



# **Lost Connections: Supporting parents and caregivers in the workplace**

**A WPI Strategy report for Vodafone UK**

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# About WPI Strategy

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# About Vodafone

Vodafone UK is a technology communications company that connects people, businesses and devices to help our customers benefit from digital innovation. Our services span mobile, fixed-line connections, home and office broadband, and the Internet of Things (IoT).

We have a strong track record as a tech pioneer, making the UK's first mobile phone call, sending the first text message, and making the UK's first live holographic call using 5G in 2018. We were also the first to start carrying live 5G traffic from a site in Salford, Greater Manchester. As of June 2021, we have 5G in 364 locations across Europe – 124 in the UK and 240 across Germany, Spain, Italy and Ireland. Our 4G network coverage currently reaches over 99% of the UK population.

Today, Vodafone serves more than 18 million mobile and fixed-line customers in the UK.

Sustainability is also at the heart of what we do: as of 1 July 2021, 100% of the grid electricity we use in the UK is certified to be from renewable sources.

For more information about Vodafone UK please visit: [www.vodafone.co.uk](http://www.vodafone.co.uk)

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# Foreword

The UK workforce is filled with parents: single, married, same-sex, adoptive, young and old. In fact, there are more working-age parents in the workforce than out of it.<sup>1</sup>

That number has increased in the last two decades, with the employment rate for mothers jumping from 66% to 75%, overtaking that of women without dependent children. Both employers and the Government need to stand behind parents and caregivers to ensure they are properly supported as they hold down a job at the same time as looking after their children.

New and prospective parents are sometimes not given the support and assurance that they need, and one of the biggest challenges new parents and caregivers face is combining childcare responsibilities with work.

It is time to challenge head-on the stereotyped assumption that looking after children is mostly a woman's responsibility. Polling carried out for this report shows the gendered impact of having a child on a person's career, with women feeling that they lose out from having a child more than men. Nine in 10 mothers believe that having a child negatively impacts a person's career. This should not be the case.

The low uptake of the right to shared parental leave is evidence that there are still barriers that stop parents taking equal time away from work to look after a child. Often a lack of transparency over what support measures are available for new parents and caregivers, and a lack of understanding from employers, can contribute to them lacking confidence about their options.

Employers have nothing to fear from supporting parents: quite the opposite. Our polling shows a clear business case for improved parental leave. More than half of all adults polled, and almost two-thirds of 18-34-year-olds, said that parental leave policies are a useful indication of whether an organisation is a good employer, even if they are not planning to have a child themselves.

That means it is easier to attract employees if you have good parental leave policies than if you do not. Organisations which offer good parental support reap the rewards by attracting the best talent.

Flexible working arrangements once a child has arrived – and once parents have returned to work – is one measure that can make a real difference, if employers are able to offer it. At Vodafone, our Future Ready way of working allows our employees – depending on their role – the opportunity to work at home, at one of our sites, or in a 'blended' environment combining some time working from home and some at a Vodafone site. We have seen how well we can work together virtually since the Covid-19 pandemic began and this flexibility enabled many of our employees to balance their busy lives better.

Vodafone is proud to offer 16 weeks fully paid leave for non-birthing parents to all our employees globally. And both our global parental leave and maternity policy include being paid for five days work, while working four days, for the first six months after returning to work. Regular catch-ups and keeping in touch days while parents are on extended periods of parental leave can also help parents stay connected to their job and their colleagues, and make the transition back to work easier.

This report makes recommendations for both the Government and for employers on how to provide greater support for new parents and caregivers in the workplace, including on flexible working, reviewing the effectiveness of shared parental leave, considering whether the statutory right to up to two weeks paternity leave is still fit for purpose and providing the digital tools for employers to support flexible working.

Employers rely on working parents; we need to make sure that working parents can rely on their employers too.

**Clare Corkish**  
HR Director, Vodafone UK

# Chapter 1: The state of play for working parents and caregivers

Becoming a parent for most is joyful, fun and rewarding, but it is always life-changing – and that needs to be reflected in the way new parents are treated at work. Most people who have a child do so during their working life. There are more than 13 million working parents in the UK<sup>2</sup> making up almost half of the UK workforce, and that means millions of parents having to decide how best to balance the demands of parenting with their job.

Many new parents and caregivers will get help from family members, friends and networks of other parents. But given that most people who have a child also have a job, support from employers can be as important.

For employers, making sure that parents and caregivers are supported is a crucial part of attracting and retaining the best staff: not just those who already have children, but employees and potential employees who know that they might want to have children in future. Employers who want to support new parents first need to identify and understand the challenges they face.

To support this report we commissioned three separate polls.

- A poll of 1,052 UK residents aged 18+ who have become a parent in the last five years was carried out by Survation in October 2020.
- Another national representative poll of 1,018 UK residents was carried out by Survation in October 2020.
- A subsequent poll of 2,007 UK adults, including 1,217 workers, was carried out by Opinium in July 2021, also for this report.

## Parental leave

There is a clear disconnect between statutory provision for parental leave and what many new parents require. Statutory parental leave gives only minimal support, and the uptake of shared parental leave is especially low. A survey conducted in 2020 found that fewer than one in 10 working parents were taking advantage of shared parental leave.<sup>3</sup>

- 35% thought the parental leave offered by their employer was sufficient for all parents.
- 31% thought paternity leave was insufficient.
- 15% thought maternity leave was insufficient.

## Career impact

Our polling found that 84% of respondents, including nearly 9 in 10 mothers (89%) think that having a child has a negative impact on a person's career, with possible impacts including loss of income, slower progression, the cost of childcare, having to take time off and less flexibility.

- 89% of mothers think that having a child has a negative impact on a person's career.

## Confidence

Taking time away from work to have a child, especially for an extended period of parental leave, can lead to a loss of professional confidence. Previous research for Vodafone examined how those returning to work faced a reduced level of confidence.<sup>4</sup>

- Almost two-fifths of those we polled (37%) experienced a loss of professional confidence in their ability during their break.

## Childcare costs

There is plenty of research which suggests that the cost of childcare is a major barrier for mothers in particular when considering returning to work.<sup>5</sup> Our polling supports this, with almost twice as many women (49%) as men (26%) saying that childcare costs were among the main challenges they experienced when returning to work after parental leave. Childcare costs can wipe out, or at least significantly reduce, the economic benefits of returning to work, and given the gendered pattern of taking time off when a baby is born, this tends to impact women's choices more than men's.

- 49% of women said that they were worried about childcare costs after returning to work.
- 26% around half as many men were worried about childcare costs after returning to work.

## Adjusting to parenthood

Stress and maintaining a work-life balance are issues that new parents often face when they come back to the workplace after a period away looking after a new baby.

- 39% found it harder to maintain a work-life balance.
- 33% reported feeling more stress.

## Lack of support

Too many of the parents in our polling said that they did not feel adequately supported by their employer on returning from parental leave.

- 10% of women returning from parental leave said they did not feel supported at all.

## Loneliness

New parents often experience loneliness when they have a child. Our poll found that there was a gender divide on this issue. Women were nearly twice as likely as men to say that becoming a parent resulted in them becoming more lonely or isolated.

- 60% of women stated they felt more lonely or isolated after having a child, compared to 33% of men.
- Of those who reported feeling lonelier, 73% agreed that feeling disconnected from the workplace was a factor.

# Chapter 2: Strengthening support for working parents and caregivers

Making parents, and especially new parents, feel supported in the workplace means addressing the challenges outlined in the previous chapter. That means, where possible, action by both government and employers. Employers, where they can, should seek to improve what is available to new parents and caregivers, including more flexible working options, enhanced parental leave and efforts to keep new parents who are away from work connected with their colleagues, if this is what the employee would like, and confident about their ability to return.

## **Flexible working**

The pandemic has brought a recognition of the benefits that flexible home working can provide to many parents and caregivers, as well as a better understanding on the part of employers that there are several roles that can be performed effectively with less time in an office or other working environment. Our polling found that only 16% of workers think that employers should go back to the same working arrangements as before the pandemic. Employers should, where they can, respond positively to this and offer better flexible working practices to help all employees, which will in turn support new parents and caregivers in the workplace.

- 48% of workers think employers should provide more flexibility on working from home.
- 18% of workers think employers should provide more flexibility on working hours.

The increased presence of flexible working practices in the workplace, as suggested in the Government's flexible working consultation, would therefore likely have multiple benefits. Flexible working, however, only resolves some of the needs of new parents and caregivers.

## **Vodafone's Remote Working Solution**

With more people now working remotely, it's crucial for businesses to have the right long-term solutions in place. Vodafone UK's Remote Working Solution helps businesses adapt to their employees' remote working needs, using Vodafone Device Manager Cloud (VDM Cloud) and 5G-ready Vodafone Red tariffs. Vodafone's Remote Working Solution brings together everything – from connectivity and devices, through to security. So, an entire workforce can work efficiently from anywhere.

## Vodafone's 'Future Ready' way of working

During the pandemic, Vodafone kept the UK connected at a time when it mattered more than ever. To meet the pressing needs of its customers while keeping its employees safe, the company changed the way it worked almost overnight with the vast majority of employees working remotely using technology and digital tools to serve our customers.

Vodafone saw how well its teams worked together virtually during the pandemic and this flexibility enabled many of its employees to better balance and juggle busy lives. Therefore, as Vodafone developed its workplace policies, the company viewed flexibility and trust as the core principle that should underpin this new way of working. From September 2021, Vodafone UK colleagues, depending on the specifics of their role, work in one of three ways\*:

- 'Blended' working – staff, such as support and head office colleagues, who will be able to work partly from home and partly in an office, with the pattern being agreed between employees and local line managers.
- At home – some colleagues work from home the majority of the time.
- At a specific site or in the field – e.g. retail store staff and network engineers, respectively.

As these plans were developed, Vodafone focused on finding the right balance that works for the business and that achieves the best of both worlds for the people who make the company the success it is.

*\* subject to relevant Government guidance*

## Vodafone's Global Parental Leave Policy

Vodafone has introduced a new parental leave policy for non-birthing parents which means that employees worldwide are offered 16 weeks of fully paid leave. The workplace policy is designed to support families by giving every parent the opportunity to have more time with children new to their family. In the UK this has been introduced in the form of an extension to our Paternity Leave policy.

Any employee whose partner is having a baby, adopts a child or becomes a parent through surrogacy will have the flexibility to take up to 16 weeks paid leave during the first 18 months. Vodafone employees can also phase their return from parental leave by working the equivalent of a 30-hour week at full pay for a further six months, in the same way that can be done for Vodafone's Maternity Policy.

## Parental leave policies

Encouraging shared parental leave could allow for a rebalance of time out of the workplace between men and women. This could reduce other challenges that new mothers face around confidence and perceived loss of skills.

The gender pay and progression gap is an ingrained issue in many workplaces, and inadequate parental leave policy can, therefore, be both a result and a driver of this gender disparity. Unbalanced parental leave policies perpetuate the idea of differently gendered parental responsibilities, with mothers in a caring role and fathers as providers. Good employer practice can help counter some of these assumptions and start to break down the barriers that women, and mothers in particular, face. Employers, where they can, should consider reviewing their parental leave policies.

## Keeping in touch during parental leave

Our research identifies loneliness and loss of confidence as significant challenges for new parents, with disconnection from the workplace being a factor in this. Employers have a role to play in helping their employees stay connected, both socially with their colleagues and in terms of giving them confidence about their ability to return to work effectively, if this is what the employee would like.

Technology can be a simple part of the solution for this, as it can enable remote contact while parents are away on leave, as well as helping to facilitate a phased return to work or a flexible working arrangement later. Training line managers so that they can best support new parents and caregivers, offering refresher training for them once they return to work, including in digital skills where relevant, can all be helpful. Offering 'Keeping In Touch Days' and project and organisational updates, if the employee would like this while on leave, are all measures that can help mitigate any loss of confidence that new parents and caregivers might face. In order to create a supportive environment for new parents, employers should be receptive to their needs and tailor their practices accordingly where they can.

### Case study: support for employees and employee networks

Vodafone provides a number of mental health and wellbeing support initiatives for its employees, including mental health first aiders, access to a 24/7 remote GP and a dedicated internal service providing free, professional and confidential counselling.

These policies and services are complemented by several internal networks for Vodafone employees, helping to support and connect employees. One example is the Ready Parents & Carers Network:

"We first set up the Ready Parents & Carers Network in 2019, as a grassroots initiative to provide holistic support for our caregiving colleagues.

The network is led by a group of passionate volunteers, with representatives from a wide variety of caregiving backgrounds such as single parents, fathers, those going through fertility or adoption journeys, young carers, 'sandwich carers' and many more.

Now serving more than 700 members as one of Vodafone's core Diversity & Inclusion employee networks, we offer practical help, policy guidance and wellbeing signposting for employees, along with guidance for line managers on creating a culture of compassion and inclusivity in their teams."

**Emily Hutchison, Co-founder & Chair, Ready Parents & Carers Network**

# Chapter 3: The business case for supporting working parents and caregivers

Good parental leave policies are not just good for working parents and caregivers, they are hugely beneficial to employers too, and act as a valuable signal to potential applicants. The type of parental leave policies workplaces offer can be viewed as an indication of what their wider employment practices are like. For potential recruits, parental leave policies can be a deciding factor on whether to apply for a job or accept a job offer; for existing employees, they can make the difference over whether to stay or leave.

Our polling found that this is especially the case for younger workers (under 35s), who are most likely to be of an age when they are either considering having a child or think they may do so in future.

- 52% of all adults and 64% of 18-34 year olds agree that parental leave policies are a useful indication of whether someone is a good employer, even if they are not planning to have a baby yourself.
- 37% of all adults and 55% of 18-34 year olds agree that they would be more likely to apply for a job if they knew the employer had good parental leave policies.
- 33% of all adults and 51% of all 18-34 year olds agree that they would be less likely to apply for a job if they knew the employer had poor parental leave policies.
- 12% of all adults and 25% of all 18-34 year olds said that they have decided not to apply for a job because they thought the employer's parental leave policies were inadequate.
- 9% of all adults and 21% said that they have turned down a job offer because they thought the employer's parental leave policies were inadequate.
- 9% of all adults and 18% of 18-34 year olds said that they have left a job because they thought the employer's parental leave policies were inadequate.

Research from Working Families shows that striving for more flexible and family-friendly workplaces pays dividends for employers. Nearly three in five parents (58%) in the 2019 Modern Families Index reported having a flexible and family-friendly employer would make them more likely to stay.<sup>6</sup>

# Chapter 4: Policy recommendations

**Employers** should be encouraged to take the following measures where possible:

- **Employers, where they can, should adopt enhanced parental leave policies and be clear and transparent about their parental policies, particularly in the recruitment process.** Adopting an open and enhanced approach to parental leave helps to destigmatise taking leave and improve gender equality in the workplace, allowing more women to stay in the workforce if they wish. Providing non-birthing parents with a larger amount of leave also encourages more men to take on caring roles, whilst making those who are already caregivers recognised.
- **Employers should reflect on the benefits of remote and flexible working during the pandemic and, where suitable, continue with these practices in the future.** Whilst every organisation will have different needs, the changed way of working for many during the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that not every role requires a physical presence in the workplace five days a week, without impacts on productivity for many organisations. Employers should reflect on the benefits that remote and flexible working have for carers and parents, and consider how they can continue to incorporate such changes moving forward, including through the technologies that will help support this, in a way that works for both the employer and employees.
- **Employers, where they can, should strengthen internal support systems for new parents and caregivers.** Strengthening internal guidance and mechanisms on how to support new parents and caregivers, such as educating line managers, can help to ensure that they feel supported by their employers and ease their transition back to work after parental leave. Employee networks can help bring together new parents and allow them to share their experiences and challenges, whilst buddying and mentoring can provide support. Policies such as 'Keeping In Touch Days' - or more informally, just staying in touch with colleagues in a social capacity - if this is what the employee would like - can help prevent new parents from feeling completely cut off from the world of work.

**The Government** should also consider the following:

- **The Government should also consider reviewing both shared parental leave and paternity leave.** The Government should use this to determine why the uptake of shared paternal leave is relatively low and whether there should be changes to encourage uptake. The Government should consider whether paternity leave is still fit for purpose under modern ways of working.
- **Government support for technology adoption.** Given the importance of technology in supporting flexible working, Government should support SMEs to access the latest technology. This should include both software and hardware, and could be implemented through a voucher scheme, tax incentive such as the salary sacrifice scheme, or grant to employers and/or carers. The Help to Grow: Digital programme announced in the Budget 2021 is a good start and should be expanded to include incentives to encourage SMEs move to newer, more efficient mobile technology, including 5G, which would help support more flexible forms of working.
- **Government support for digital infrastructure rollout.** Government support for the digital infrastructure to underpin this technology is also required, to complement the significant progress already made by the industry. In particular, 5G and full fibre broadband have the potential to unlock productivity and enable economic growth across the UK and support more flexible forms of working. Government needs to commit to change the current investment and policy model through its Wireless Infrastructure Strategy to free up the resources that will be needed to drive technology rollout and adoption. This includes incentives to invest using government procurement, incentives to create a market for 5G/Internet of Things technology and policy support such as planning reform to lower the cost of network rollout.

# Annex: UK statutory parental leave entitlement

## **Maternity pay and leave**

Statutory Maternity leave is 52 weeks and it is split into two blocks of 26 weeks. The first is ordinary Maternity leave and the second 26 weeks are additional. Pay is paid for up to 39 weeks. In the first six weeks new mothers get 90% of their average weekly earnings, and for the next 33 they get either £151.97 or 90% of their average weekly earnings (whichever is lower). Tax and National Insurance are deducted.<sup>7</sup>

To qualify for Statutory Maternity pay, you must earn on average £120 a week, give notice and proof that you're pregnant and have worked for your employer 26 weeks continuing into the qualifying week – the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth.

## **Paternity pay and leave**

A parent whose partner is having a baby, adopting a child or having a baby through surrogacy is eligible for one or two weeks paid Paternity leave and Paternity pay. Throughout this time, employment rights are protected and this includes the right to pay rises, to build up holiday and return to work.<sup>8</sup> The statutory weekly rate of Paternity pay is £151.97 or 90% of their average weekly earnings (whichever is lower). Tax and National Insurance are deducted.

To qualify for Statutory Paternity pay, you must be an employee, give the correct notice and have worked for your employer 26 weeks continuing into the qualifying week – the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth.

Prospective parents claiming paternity leave must tell their employer 15 weeks before the baby is due when the due date is, when they would like their leave to start and if they would like one or two weeks leave.

Those whose partners are having a baby are entitled to time off work to attend two antenatal appointments. Those who are adopting can get time off for two adoption appointments.

## **Shared Parental pay and leave**

The Government currently stipulates that employees may be eligible for Shared Paternity leave and Statutory Shared Parental pay if they and their partner are either having a baby, adopting a child or having a baby through a surrogacy arrangement. This means that parents can share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay between them. The pay and the leave must be shared in the first year after the child is born. The leave can be taken in blocks or all at one time, and both parents can also be off at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

Statutory Shared Parental pay is £151.97 a week or 90% of a claimant's average weekly earnings whichever is lower. To be eligible for Shared Parental leave and pay you and your partner must have been employed continuously by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by end of the 15th week before the due date and stay with the same employer until you start your leave.

## **Adoption pay and leave**

Statutory adoption leave mirrors maternity leave, meaning one parent "the adopter" gets the same rights and entitlements. This means the leave is 52 weeks and it is split into two blocks of 26 weeks. The first is ordinary maternity leave and the second 26 weeks are optional. Pay is paid for up to 39 weeks. In the first six weeks adopters get 90% of their average weekly earnings, and for the next 33 they get either £151.97 or 90% of their average weekly earnings (whichever is lower). Tax and National Insurance are deducted.<sup>10</sup>

To qualify, you must give the correct notice, must earn on average £120 a week (before tax), give correct notice and proof of adoption or surrogacy and have worked for your employer 26 weeks by the week you are matched with the child.

# Endnotes

- 1 ONS (2019) Families and the Labour Market UK, 2019
- 2 Working Families (2020) Modern Family Index
- 3 People Management (2020) Fewer than one in 10 employees using shared parental leave
- 4 Vodafone (2021) Lost Connections: Supporting Returners into the Workplace in 2021 and Beyond
- 5 TUC (2020) Forced out: The cost of getting childcare wrong
- 6 Working Families (2019) Response on flexible working, parental leave and pay transparency
- 7 Government guidance on Maternity Pay and Leave
- 8 Government guidance on Paternity Pay and Leave
- 9 Government guidance on Shared Parental Pay and Leave
- 10 Government guidance on Adoption Pay and Leave