay for that period.

When finances were cited as less important, this was due to the overriding importance of other factors such as parenting approach and workplace culture. For example, a male employee in a Higher Education setting felt strongly about taking a parenting approach that was informed by progressive ideologies about gender equality. For him and his partner, receiving enhanced ShPP was considered a bonus. This employee also had a similar salary to his partner, although the employee did not state this as a factor in the couple's decision making.

When workplace culture influenced decision making, employees expressed a sense of responsibility when it came to how their period of leave might be covered by their employer. This influenced decision making as employees chose a pattern of leave that suited their employers' needs as well as their own. For employees in Higher Education²⁸ whose role involved teaching, the timing of leave was a particularly important consideration. Employees dealt with this in one of two ways. The first was to request SPL for a duration that suited their own needs but during a time that was most convenient for their employer, such as over the summer holidays when no teaching cover would be required. The second was to choose a time that suited them but for a duration that made it easier for employers to cover the role, such as for six months.

"[I] would have loved to have taken two months out as a block but I don't think the business was really geared up, with the role that I have, I don't think it was geared up to do that." (Male employee, SPL, utility company, male dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1)

Employers' perceptions of factors affecting take up

Senior managers and line managers described a range of factors that they had observed as influencing take up in their workplaces. These factors reflected the reports of employees and included: organisational and cultural norms; ease of finding cover for employees taking leave; employees' finances; and employees' understanding of the policy.

Workplace culture and norms

Senior managers and line managers across workplaces described their workplace cultures as accommodating, flexible, and focused on promoting work-life balance. SPL was seen as part of this and managers encouraged employees to spend time with their family. Managers were aware that workplace culture and attitudes towards work-life balance and parenting roles could influence employees' feelings about taking SPL. Visibility was also described as important for encouraging take up of SPL. Senior managers suggested that when an employee takes SPL, others are more likely to take it.

However, they also acknowledged that there were exceptions, and this could influence employee decision making. For example, male-dominated departments or older male staff were perceived as holding views that contrasted with those of the wider workplace. Consequently, they could feel resentful towards colleagues having opportunities that were not available to them in the past.

"There's a lot around well-being. That's promoted a lot here. I suppose there's a tenuous link in there, making sure your family is okay, makes you feel okay... overall, people just see, you must say to yourself, that's a really nice company to work for, that supports its staff in some challenging times in life... You might get a

²⁸ Two out of the six case studies were in the Higher Education sector.

few individuals – older men who have been at the company for 40 years – who feel 'well, I didn't have the opportunity to do that when I had my child, so why should that person get it?' (Female line manager, information and communication, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 2)

Managers also acknowledged that more “traditional” views of parenting existed in the workplace. It was suggested that despite family-friendly workplace policies, it is often the expectation that the mother will be the primary care giver and the father will go back to work. Consequently, male employees could feel as if it is inappropriate to take SPL because it is taking advantage.

“They may feel they are pushing it... taking advantage of a new legislation and change in society” (Male line manager, Higher Education, female-dominated extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Ease of finding cover

Across sectors, senior managers and line managers reported that some roles were more difficult to cover than others, and that employees were aware of this. It was suggested that, when employees were aware of difficulties in finding cover, it influenced their decision making in terms of when they planned to take leave and for how long. This observation supports employees’ reports that they felt a sense of responsibility for covering their roles.

Managers acknowledged that, while finding cover for employees should not present a barrier, the employee’s role and the time of year they wanted to take leave could influence the type and length of leave they would be able to take without negatively impacting their work priorities and/or colleagues. Office-based roles with shared workloads were considered easier to cover than more senior or specialist roles and/or operational roles, which could present a barrier. For example, a line manager in Further Education noted that, for employees in senior roles such as head of department, it would not be practical to take short blocks of leave because there would not be enough support to cover the absence. Notably, at this workplace, no employees had taken SPL.

“It just wouldn't be feasible to just take, for the next one, to take two months off, three months off, to, and leave the department as it is because there just isn't enough support for people.” (Male line manager, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

In Higher Education settings, senior managers described resource management as the responsibility of the employee. Employees were encouraged to take leave at a time when it was most convenient for teaching so that cover was not required (such as over the summer). Employees’ descriptions of their decision making confirm that this was a significant factor in their parental leave requests.

Employees’ finances

Senior managers’ and line managers’ observations about the importance of employees’ finances were consistent with employees’ own descriptions of decision making reported above. Managers observed that SPL and ShPP could be financially challenging for employees. Splitting parental leave through SPL may not be financially feasible when only one partner has access to enhanced pay (either through enhanced Maternity Leave or enhanced ShPP). SPL and ShPP also may not make financial sense when one partner earned more than the other or

when an employer offered enhanced Maternity Leave and pay but only statutory SPL and ShPP.

“One of the barriers to this, is the fact that their partner could be getting enhanced Paternity Leave, and then if they move on to shared parental leave, they’ll be losing out on that enhanced Maternity Pay and only be getting statutory parental pay, shared parental pay.” (Male senior manager, utility company, male-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1)

Senior managers and line managers thought that their employees chose the parental leave option that was best for their families in terms of finances. Senior managers reported that those who took SPL tended to be those on higher salaries. For example, a senior manager in a Higher Education setting noted that employees on higher pay bands (e.g. academics, professional services, and HR staff) took SPL more often than employees on lower pay bands (e.g. administrative, manual, and clerical staff). Similarly, those who took SPL for Adoption also tended to be those on higher salaries.

However, senior managers and line managers did observe some variation in higher-paid employees’ final decision making. Higher earners’ decisions to take SPL were thought to depend on how willing they were to take the associated pay cut. For example, a senior manager in the utility company sector described how employees in high-paid manual roles, who were predominantly male, could be reluctant to go from a salary of £2,500-3,000 per month down to statutory ShPP.

Understanding of the policy

Across sectors, senior managers noted that there was a lack of awareness and lack of publicity of SPL in the workplace, which could negatively impact take up. In addition, senior managers noted that SPL was seen as complicated due to the flexibility built into the policy, so employees and line managers struggle to understand what will work best. Senior managers commented that the additional complexity of having to deal with another employer was a factor in the lack of promotion. However, when workplaces openly publicised their SPL policy and offered training, managers felt this had a positive effect on employees taking leave.

4 Requesting and approving leave

This chapter first describes the processes for requesting and approving shared parental leave (SPL) at participating workplaces before discussing key considerations for employers in approving leave requests. Experiences of the request and leave process are then explored from the perspective of employees.

Key findings

Leave requests were handled primarily by line managers and HR departments. The request process consisted of formal to less formal discussion of leave types, periods and cover arrangements and written notifications of leave decisions.

The sample included employees who took continuous and discontinuous leave. Employers were aware continuous blocks could not be refused. While they wanted to accommodate employees' preferences, discontinuous blocks were considered harder to manage organisationally.

Positive experiences of request and approval among employees were shaped by supportive, approachable and knowledgeable employers and simple and clear application processes and policies perceptions.

Conversely, less positive experiences concerned less approachable employers with a weaker command of the policy, unclear forms and policies, overly bureaucratic application processes and inconsistencies in the communication of approved leave.

Processes for requesting and approving leave

This section details the processes that senior managers, line managers and employees described for requesting and then approving chosen parental leave options.

Requesting leave

What does the legislation say?

To be eligible for SPL, the birth parent must pass the 'continuity of employment test'²⁹ and their partner must pass the 'employment and earnings test'³⁰.

They must provide their employer with a 'notice of entitlement' to take SPL and a 'period of leave notice' at least eight weeks before the intended leave period.

²⁹ To pass the 'continuity of employment test', the parent taking SPL needs to have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before their baby is due or their adoption match date. They must also still be working for the same employer at the start of each block of leave they take.

³⁰ Partners must have been employed or self-employed for at least 26 weeks in the 66 weeks before the week the child is due (for birth parents) or match date (for adopters). They also must have earned at least £30 a week on average for 13 of those weeks.

The notice of entitlement should set out how much leave both parents are entitled to take, the length and timing of the intended leave and signatures for both parents. The period of leave notice should specify when the employee will start and end the block of SPL that they wish to take.

Across participating workplaces, the process for requesting leave involved a combination of the following actions, though the sequencing of these steps varied between individuals:

- **Discussing leave options** with the HR department or line managers, in cases where leave decisions had not already been made. Finance departments were also consulted when financial considerations were important for employees. Employees who sought advice about their leave options approached their employers proactively.
- **Discussing leave intentions** with line managers or HR departments, where the type of leave to be taken had already been selected. These discussions involved first sharing news about the new arrival and discussing potential leave dates and patterns as well as the logistics of how cover could work.
- **Notifying employers in writing** through application forms and resource management systems. The purpose of this was to confirm eligibility for SPL, provide the necessary documentation, such as matching certificates for adoptive parents, to 'book' leave dates, and to provide an indication of the likelihood that leave arrangements might change.

Senior managers could not always recall the exact time periods required for employees to give notice for their leave. While some mentioned a minimum of eight weeks, others emphasised the need for sufficient time to organise cover.

Approving leave

What does the legislation say?

Qualifying employees have a statutory right to take SPL and to determine when they take their share of the leave.

An employee is entitled to submit up to 3 period of leave notifications. Where each notification relates to a single continuous block of one or more weeks of leave, and the employee meets the eligibility requirements for SPL, the employer must agree to the leave requested, providing that the employee has given at least 8 weeks' notice of when they will start their first period of SPL. This means that an employee can secure up to 3 separate blocks of leave by giving their employer 3 separate period of leave notifications.

Where an employee uses a single period of leave notice to 'book' more than one block of leave the employer can agree to this, suggest alternative dates or refuse to accept the notification. Where the employer refuses to accept the notification, detailed rules apply but essentially if the employer and employee cannot agree the default is that notification will be treated as a request for a single block of leave which will start on the first day of the first block of leave that the employee sought to 'book'.

Period of leave notices can be used to vary the dates for or amount of SPL previously booked, and parents can also vary the allocation of SPL between them by varying their original notice of entitlement.

The process for approving leave was led either by HR departments or by line managers. Irrespective of who led the approval process, the support or input of the other party was always drawn in for specific reasons, as discussed below.

Where the approval process was HR-led, HR took overall responsibility for handling, approving and confirming leave requests. Line managers were brought in to discuss specific patterns of leave and to approve discontinuous blocks in particular, which were described as potentially more disruptive to staff resourcing arrangements. Line managers were consulted in these scenarios as they were responsible for organising cover over the period of leave.

Where line managers took overall responsibility for the approval process, they reviewed applications, decided how to cover the period of absence and granted requests. A senior manager in one workplace explained,

“The manager would just manage it as any other type of leave request and make a decision about how to cover the period of absence.” (Female senior manager, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

Although they led on the whole process, line managers contacted HR for queries about parental leave policies and for support around more complex or unusual situations, such as when an adoptive parent wanted to take SPL. Additionally, line managers would contact HR if they had concerns around requests for discontinuous leave and required a discussion about whether this could be facilitated.

The research included one case study, a Further Education College, in which no staff had yet taken up or requested SPL and which was found to have a hesitant workplace culture towards SPL. Interestingly, the process for requesting and approving leave for this workplace appeared to be more formal than the other case studies in the sample. This may reflect the more hesitant attitudes towards SPL in this case study, though it should be noted that the process was in line with Acas good practice guidelines. The process involved leave being approved by senior management in conjunction with HR, rather than line managers. It involved two formal meetings; the first to discuss employees’ intentions for leave patterns and length, followed by a meeting to discuss employees’ decisions. Approval decisions would then be made by senior managers.

Considerations for employers in approving leave

The sample of employees in this study included those who took continuous blocks, and employees who opted for alternating blocks of leave. These leave requests appeared to have been agreed without any need for negotiation around the length or pattern of leave.

Employers acknowledged that requests for single blocks of leave must be approved as a statutory right. It appeared however that when considering leave requests employers were driven by the desire to accommodate employees’ wishes whilst also minimising disruption caused to resourcing and workload management.

Employers with supportive and receptive workplace cultures around shared parental leave said they aspired to accommodate **all** leave requests and to agree the leave pattern that most suited their employees, much like their approach to Maternity Leave.

“The assumption is that it's all approved and it all goes through. So, there's very little debate on this.” (Male senior manager, utility company, male-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1)

Caution was nonetheless expressed regarding discontinuous leave patterns, even among more supportive workplaces, who wanted to achieve mutually agreeable solutions, but felt there needed to be a strong rationale to justify this kind of leave.

“I’m not aware of any requests being refused, but it would be for a good reason e.g. an event the person needs to be there for” (Female senior manager, Higher Education, male-dominated, very-large employer, Workplace 3)

For the Further Education college mentioned above, approval for discontinuous leave would depend on whether cover could be arranged. It was explained that arranging cover in this setting would require either hiring externally or for internal staff to increase their hours. Finding cover for SPL was anticipated to be more challenging compared with Maternity Leave because the absence could be shorter and intermittent.

“If she was to say, ‘I’m going to go off on 3rd February and I’ll have two weeks and then I’m going to come and work for two weeks, and then I’m going to go off for two weeks and then I’ll come back’, which she’s perfectly entitled to do, we would take a deep breath and say, ‘oh my God, how on Earth are we going to do that?’ It’s just, we can’t get someone to cover the whole block of it because we only need them in for two weeks of it, so what do we do with the kids? How do we...? That is really difficult. Those sorts of questions we will ask ourselves when people ask for leave, can we accommodate it? What would we do if we can’t accommodate it? Do we have another solution that we could offer instead? That’s how we try and get round things.” (Female senior manager, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

Employees’ experiences of the request and approval process

Employees’ experiences of the request and approval process were shaped by how supportive and accommodating, informative, straightforward, fair and consistent they perceived the process and their employers to be. Both positive and negative experiences of these themes were found among workplaces that were grouped as supportive and receptive towards SPL³¹. This indicates that areas for improvement around the request and approval process were found even in workplaces that were most supportive of the policy.

Supportive and accommodating

Employees described positive experiences of the request and approval process when their employers and colleagues supported their choices and were willing to make adjustments to enable them to take leave.

Employees valued line managers who were positive, supportive and understanding in relation to their chosen leave arrangements and who gave employees the autonomy to make the best decision for them.

“My line manager more or less said to me, ‘Do what works for you. I’ll support any decision.’ So, I didn’t feel like I needed to consult with her at every step.” (Female

³¹ As workplaces grouped as hesitant had not experienced any requests to date, the hesitant group is not included here

employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

“So, from my perspective like I say, it was pretty plain sailing for me. There was no negativity. Everyone was quite positive about it.” (Male employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Employees also described feeling reassured where their colleagues’ showed support and willingness to make adjustments when they took leave. This was important because employees often felt responsible for their roles being covered, particularly when their roles involved teaching or more senior responsibilities.

A flexible and accommodating approach to the request process was also appreciated. For example, when an employee notified his employer of his intention to take SPL outside of the stipulated eight weeks’ notice, he praised the HR department for waiving the deadline and accommodating his request.

Employees who described a less supportive approach, particularly from HR, felt that requesting leave was more challenging. This was exacerbated when awareness of the policy in the workplace was limited (this is discussed further in the next section). Although this did not prevent employees in this study from requesting leave, it was considered a potential barrier for others.

Among employees who requested shorter leave periods, there was also a view that their employers’ willingness to accommodate SPL requests had a limit, and that their leave request may not have been seen positively if a longer leave period was requested. For example, a male employee working in an operational role for a male-dominated company noted that his employer was not accustomed to finding cover for long periods of staff absence and may find this challenging.

Informative

As discussed in Chapter 2, both employers and employees felt that the mechanisms of the SPL policy, such as pay and leave entitlements, could be complicated and difficult to understand, and that this was compounded by the need to navigate the policies of two different employers. Employees reported finding it difficult during the request process to work out the best arrangement for their family based on their workplace offer, and their partners’ offer.

“I think overall the policy and the concept of shared parental leave is not confusing, but the mechanics of how you make it work can be.” (Female employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Employers also highlighted the complexity of the SPL policy and of requests that combined two policies, such as SPL and Adoption Leave. For this reason, they described offering advice and guidance to both employees and line managers.

“[They’re] welcome to talk to HR because it's quite a complicated area” (Female senior manager, Higher Education, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 3)

In an extra-large workplace with higher take up levels relative to others in the sample, senior managers said that the HR department was often approached by employees wishing to

discuss their parental leave options and that employees could also draw on support from administrative staff in completing application forms.

While employees did not always need advice from HR or others, and consulted written information instead, the support offered through HR departments, when it was clear and informative, was highlighted as a particularly positive aspect of the request process.

Positive experiences centred on the willingness and availability of HR, as well as line managers, in talking through leave options and configurations and answering questions both in relation to policy details and application forms. Flexibility in being able to contact HR advisors both by email and in person when required was also valued.

There was however one experience of a HR department being unclear about how to go about operationalising the policy, though this was attributed by an understanding employee to it being the first time implementing the SPL policy for this workplace. In this case the employee took the lead in working out the policy, liaising with the two employers and ensuring they had the right information.

“They didn't have a clue about shared parental leave, but then nobody did back then. This is a couple of years ago, so they were open and honest about that. I didn't really understand shared parental leave; it was a bit of a minefield to all of us. But we figured it out together so there was stuff that they didn't know, but it's just because they hadn't been through it before. I'm sure the process is much smoother now. (Female, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Straightforward

A key influence on employees' experience of the request process was the extent to which it was perceived to be simple and straightforward. This included perceptions of the steps for requesting and granting leave, of written policies for SPL and of supporting documents, such as application forms. Interestingly, there were instances of different employees from the same organisation giving both similar and contrasting accounts of the same processes or documents. This suggests that experiences may be determined not only by the clarity of process and policies but also of employee interpretation and understanding.

Where experiences were positive, the process was considered simple and unbureaucratic. Employees who had positive experiences of the overall process came from workplaces with more supportive workplace cultures and attitudes towards SPL.

“[There was not] much fussing, there wasn't much bureaucracy which was great” (Male employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 3)

More negative experiences surrounded reportedly high levels of paperwork and bureaucracy, confusing application forms, complex and jargonistic workplace policies, and ambiguous approval or sign-off procedures. The complexity of participants' application forms was even more apparent in cases where their forms compared unfavourably with those of their partners', who were also in the process of applying for SPL from their respective employers.

“The paperwork was rubbish, if I'm honest, it had lots of unclear parts, it went back and forth several times” (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

“To actually apply was - it was really unclear. The actual thing is a very good idea, but it was very complicated to understand what you were allowed, what information you had to send in, and to actually apply was complicated” (Male employee, SPL, information and communication, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 2)

In one example, an employee opted to use the Acas form instead, which his employer then decided to adopt.

Employees of the same workplace reported that that the SPL policy was jargonistic, hard to understand and potentially off-putting. One participant had sought help from colleagues to understand the pay entitlements in the policy. The lack of clarity was in part attributed to the policy being new, and employees called for it to be reviewed and re-written in simple terms. In contrast, supporting information about SPL from the same workplace, including flow charts and employee case studies, were reported to be helpful in demonstrating the way in which the logistics of the policies could work.

Fair

Employees who were adopting a child reported positive experiences around the fairness of their workplace policies and of their treatment, which they felt was the same as for a biological parent. It was noted that, despite the presumed challenges associated with the shorter notice periods (seven days) for Adoption Leave, employers responded well to being notified suddenly of a match. These employees felt supported by their workplaces when managers accommodated their leave requests swiftly.

“They were quite aware that the moment that I received the matching certificate, I was sure they would allow me to enter into this parental leave as soon as I can.” (Male employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 3)

Consistent

Employees usually received written confirmation, by email or letter, from their HR departments to outline the dates and pay arrangements for their period of parental leave. Where employees in same workplace had different experiences of receiving written confirmation this caused anxiety about whether the leave had in fact been granted and it was felt that there should be greater consistency in sending written confirmations to staff.

5 Experiences of parental leave

This chapter contains two sections: experiences of employees taking Shared Parental Leave (SPL) and Maternity Leave; and experiences of line managers and senior managers whose staff took some form of parental leave.

Key findings

SPL offered employees flexibility to increase the quality of time spent with their children, to share parental responsibilities equally and to change the pace of their return to work according to family commitments. This was most notable among existing parents who contrasted SPL with other parental leave.

Experiences of taking SPL exceeded employees' expectations. Fathers taking SPL felt that it was more rewarding despite being harder work than expected. Secondary caregivers, in adoptive parenting and same-sex relationships, valued being able to spend longer with and bond with the new arrival than they would have otherwise.

In preparing to take parental leave, some roles (e.g. teaching) required preparation to minimise disruption compared with roles for which work could more easily pause and resume during and after the leave period or be executed by cover staff. Employees in some roles also felt greater pressure to work during their leave and to return to work sooner. These issues were considered part of the job and were not viewed negatively.

For employees, positive experiences of returning to work were characterised by supportive measures being put in place such as phased return to work, KiT days, handover periods with cover staff and support managing breastfeeding. Negative experiences included pressure to return to work sooner than wanted, unrealistic workloads on return to work and the need to adjust to changes made to employees' roles.

Employers who felt their support had led to smoother experiences of employees returning to work had used KiT days, flexible working arrangements and handovers with cover staff. Where they reported facilitating less positive experiences, a lack of staff resources and line manager training were thought to have created workload pressure and inconsistencies in how returning staff were managed.

Employees' experiences of taking parental leave

This section discusses employees' experiences of taking SPL and Maternity Leave. Three stages of leave are addressed: preparing to take leave, being on leave and returning to work. The section ends by exploring how the reality of taking leave compared with expectations.

Preparing to take leave

Participating employees' approach to preparing for leave fell into two groups: those who undertook advanced preparation and those who did not. This was determined by the nature of their roles and the support employees received from senior managers and line managers.

Employees who prepared in advance did so to ensure that their work would be covered with minimal disruption to their employers and colleagues. In educational settings (Higher and Further Education), employees acknowledged that leaving teaching-based roles could be challenging, due to the need to arrange cover, greater staffing pressures and disruption to students, and therefore required preparation that they in part felt responsible for. For those working in Higher Education, employees and senior managers considered this the employee's responsibility. These employees also reported feeling that it was not possible for their work to be paused or covered in their absence. They therefore prepared by changing their own teaching schedules, clustering teaching in one term, or by working unpaid overtime in advance of their leave to pre-record lectures for use in their absence.

“You can't just walk away.” (Female employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

When employees felt no responsibility to undertake advanced preparation, this was because employers took responsibility for arranging cover and the work could be easily executed by replacement staff. For example, one employee working in a Higher Education institution as a Project Coordinator, a non-teaching role, reported that it was relatively easy for his employer to put a contract out for his six months of SPL.

Being on parental leave

Employees discussed their experiences of parenting and how their chosen type of parental leave affected their work-life balance. Whether employees took SPL or Maternity Leave, employees largely reported positive experiences, as they found that their leave arrangements suited their needs and the needs of their families. These needs centred around time spent with children and the division of childcare responsibilities between parents.

As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the reasons employees took SPL was to enable both parents to spend time at home with their new arrival. Male employees in opposite-sex relationships found that taking SPL enabled them to spend more time with their child than Paternity Leave would have, and those in same-sex relationships found that SPL enabled both parents to share time spent with children. These employees reported several benefits of spending more time as a care giver, including building a strong bond with their child early in life and closely witnessing their child's key developments such as learning to crawl or speak. In comparison, the employee who took Maternity Leave did so because she wanted a more substantial amount of time at home. The reported benefits were similar to those who took SPL, including being able to pay full attention to the child.

With regards to division of childcare responsibilities, male employees appeared to take more away from their shared leave experience than female employees who took SPL or other forms of leave. Although their leave patterns varied greatly (from two weeks to six months), male employees gained from the ability to share childcare responsibilities such as feeding, which in turn set the precedent that childcare would be shared going forward.

“As a parent we try and share a lot of responsibility and I think that's the way we want to raise our children. For instance, it's not the mum who does all of one thing or the dad that does all of the other thing.” (Male employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

In contrast, female employees who breastfed felt that, while taking SPL enabled greater equality in sharing parenting tasks, gender equality did not extend easily to all responsibilities. For example, for some employees, feeding could not be easily shared between two parents.

Furthermore, the employee who took Maternity Leave was less satisfied with the division of childcare in her family. She felt that she and her husband were not equal partners in the parenting relationship because he was only able to spend time with the family on evenings and weekends.

When employees took SPL following the birth or adoption of a second child, they contrasted their experiences of SPL with previous experiences of Maternity/Paternity Leave or Adoption Leave. They felt they were better able to share the time spent with their second child compared with their first child. The comparative benefits of SPL included sharing responsibilities more equally, better supporting older children as they started school, spending more time together at home and being able to go out and do more things together as a family.

Case illustration 5.1: female employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4

Sarah is in a same-sex relationship with Zoe. They have two adopted children. When Sarah participated in this study, they had recently adopted a second child, Emma.

When adopting their first child, Sarah was only able to spend six weeks at home, whilst her partner was able to take almost one year of Adoption Leave. This was disappointing for Sarah, as Zoe was able to bond more closely with their first child. When adopting Emma, Sarah spent more time with her (16 weeks); most of this time was spent together as a family. This enabled Sarah to bond with Emma and it brought Sarah and Zoe closer together as parents.

“see [my second child] has an equal bond between both parents now, whereas [my first child] still has a stronger bond with [my partner] [...] being able to have that first 16 weeks with [my second child] myself was hugely, hugely important in terms of the bond and settling in and making me feel like an equal part of the parenting partnership. Completely invaluable [...] it's brought us closer, we're able to have that shared experience, whereas the first time round, I didn't have that [...] It was a completely different experience to the first time around”

Work-life balance

Male employees reported benefits included being completely free from work-based pressures and having the ability to follow parenting routines without simultaneously managing a work routine. At the same time, female employees found the ability to return to work after a shorter period of leave to be beneficial to their careers.

Employees in Higher Education settings described less of a work-life balance during the leave period. As noted in Chapter 2, employer expectations were different for employees in Higher Education. Consequently, employees in HE reported working during their leave. Employees described this as typical of working in HE and not unique to their situation and it was not always described negatively. However, there was a sense of pressure surrounding the need to work. For example, an employee described their work as ‘hanging over’ them during their leave.

“When [my partner] went on Adoption Leave, she turned her computer off and that was it. That's not how it works in academia, or not for me anyway [. . .] that's the nature of academia and that's just what you sign up to. That wasn't anybody's fault” (Female employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Experiences of return to work

Employees' experiences of returning to work were shaped by the type of leave they took, the pattern of their leave and workplace expectations.

With regards to type and pattern of leave, SPL allowed parents to take up transitional childcare arrangements which made returning to work easier. Employees felt it was important to have as little disruption to their family lives as possible when returning to work, and SPL allowed them to dictate their own pace of return and fit work around childcare commitments. For example, an employee in Higher Education took two weeks of SPL simultaneously with her partner and then returned to work while her partner took his share of SPL. This enabled her to ease back into work whilst knowing that her child was fully supported. Women who took SPL for their second child felt their return to work was less disruptive than with Maternity Leave, as it enabled one parent to be at home with the child.

Employees who took shorter periods of leave (16 weeks or less) reported positive experiences of returning to work as they felt able to reconnect with colleagues quickly and were included on project work. In comparison, employees who took longer periods of leave (six months or more) reported difficulty adjusting back to work. These employees found that changes occurred in the workplace in their absence, which were difficult to adjust to when they returned. This was particularly challenging when roles changed substantially. For example, an employee in Further Education had to change the course he taught when he returned to work. As he had not taught the new subject before, this required a lot of additional preparation. This meant that his return to work was stressful, and he felt that his preferences had not been accounted for.

“Things can change. The lady who took over the management of my team introduced different things that I had to catch up on [. . .] she changed my role while I was away [. . .] I could see if people took really big leave, they could come back to a completely different job or their job might have even gone.” (Male employee, SPL, utility company, male-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1)

Employees described either positive or negative experiences of returning to work. When employees reported positive experiences, they described a range of measures that had been put in place to support them. Among those who took longer leave periods, employers facilitated a phased return through part-time or reduced hours. Employees found that this enabled them to reacclimatise with the workplace at their own pace, and they reported a stronger sense of agency around hours worked and the flexibility to be present for school and nursery runs.

Other forms of support included KiT days, cover arrangements, and support managing breastfeeding. Whether arranged formally and paid for by employers, or arranged informally by the employees themselves, KiT days helped employees stay on top of workplace developments, maintain workplace relationships and earn additional income. Having cover arranged by the employer and handover periods with cover staff when returning to work helped minimise any pressure that employees felt. Finally, one employee working in Higher Education wanted to return to work early, because she enjoyed her work, but also wanted to continue breastfeeding. Her employer facilitated this by arranging for the storage of expressed milk.

Negative experiences included: feeling pressure to return to work sooner than they would like, feeling pressure to complete an unrealistic workload on return to work and the need to adjust to changes made to employees' role and responsibilities.

“They didn't seem to understand the fact that, yes, you've come back to work, it doesn't mean you're working at full capacity. It's going to take some time to get back up to that sort of level.” (Male employee, SPL, local authority, male-dominated, very large employer Workplace 5)

“I was seen a little bit as a jigsaw piece that has had to be slotted in somewhere. Yes, I think having time off, you sort of lose your position in College [. . .] personally it took an impact - it made an impact because it dented my confidence, teaching an A level that I don't have any experience of. It took me an awful lot of outside work to read up, to learn it, to prepare resources and to feel like I had enough knowledge to go to the classroom.” (Female employee, Maternity Leave, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

This was particularly true for employees in Higher Education, where the precarious nature of employment contracts and funding structures created extra pressure for employees.

How experiences compare with expectations

Employees' feelings about how expectations of taking leave compared with reality varied between male and female participants. Male employees found that taking SPL was both more difficult and more rewarding than expected. For those who experienced difficulties, it was their first experience of spending a prolonged period of time at home as a primary caregiver. They found the experience more onerous than expected and described it as socially isolating. However, for all male employees taking SPL, the experience of having time with their child, whether two weeks or several months, exceeded their expectations significantly. In that time, they witnessed their child progress through more stages of development and felt more invested in this process than they expected.

“I genuinely sat there, 'What the bloody hell have I let myself in for here?' The same as any parent does but, no, nothing would change me - if we were gifted to have another child down the line, I would do the same again [. . .] even with all the bad bits, it was worth every second of it.” (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5).

Employers' experiences of leave and return to work

This section discusses senior managers' and line managers' experiences of preparing for staff to take leave and of employees' return to work.

The primary concern for employers when **preparing for staff to take leave** was ensuring periods of leave were covered. Patterns of leave presented different challenges for different employers. For roles that involved teaching, longer blocks of leave were less disruptive, whereas for operational or managerial roles shorter blocks of leave were preferred by employers. Employers shared the view that arranging cover creates additional pressures, such as the need for training. For example, a senior manager working in the utility company sector commented that operational roles are particularly difficult to cover, due to the extensive training required and long hours involved. Line managers reported that thorough handover processes were helpful.

Employers' ideals around good practice in **managing return to work** were not always matched in reality. Senior managers reported clear strategies for best practice around

managing a return to work. They stressed that employees readjust to working at their own pace. Therefore, line managers would ideally pay attention to the needs of individual employees and make arrangements accordingly. It was felt that line managers should support their employees by contacting them regularly, confirming return dates early on and by generally ensuring that everything is in place to support the employees' return. One senior manager working in the Higher Education sector reported that consistency of management should be ensured across line managers through training sessions, the creation of workplace guidance documents and by establishing a network of mutual support for parents and carers.

In reality, senior managers noted that the range and consistency of outcomes for staff returning from any period of parental leave depended on the consistency of line management. Where senior managers and line managers felt that their support had led to positive experiences for their staff, they had utilised tools to ensure a tailored approach for individual employees such as KiT days, flexible working arrangements, and a handover period with cover staff. Where senior managers and line managers were unable to facilitate positive experiences, they reported a lack of resources and training opportunities, leading to inconsistencies in how staff were managed.

6 Reflections on how Shared Parental Leave policies work

This chapter explores perceived impacts of taking different forms of parental leave from the perspectives of employees and employers. It then reports participants' reflections on the effectiveness of SPL specifically and participants' suggestions for improvement.

Key findings

Male employees in particular felt that the time off at home facilitated by SPL led to personal development and an improved sense of wellbeing. They felt better prepared to parent and gained new perspectives on work-life balance, prioritising children over work.

Taking SPL also facilitated a more shared approach to parenting. Whether parents split SPL equally or one parent was the primary care giver, the parenting approach taken during SPL was continued once the leave ended. This was true for opposite- and same-sex couples.

Employees did not perceive any negative career impacts following SPL. Female employees did, however, note that returning to work was less challenging after a shorter period of leave. Employees also felt positive about being able to set an example for their colleagues in terms of how SPL could be used.

By contrast, employers noted a range of positives and negatives of having staff on leave. Positives included opportunities to develop and learn for cover staff, the new perspectives that cover staff could bring to a role and a perceived positive impact on staff morale. Negatives included the temporary skills gap while cover staff are being trained, the cost of finding and training cover staff and lower productivity whilst cover staff and their colleagues adjust to new arrangements.

Employees and employers across workplace culture types felt that SPL policies were effective but there was room for improvement. Participants suggested changes to make the policies more accessible, which included: access to a more substantial enhanced ShPP offer; active, targeted promotion of SPL, particularly for male employees/male-dominated workplaces; and a supportive workplace with a straightforward request and approval process.

Perceived impacts of taking parental leave

Employees' perceptions

Participating employees reported a range of perceived impacts, centred around personal development and wellbeing, approaches to parenting, and returning to work.

Personal development and wellbeing

Male employees reported several ways in which they developed personally through taking SPL. Although it was unusual for male employees in this study to take leave for more than 12 weeks, there was consensus that the time at home facilitated by SPL led to personal growth and development in unexpected ways. Both first- and second-time fathers reported learning lessons about their understanding of parenting roles, and of how and why parenting should be shared. They also felt their leave gave them valuable experience of parenting, which led to improved confidence.

“I’ve always been quite hands-on with my kids, but it probably just gave me a wee bit more experience because if my wife was to say go away for a couple of days, I’ve probably got some friends who would be a bit nervous about it, whereas I’d be completely fine. I’d probably encourage it. So yes, no, I think just a bit more confident. I think it might have been different if it had been my first child and I was home alone, but that’s just from a personal viewpoint, that because it was my second and I’d been there and done it and was a bit more relaxed.” (Male employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Being more involved in childcare also led to changes in what employees considered important in their lives. For example, a male employee in Higher Education who took 11 weeks of SPL when he adopted his daughter noted a big shift in his priorities. He described how, before he adopted his daughter, he worked 12- to 14-hour days and did not take more than one or two days off at a time. Since adopting his daughter, childcare is now his priority, and he works shorter days to facilitate it.

“My priority before was just producing science. My priority now is my daughter.” (Male employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 3)

With regards to wellbeing, receiving enhanced ShPP meant that participating employees were able to take time off and take care of their new arrivals without worrying about finances. Employees also found having extended time off at home changed their perspective on work-life balance. It highlighted the importance of taking time off in general and emphasised the need to maintain a work-life balance when returning to work. For example, a male employee found that although staying at home for childcare purposes was outside of his comfort zone, it was “*liberating*” to parent without the pressures of fitting childcare around work.

“What it enabled me to really think was, about making sure I nailed a work-life balance and prioritising my workload. What it taught me was, that you could get embroiled in an awful lot of rubbish that was just backwards and forwards correspondence that actually weren’t relevant, and you end up in loads of meetings that aren’t relevant to you [...]. My time is more valuable to me, if that makes sense, and I’m a bit more precious with it.” (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

Approach to parenting

Employees reported that taking SPL influenced their parenting in two ways: it either enabled and solidified their intended shared parenting approach or created an opportunity for shared parenting in a way that was not expected.

Chapter 3 discussed an employee who decided to split 12 months’ SPL equally with his partner because they felt passionate about modelling gender equality and shared parenting in their

relationship. When reflecting on the effects of SPL, he felt that splitting leave 50:50 had set a precedent to split childcare equally going forward. When he and his partner had both returned to work, tasks like drop-off at day care and taking days off when their child was unwell were shared equally “*by default.*”

Although this was not a strong driver in decision making for other male employees, they reported similar experiences in sharing responsibilities more equally. For example, a male employee who took four weeks of discontinuous leave described how taking SPL had changed his understanding of the ways parental responsibilities could be shared.

“it’s broadened my horizons, as far as I understand how you should be able to actually share responsibilities, yes? Both maternal and paternal. So, I’ve been there through the day, even though it’s been for two weeks, to be able to still share that kind of responsibility of bringing a child up.” (Male employee, SPL, utility company, male-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 1)

When employees took SPL for a second child (by birth or adoption), they were able to reflect on how their parenting roles changed. Employees in opposite-sex and same-sex relationships found that taking SPL enabled them to share parenting responsibilities more equally with their second child compared with taking previous Maternity, Paternity or Adoption Leave for their first child. This meant that childcare felt much more like a shared responsibility and that these employees felt better able to bond with their new arrival as well as older children.

Returning to work

When returning to work, employees reported four ways taking leave influenced their experiences: career trajectory, approach to work, work-life balance, and raising awareness of SPL.

Employees did not feel that taking parental leave had impacted their careers in any negative ways. This was either because they did not take a substantial amount of time off (6 months or less) or because taking nine months to a year off was the accepted norm.

“I think because I only took it for 16 weeks, I don’t think it had a huge impact” (Female employee, SPL for adoption, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

When positive changes were perceived these were amongst male employees and dependent on individual and workplace context. For example, a male employee felt that taking parental leave motivated him to go for a promotion when he returned to work, while another male employee found that the time off was a chance to evaluate his career and the next steps he could take.

“It did me the world of good if I’m honest, because it gave me a chance to really think about what I’ve done work-wise, and was I going back to doing the right thing, and things like that.” (Male employee, SPL, local authority, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 5)

Male employees also report changes in their approach to work following leave. They found they had greater empathy with colleagues and direct reports who had children, so were more flexible when managing employees’ family-related needs.

The improved work-life balance that employees experienced during leave continued when they returned to work. This was in part due to the changes in priorities also experienced when

taking time off. Employees reported that, while their careers were still important to them, they were better able to maintain a balance between work and home.

Finally, where employees were amongst the first to take SPL at their workplace, they felt they were setting a positive example. They also found that, by taking SPL, they raised awareness amongst colleagues by improving visibility.

“I was the first person in the department to take shared parental leave and they were very supportive of it in personal terms but also in terms of demonstrating to other employees, other colleagues, that this is an option. Subsequently, four other male colleagues have taken shared parental leave since I took it” (Male employee, SPL, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

Employers' perceptions

Participating senior managers and line managers perceived impacts on employees themselves, impacts on the team or department, and impacts on the wider workplace. While they perceived benefits for employees and their workplaces, there also were perceived negative impacts for their teams and for employers.

Impacts on employees

It was difficult for senior managers and line managers to comment extensively on the impacts of taking parental leave on employees themselves. However, line managers discussed two observed impacts on direct reports. First, when staff returned to work, they gained new transferrable skills which were presumed to have resulted from the parenting experience during leave. Second, when employees split leave with their partner and took a shorter period of time off, they were better able to transition back to work.

Impacts on the team

Line managers perceived both positive and negative impacts on their teams or departments when staff went on leave. Negative impacts related to productivity, skills gaps and team dynamics. Line managers reported having staff on parental leave could lead to a short-term drop in productivity. This is in part because cover staff needed time to adjust to their new role, but also because colleagues had to adjust to new members of the team or new managers. It could also leave a gap in skills in the team, especially within advanced roles which are more difficult to cover.

However, line managers also emphasised the positives of using cover staff or having current staff cover new responsibilities. Although not an intended consequence, having staff on leave presented development opportunities for other members of staff. Furthermore, not only did the staff themselves develop new skills and expertise, but they also brought new perspectives to their cover role and made positive changes to established ways of working.

“We had some cases where the individual who covered introduced, for example, some new dashboards for measuring the production performance, so that wouldn't have happened, necessarily, if that person hadn't gone into cover.” (Male senior manager, information and communication, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 2)

Impacts on the wider workplace

Senior managers and line managers felt that, when staff had time off to care for children, it improved morale across the workplace in two ways. Senior managers felt that staff, including non-parents, viewed their workplace more positively for offering and accommodating parental leave. This was then perceived to improve staff retention and productivity more generally. Line managers and senior managers felt that, when they were able to accommodate leave requests, employees were loyal and did not seek alternative employment following leave.

“I think people who also have no intention of even having kids or maybe had kids years ago, are like, 'It's nice to work for a university that does these kind of things', so it can have a positive impact even on people who don't plan to take it.”
(Female senior manager, Higher Education, female-dominated, extra-large employer, Workplace 4)

In terms of negative perceived impacts, senior managers observations were similar to line managers in terms of productivity, but they also observed cost implications. First, finding cover staff and re-prioritising or reallocating work had cost implications. Second, when cover staff needed to be trained to take on new roles, this also cost money.

Managers in education settings noted sector-specific drawbacks. In FE, it was seen as detrimental to students to have teaching staff on leave temporarily. In HE, senior managers explained that grant funding created additional complexities. For example, the cost of staff resourcing included in a grant budget generally does not include the cost of parental leave, leaving the university to cover the salary costs of both absent and replacement staff. Senior managers in HE settings indicated that this presented a barrier to hiring cover staff.

Reflections on the effectiveness of SPL

Participating staff were asked to reflect on how effective they found SPL policy, both in terms of the statutory policy set out by government and workplace variants.

Views on effectiveness of government policy

Across staff roles, there was agreement about what worked well and less well about the government SPL policy. In terms of what worked well, participating staff felt that the ability to split leave and having flexibility around how this could be done worked well. However, there were two areas in which the policy was seen to work less well. First, participating staff reported that the complexity of SPL policy made it difficult to understand how terms and eligibility compared with Maternity and Paternity leave. Second, the statutory ShPP offer was seen as insufficient and impeded uptake when employers offered statutory ShPP without enhancement.

Another key observation was around the difficulty of overcoming strong cultural norms around gender, parenting and work. The participating employee from Workplace 6, where there was no take up of SPL, noted that although it is positive to have a parental leave policy that enabled greater equality in sharing leave and childcare responsibilities, the cultural expectations that men will prioritise work and women will prioritise children remains.

“[If we had taken SPL], [my husband's] bosses would've assumed that he wasn't committed to the role and that he was going to be somehow flaky. Unfortunately, he works in a fast-paced environment where people are very replaceable and they are commission-based, so the more you work, the more you can commit, the better you do for yourself and the company. I just don't think it fits with the culture of being a man or the culture of working in sales for you to take any sort of

extended period of time off work, whereas a female teacher taking a year off after she's had a baby, completely the norm, completely expected that that's what you would do." (Female employee, Maternity Leave, Further Education, female-dominated, large employer, Workplace 6)

Suggested improvements

Participating staff across workplaces were asked for their views on what could be improved about SPL policy. Staff largely focused on their workplaces policies (discussed below), but some suggestions were made for improving SPL and encouraging take-up:

- Active, targeted promotion of SPL amongst men and in workplaces in male-dominated sectors.
- Guidance around managing resourcing for sectors where this is more challenging, such as teaching. Although participating staff were aware of their legal rights, managers and employees felt that additional support was needed to facilitate and manage requests, particularly in settings where accommodating SPL was presumed to be inconvenient.
- The addition of a 'KiT support day' for working partners. Currently, employees on leave need to source childcare if a KiT day is arranged when their partner is working. Employees who suggested this felt that if one parent is on leave and one is working, the parent in work should be able to take paid time off to care for the child while the parent on leave carries out their KiT day.

Views on effectiveness of workplace policy

Employees' and employers' views on the effectiveness of workplace policies were more extensive, centring around accessibility and promotion of policy documents, the request process, and pay entitlement.

- From employees' perspectives, workplace policies worked well when the processes were straightforward, support was provided, and line managers were flexible.
- Employees felt that, when preparing to take leave, having a workplace policy that was easily accessible in terms of where it could be found and how clearly it was written was useful.
- Employees also felt being able to request SPL by filling in an online form as well as having access to support from line managers and HR made the request process more straightforward.
- Employees who took SPL when adopting children described their employers' approach to the request process as flexible, which was deemed to work well. As described in Chapter 4, notice periods for being matched to an adoptive child could be as short as seven days.
- Finally, access to enhanced ShPP was key in enabling employees to take SPL.

Employees felt that their workplace policies worked less well when the above elements were not in place. As discussed in Chapter 4, employees reported that when a workplace policy was written in a complex way and included jargon, or the application process was complicated, it was less accessible. In these instances, HR had to assist and explain, unlike other workplace policies which employees could understand, interpret, and request without HR support.

Employees perceived that this could prevent a barrier to accessing SPL. In addition, when workplaces did not offer enhanced ShPP, employees lost out financially which limited the number of staff able to take SPL.

Additional complexities arose when it came to cross-employer communication. Employees felt that, because there is no standard set for how workplaces should navigate this and workplace policies differ, it was difficult to figure out with their partners how much leave they were able to take and when. Employees also observed a lack of promotion and awareness of SPL in their workplaces, which meant that managers and colleagues were unaware of the policy leading to low take up.

“Because [my colleagues] never actually bothered to consult the HR, they didn't know about this shared parental leave. I think that's something that should be more advertised.” (Male employee, SPL Higher Education, male-dominated, very large employer, Workplace 3)

For employers, having a notice period was the most helpful thing about workplace SPL policy. They reported that this enabled them to plan and prepare for staff being on leave. Workplace policies were seen as less successful when it came to consistency of how the policy is understood amongst managers. Senior managers observed that the success of the request process was in part dependent upon the line manager and could therefore vary quite substantially.

Suggested improvements

Participating staff observed a number of ways in which their workplace policies could be improved. These included: awareness of SPL, providing clear guidance, and providing sufficient enhanced ShPP.

- **Awareness of SPL:** participating staff felt that more needs to be done to improve awareness of SPL within their workplaces, such as ensuring that managers are trained to know about and understand the policy. Where there was no take up of SPL, staff felt it should be proactively encouraged, particularly amongst male staff.
- **Providing clear guidance:** participating staff also felt that workplaces should provide clearer policies and support. Suggestions included providing a greater range of examples in supporting information to better demonstrate how SPL can work and exactly what the entitlements are.
- **Providing enhanced ShPP:** across workplaces, employees and managers felt that the financial offer needed to be improved. When workplaces offered statutory ShPP, SPL was not accessible due to the pay reduction employees would have to take. When workplaces offered enhanced ShPP, employees still felt the financial offer could be improved to give employees greater flexibility in their decision making around childcare. Senior managers also acknowledged the need to improve the financial offer to attract and retain high quality staff.

7 Summary of key findings and conclusions

In this final chapter, the key findings are summarised, including key facilitators and barriers to the take up of Shared Parental Leave (SPL), how the policies are working, and suggestions for improvement.

This study aimed to develop a better understanding of the effectiveness of recent reforms to family-related leave policies in Britain. Through 19 interviews across six case studies, this research examined the views and experiences of employees who had recently taken Shared Parental Leave or Maternity Leave and their employers. The research objectives were as follows:

- Gather evidence on levels of awareness of the SPL policy reforms.
- Gather views on how well organisations' policies on SPL are working.
- Examine the contexts, processes and motivations that facilitate or discourage employers from offering and employees from taking up SPL.
- Explore the experiences of, and perceived impacts on, employers and employees of requesting and using SPL.

Levels of awareness of the SPL reforms and views of organisational policies

Both employees and employers were aware that the government had introduced SPL in order to promote gender equality and to enhance work-life balance. The aims of the policy were widely supported and employers aspired to achieve these aims in their workplaces. While the aims of the policy were well-understood, the view that the mechanisms of the policy were complicated and difficult to understand was widespread across workplaces and among staff in different roles.

Employees reported several ways in which workplace policies and processes worked well or less well. Because of the range of factors, perceived success of the policies varied across workplaces and no workplace was perceived by employees or employers to “get everything right”. When SPL policies and processes worked well, it was in the following ways:

- Workplace policies were easily accessible in terms of where they could be found and how clearly they were written.
- The request process was simple, such as filling in an online form. Line managers were flexible, and support from line managers and HR was informative and proactively offered.
- Workplaces offered enhanced ShPP so that employees' finances were not negatively impacted by taking leave.

Facilitators and barriers to offering and taking up SPL

A typology emerged through the research around workplace culture, policy and practice around shared parental leave and pay and of staff members' attitudes towards the principle of parents sharing leave. Participating workplaces fell into three categories: supportive, receptive (but mixed) and hesitant. This typology demonstrates the interaction between different factors

that play into parental leave choices, both on an organisational and individual level. For example, the effect of generous pay policies can be counteracted by a lack of support among employees for the principles of shared parental leave. In addition, open-minded attitudes towards sharing parental leave may be outweighed by the perceived time and cost implications of reorganising workload and resourcing around shared leave patterns.

This typology provides an indication of the facilitators and barriers to offering and taking up shared parental leave within different types of workplaces, and therefore how and where support to encourage take up could be targeted. However, it should be noted that more extensive research, with greater sample diversity, may enable further development of this typology and the categories within it.

Key facilitators and barriers to take up for employees and employers

The evidence suggests that for employees to feel able and confident in taking SPL, four key factors play a role in decision making, though the relative importance of each factor varies for each employee depending on their individual and workplace context.

Decisions around taking shared parental leave and the pattern of leave taken were based on the ability to limit negative associated impacts on household finances. Enhanced ShPP emerged as a key facilitator to widening access to SPL. This study found that when workplaces offered enhanced ShPP, it facilitated access to SPL for those who would otherwise be unable to take it or would not consider it.

Employees wanted to be able to take a pattern of leave that facilitated their **preferred parenting approach**. Employees in this study had a range of preferred parenting approaches depending on their gender, family context and political views. SPL worked well for those who wanted the mother to be the primary caregiver while allowing the father to spend more time at home, and those who used SPL for a second child reflected that SPL allowed for greater flexibility than Maternity, Paternity or Adoption Leave. However, lack of enhanced ShPP could prevent parents from taking leave in a way that best suited their needs, particularly if they wanted to split the leave period more equally, as it put a limit on the amount of time each partner could spend at home without losing out financially.

Employees also needed to be able to take a pattern of leave that **enabled work-life balance** and did not negatively impact their career, colleagues or workplace. Whilst employees want to spend time with their family and new arrival, they also wanted to avoid creating problems for their employer or taking a long break that could undermine their career. This was true for male and female employees, who found the flexibility of SPL better suited to meeting these needs.

Having a **workplace culture that prioritises employee wellbeing**, particularly within employees' immediate team or department, was also important. When employees felt that their colleagues understood their needs as a parent along with supportive line management, taking leave was easier. Employees did not feel like a burden and felt confident that their request could be accommodated without feelings of resentment.

For employers, workplace culture and finances were important and required a delicate balance to ensure the benefits outweighed the costs. When workplaces felt the financial burden was too great, this was a deterrent to offering enhanced ShPP. In the typology, managers at supportive workplaces described benefits to their workplace such as staff morale and loyalty as motivators for offering enhanced ShPP, whereas managers at hesitant workplaces perceived negatives like costs and logistics as outweighing any potential benefits. Views in receptive

workplaces were mixed: senior managers embraced SPL and wanted to encourage it but were cautious of the time and cost implications of covering leave and enhancing pay.

There were also two wider barriers for employers. **Lack of understanding** presented a barrier across staff roles: there was consensus among employers and employees that the mechanisms of shared parental leave policy are complex. While employers and employees understood the principles of shared parental leave, staff were less confident about the precise details of pay and leave. When management found policies confusing, this prevented workplaces from promoting the policy, and when employees were confused about pay and leave entitlements this prevented them from considering SPL as an option.

Different patterns of leave, whether single or discontinuous blocks, presented varying challenges for different employers. For example, for teaching, longer blocks of leave were less disruptive, whereas for operational or managerial roles shorter blocks were preferred by employers. Irrespective of the pattern of leave, employers shared the view that arranging cover creates additional pressure and cost, such as the need for training. This could then present a barrier for employers who were reluctant to promote a policy that might create additional work or challenges. Employees were also often aware of these challenges and wanted to minimise disruption for their employers and colleagues, thus preventing them from requesting SPL and sharing leave as equally as they wanted to.

Experiences of leave and perceived impacts

As SPL offers flexibility in how employees take time off for childcare, employees found that taking leave improved the quality of time spent with their children and allowed them to share time with their partners more equally. This was particularly apparent for existing parents, who contrasted SPL with other types of leave, and fathers, who found that taking SPL exceeded expectations.

Experiences of preparing to take leave were characterised by the need to minimise disruption, which for some roles meant taking on additional work. When returning to work, positive experiences related to supportive measures such as phased returns, and negative experiences included pressure to return to work, unrealistic workloads and the need to adjust to changes made to employees' roles.

Employers who felt their support had led to smoother experiences of employees returning to work had used KiT days, flexible working arrangements and handovers with cover staff. Where there were less positive experiences, a lack of staff resources and line manager training were thought to have created workload pressure and inconsistencies in how returning staff were managed.

Suggestions for improving take up

Participating staff suggested three key areas for improvement that could help increase take up of SPL: awareness and understanding of SPL, guidance and support, and an enhanced pay offer.

Findings indicate that **awareness and understanding** varied greatly between workplaces and members of staff. Staff engaged with SPL on a need-to-know basis and active promotion within workplaces was limited to supportive workplaces within the typology. That supportive workplaces that actively promoted SPL saw the highest take up suggests that other workplaces could improve take up if they too promoted the policy. Employees who observed

limited understanding in their workplaces suggested that targeted promotion could help in male-dominated workplaces or sectors.

Managers and employees both felt that **guidance and support** could be improved. Employees and managers described how sector-specific challenges such as managing teaching resource in education settings were not easily overcome. Managers also struggled to navigate leave arrangements with the workplaces of their employee's partner. Participants therefore suggested that workplaces could benefit from seeing how cover for SPL is arranged modelled by similar workplaces. This may help to overcome logistical barriers experienced by employers to promoting SPL and encourage participation among employees by showcasing positive examples of how SPL works in similar settings. Participating employees also felt that individual workplaces should provide clearer policies, information and guidance and application processes. Promotion of simple examples of such documentation, such as the Acas application form for Shared Parental Leave, may be helpful as in the case of a participating workplace. In addition, the findings suggest that employees may benefit from seeing examples of how SPL works for employees with similar personal circumstances.

Findings in this report demonstrate that **enhanced ShPP facilitates take up**. Employees reported that lack of enhanced ShPP either prevented them from taking SPL or limited the length of leave they could take. It was suggested that promoting the positive reported effects of SPL among employers, such as to staff morale, wellbeing, productivity, recruitment and retention may be helpful in demonstrating the benefits compared with costs of offering enhanced pay.

Technical appendices

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure appropriate depth and diversity of the interview sample. To meet the criteria for taking part, an employer needed to have employees who had taken up SPL in the last 24 months, or employees who had been eligible for taking up SPL in the last 24 months but had decided against it. The research took a case study approach and a target of 8 case studies was set out across employers with and without take up of SPL.

Case studies comprised one interview with each of the following members of staff:

- **Senior staff**, such as owner-employers, CEOs, or senior managers who were directly responsible for overseeing organisational policies
- **Line managers** who worked directly with employees taking up or eligible to take up SPL
- **Employees** who had either taken SPL or had not taken SPL but were eligible to

We also aimed to interview employee’s partners. However, after piloting recruitment with two case studies, partners were removed from the research because their recruitment placed undue burden on employees. Recruitment of line managers who managed an employee who had taken SPL or chosen not to also proved burdensome for employers, so flexibility was allowed to maximise workplace participation.

A total of 6 workplaces were recruited to the sample. The table below shows the primary sampling criteria, quotas for each and achieved number of case studies within each category of characteristics.

Criteria	Characteristics	Quotas	Achieved
Level of take up of Shared Parental Leave	Take up	5	5
	No take up	3	1
Employer size	Small (5-49)	Min 2	0
	Medium (50-249)	Min 2	0
	Large (250+)	Min 2	6
Gender balance	Female-dominated	Min 2	3
	Male-dominated	Min 2	3

To achieve diversity across the sample, additional characteristics were monitored. These included:

- Workplace sector
- Gender of senior manager

- Gender of employee

These additional characteristics were collected in a screening exercise and monitored as participants were recruited.

Across the 8 case studies, there was a target of 24 interviews. Across the 6 workplaces recruited to the study, a total of 19 interviews were achieved. The table below shows the quotas for each staff role and number of achieved interviews.

Sampling criteria	Staff role	Quotas	Achieved
SPL Take up	Senior manager	5	5
	Line manager	5	3
	Employee	5	8
SPL No take up	Senior manager	3	1
	Line manager	3	1
	Employee	3	1

Recruitment

The original sample of employers was drawn from respondents to the Management and Wellbeing Practices Survey who had given consent to be re-contacted. The sample file was provided to NatCen by the Department for Business and Trade. The sample composition was prioritised based on participants' responses to the survey questions and to include a mix of the additional characteristics outlined above.

Workplaces were initially invited to take part in the research by letter, using postal addresses for the staff members who completed the MAWP survey. After an opt-out period of one week, follow-up phone calls were made to explain the research in more detail, gain consent in principle and identify a 'key contact' (the person best-placed to assist with arranging interviews). Follow-up phone calls also included screening to confirm eligibility and collect any additional information that was missing from the survey responses.

Once workplaces agreed in principle to take part, NatCen researchers provided written information for the key contact to pass on to relevant staff. Further follow-up phone calls and emails were made to help identify suitable staff, obtain consent from these staff members, and arrange a time and date for the interviews.

Recruitment took place between June 2019 and February 2020. After an initial round of recruitment from June-September 2019, a second round took place from October 2019 onwards to boost participation. A total of 145 letters were sent to respondents of the MAWP survey. The table below shows the total number of workplaces that were contacted during each wave of recruitment and the number of achieved case studies.

Sampling criteria	First mail out	Achieved case studies	Second mail out	Achieved case studies
SPL Take up	25	1	87	4
SPL No take up	15	0	18	1

Data collection

A total of 19 in-depth telephone interviews were conducted between August 2019 and February 2020. Like all government departments, the Department for Business and Trade entered a pre-election period ahead of the general election on 12 December 2019. Because of this, there was a pause in fieldwork, with no interviews taking from November 2019 until after the Christmas period in January 2020. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in duration. The table below shows the length of each interview by participant group.

Sampling criteria	Staff role	Interview length (minutes)
SPL Take up	Senior staff	60
	Line managers	40
	Employees	45
SPL No take up	Senior staff	40
	Line managers	30
	Employees	30

A topic guide was designed by NatCen, in conjunction with the Department for Business and Trade. A number of secondary variables drawn from the MAWP survey were used to inform its design. The interviews aimed to explore participant’s background and their understanding of SPL policies. They also examined the type and length of leave, the decision-making and authorisation process, experiences of leave, and the perceived impacts of take up. Each area of discussion was tailored to each participant group. For example, when asking employees about requests to take SPL, emphasis was placed on their motivations for doing so, whereas in the case of senior staff and line managers, emphasis was placed on understanding the authorisation process for the request made. Each participant received a £20 gift voucher as a token of thanks for their time and contribution.

Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded with participants’ permission and later transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were analysed using Framework analysis. The first stage of framework analysis involves familiarisation with the transcribed data and identification of emerging issues to inform the development of a thematic framework.

This is a series of thematic matrices or charts, each chart representing one key theme. The column headings on each theme chart relate to key sub-topics, and the rows relate to individual respondents. Data from each case is then summarised in the relevant cell. The context of the information is retained and the page of the transcript from which it comes is noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or extract text for verbatim quotation.

This approach ensures that the analysis is comprehensive and consistent and that links with the verbatim data are retained. Organising the data in this way enables the views, circumstances and experiences of all participants to be explored within an analytical framework that is both grounded in, and driven by, their own accounts. The thematic charts allow for the full range of views and experiences to be compared and contrasted both across and within cases, and for patterns and themes to be identified and explored.

Sample characteristics

Table A1 Participant characteristics

ID	Staff role	Gender, Ethnicity	Job Role	Type of leave	Length and pattern of leave	Income - Household (Personal)	Children (N)	Relationship type
1	Senior manager	Male, N/A	HR manager	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Employee	Male, White British	Operational line manager	SPL	4 weeks discontinuous (2 + 2)	£87k (£46k)	2	Opposite sex
2	Senior manager	Female, N/A	HR manager	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Line manager	Female, N/A	Senior production manager	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Line manager	Male, N/A	Senior survey manager	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Employee	Male, White British	Senior production consultant	SPL	3 months discontinuous (1 + 2)	£53k (£41k)	2	Opposite sex
3	Senior manager	Female, N/A	HR partner	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Employee	Male, N/D	Engineering lecturer	SPL for adoption	11 weeks continuous	£70k (£50k)	1	Opposite sex
4	Senior manager	Female, N/A	Senior HR partner	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Line manager	Male, N/A	Sustainability manager	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Employee	Female, N/D	Information manager (part-time)	SPL	9 months continuous	£65k (18k)	2	Opposite sex

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	Employee	Male, N/D	Project coordinator	SPL	6 months continuous	£60k (£30k)	1	Opposite sex
	Employee	Male, N/D	HR transformation	SPL	7 weeks discontinuous (5 + 2)	£70k (£35k)	2	Opposite sex
	Employee	Female, White British	Senior research fellow	SPL for adoption	16 weeks continuous	£80k (£35k)	2	Same sex
5	Senior manager	Female, N/A	Senior HR officer	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Employee	Male, White British	Cycling lead officer	SPL	5 weeks continuous	£64k (£34k)	1	Opposite sex
6	Senior manager	Female, N/A	Senior HR manager	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Line manager	Male, N/A	Head of Science	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Employee	Female, White British	Humanities teacher	Maternity Leave	9 months continuous	£80k (£16k)	2	Opposite sex

Table A2 – Workplace SPL policies

ID	Workplace characteristics	Workplace policy pay offer
1	Utility company; extra-large, male-dominated, take up of SPL	<p>ShPP offer Statutory: up to 39 weeks SPL paid at statutory ShPP. Any further weeks of SPL were unpaid.</p> <p>ShPP conditions None.</p>
2	Information and communication; very large, male-dominated, take up of SPL	<p>ShPP offer Enhanced: up to 24 weeks' full pay. Any further weeks of SPL were paid at statutory ShPP and then unpaid.</p> <p>ShPP conditions To receive enhanced ShPP, SPL had to be taken in first six months after the child was born or adopted.</p>
3	Higher Education institution; very large, male-dominated, take up of SPL	<p>ShPP offer Enhanced: up to 16 weeks' full pay then up to 19 weeks' statutory ShPP. Any further weeks of SPL taken were unpaid.</p> <p>ShPP conditions Could be taken any time during the 50-week period after the child was born or adopted. If both parents worked at the university, they had to share the full pay allowance between them.</p>
4	Higher Education institution; extra-large, female-dominated, take up of SPL	<p>ShPP offer Enhanced: either 16 weeks' full pay or 7 weeks' full pay followed by 18 weeks' half pay plus statutory pay (capped at normal full pay). Any further weeks of SPL taken were paid at statutory ShPP or were unpaid.</p> <p>ShPP conditions Could be taken any time during the 50 weeks after the child was born or adopted. If both parents worked at the university, each was entitled to the full allowance of enhanced pay. Enhanced ShPP was available from day 1 of employment.</p>
5	Local authority; extra-large, female-dominated, take up of SPL	<p>ShPP offer Enhanced: either 12 weeks' half pay plus statutory ShPP or 20 weeks' one third of pay plus statutory ShPP. Any further weeks of SPL were paid at statutory ShPP and then unpaid.</p> <p>ShPP conditions None discussed.</p>
6	Further Education institution; large, female-dominated, no take up of SPL	<p>ShPP offer Statutory: up to 39 weeks of SPL paid at statutory ShPP. Any further weeks of SPL were unpaid.</p> <p>ShPP conditions None.</p>

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