

Inquiry into pregnancy, maternity and work – focus groups

21 March 2018

Present in the group from the Committee

– Siân Gwenllian AM

ELGC(5)–12–18 Papur 4/ Paper 4

Present in the group from the clerking team

– Chloë Davies (Committee Deputy Clerk)

The group consisted of six women with a variety of work experiences and patterns, including public sector, private sector, small businesses, self-employment and periods of unemployment.

Application of flexible working policies

Inconsistencies in the application of flexible working policies was highlighted as a major issue facing women whilst on maternity leave, or shortly after returning to work. One participant had requested to reduce their hours on a temporary basis, as other colleagues had done, after returning to their teaching post from maternity leave. However they were told by their employer that the reduction in hours would have to be made on a permanent basis, rather than temporary, despite this option evidently being available to other members of staff.

One participant is employed by a university and highlighted a similar issue; that the application of flexible/part-time working policies depends on the role.

Another participant employed by a small business noted that the little guidance they had found for applying for flexible working was very vague. They suggested that a standard/template letter should be available to all, to ensure consistency and fairness.

It was also discussed that employees felt that applications for reduced hours or flexible working were designed so that the employee had to “make the case” to the employer about any potential impacts on the business, and that it shouldn’t be necessary to



prove that business wouldn't be affected if they changed their working pattern. The group agreed that the onus should be on the employer, not the employee, to consider how the business may be affected and the impact.

It was also highlighted that when applying for reduced/flexible hours, requests were always made via a form or on paper, without opportunities to discuss with the individual's manager.

It was also highlighted that workloads can be difficult to manage when working reduced hours, as employees often feel that they are expected to carry out their full-time duties in fewer hours/days.

Job cover whilst on maternity leave

Several participants highlighted that appropriate cover wasn't put in place ahead of them beginning their maternity leave. This resulted in pressure on the employee to complete work ahead of schedule, as well as plan for the time that they would be on maternity leave. It was highlighted that this increases the stress on expectant mothers, at a time when they are advised by health professionals to avoid becoming stressed.

One participant who worked in the private sector found that they were not involved in any discussions or meetings with managers about arranging cover for their post, but were then expected to participate in a lengthy handover process.

Missed opportunities

One participant had requested to teach year groups within the Foundation Phase in their post at a school, and after having waited a significant amount of time for an opportunity, one arose prior to her going on maternity leave, and so she was unable to take up the opportunity.

Unfair treatment by employers

One participant is self-employed but had been working with a small, family-run business for several years before becoming pregnant and taking maternity leave. They were supported during their pregnancy and a new member of staff was employed to cover their leave, but when they requested a meeting to discuss their return to work, they were told that there was no longer a post for them at the company. The replacement member of staff was male, with school age children. They highlighted that there are no rights for self-employed mothers.



Another participant held a senior level role in financial services, and highlighted that colleagues who had children appeared to only be in lower-paid, less senior roles. The participant had applied to work part-time after returning from maternity leave, and whilst this was accepted, upon their return it appeared that their previous role had been taken over by another member of staff, and was only available to a full-time employee. They also felt discriminated against when they requested to express at work as a suitable room wasn't made available.

Cost of raising children

One participant had their first child when they were still at school, and highlighted that ever since, they have not been able to afford full-time employment due to the cost of childcare, combined with not having the skills required to secure a well-paid role. They had been on benefits and child tax credits for periods of time, and felt it was difficult to escape this cycle as benefits are stopped once employment is secured, but wages wouldn't be received for a month.

It was highlighted that there is little clarity around the Welsh Government's offer of 30 hours a week of free early education, currently being piloted in selected local authority areas. One participant noted that the areas in which the offer is being piloted have higher rates of unemployment, but that it should be aimed at helping parents already in employment.



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Present in the group from the Committee

– Jack Sargeant AM

– Bethan Sayed AM

Present in the group from the Assembly Commission

– Gareth Thomas (Research Service)

The group consisted of six women with a variety of work experiences and patterns, including in the public sector, voluntary sector, private sector, self-employment and periods of unemployment.

Flexible working

One participant highlighted that **as soon as you lose the flexibility to work full-time your pay and job opportunities suffer**, which was reflected by the other group members. The availability of part-time work that pays above the National Living Wage was felt to be limited and hard to find. One participant highlighted that in the public sector organisation she works in a colleague was redeployed as she was looking for a part-time role but managers all wanted full-time staff.

One participant had asked to do a job share but the organisation had said she would be required to come in for half a day five days a week, so she was unable to take up the job.

Another participant highlighted that she had been required to do the equivalent of a full-time job in part-time hours, which had increased stress levels.

Another participant who had been employed in the private sector had highlighted that a flexible home-working post had been advertised when she was on maternity leave. She wouldn't have found out about this unless she had checked her work e-mails, however the employer said she couldn't apply for it as she was on maternity leave and they needed someone to start immediately.



It was felt that **gendered expectations of who should be the primary carer** impacted on the flexibility of working mothers in a number of ways. These include society expecting women to be the ones who take time off to look after a sick child, employers not being supportive of male staff when they needed to do this, and women feeling that they needed to get someone else to come and look after a sick child to be able to go into work.

What flexible working should look like

One participant highlighted that her employer, in the public sector, **had adopted good practice in ensuring she could work flexibly**. She had met with her managers on returning to work from maternity leave to discuss how she could work more flexibly. Specific measures included allowing her to work on an annualised hours contract, being able to work full-time hours over 4 days per week, and being given the freedom to manage her own working time.

Unfair treatment by employers

Over half of the participants stated that they had experienced unfair treatment while on maternity leave. Two of the participants **had been made redundant while on maternity leave**, while a third participant had successfully resisted her employer's attempts to make her redundant. In addition, **another participant had come to the end of her fixed-term contract while on maternity leave, but had been replaced by her maternity cover**. The participants who had been made redundant or been facing redundancy highlighted that there is a considerable gap between organisations' policies and the reality on the ground and that employers can find ways around the law if they want to. How policies are applied is down to individuals within organisations.

This was raised in an example given by a participant who had been told her public sector post would be made redundant while she was pregnant. She spent her pregnancy going through a grievance process. Her current head of service left their job shortly after she started maternity leave, and was replaced by a colleague who immediately stopped her redundancy as it would have been illegal. The department subsequently employed another 10 people in similar roles.

One participant had been made redundant while she was on maternity leave as her company's office in Cardiff closed. She was told by one of her friends working in the



organisation about this rather than her manager, and the news came as a complete surprise to her.

Another participant had been told by a trustee of the organisation she was working for that she would be made redundant. She was not aware of this, and found out that other people working in her organisation had been openly discussing her redundancy during meetings. They then ignored e-mails she sent about this, and refused to allow her to hold a grievance meeting in Cardiff so she had to go to London.

Trade union support that women had received was mixed. One participant felt that her union had been helpful, however her case reached the stage where she would have to take it to an employment tribunal which she couldn't afford. However, another participant described the involvement of her union as horrendous, stating that working with heads of service achieved better outcomes.

It was raised that **taking a case to a tribunal is a very stressful process**, that the women involved had not done so as they had new babies and the timeframe for making a complaint is very short.

Returning to work from maternity leave

The participants discussed the difficulties around returning to work, and keeping up with developments in their organisation while on maternity leave. One participant was currently on maternity leave, and was nervous about returning to work as she had experienced problems with her employer negotiating working part-time. Another participant felt that employers could prepare mothers for returning to the workplace by keeping them better informed about what is going on within the organisation – keeping in touch days are useful but a more formal process may be required. Other participants stated that their employer had not kept in contact with them during maternity leave.

One suggestion made by a participant was that **employers should conduct audits to establish the reasons why women may not return to work**, or may leave jobs soon after returning.

Career progression of mothers

Career progression for mothers with young children was felt to be difficult to achieve. One participant stated that she felt that until your child is 9–10 progression is difficult



and you are stuck in your role. She also stated that gendered expectations had led her not to apply for a senior post as she had a young child and would not have had a work-life balance.

Costs of childcare and Welsh Government 30 hours free childcare policy
Many participants raised the cost and availability of childcare as considerable problems for working parents.

Participants felt that private childcare was very expensive, and that costs could result in women giving up paid work as their entire salary could go on childcare. The support provided by grandparents was raised as being key, with 70–80% of support being provided by them in some cases.

The current Welsh Government requirements of 10 hours per week in the term following a child's third birthday was widely felt to have problems. **Members of the group stated that provision was frequently available for half a day, resulting in parents having to use expensive wrap-around care from private nurseries.** This was seen as not presenting value-for-money as it could be as expensive as private childcare for a whole day.

Two participants noted that **state nurseries were often full, and so sometimes children would not be able to access provision immediately.**

One participant noted **the problems facing rural areas**, where there are limited nurseries available, and travel between a state nursery and wrap-around care was not possible due to distance between childcare settings.

The introduction of 30 hours free childcare for working parents was welcomed. **However, there was little knowledge amongst participants about how the Welsh Government's 30 hours free childcare for working parents scheme would operate – one participant highlighted that the fact that many members of the group raised this issue was indicative of the lack of information available.**

It was mentioned that the website only has information on pilot areas, and that a more easy-to-access website is needed.

There were a number of issues that the participants wanted greater clarity on. These were:



- Whether the 30 hours care can be split between providers
- How the childcare offer will work where a parent wishes to return to work
- What the impact on private nursery fees for under 3s would be, as in England they had increased as the rate paid did not cover costs of providing the childcare.
- Provision will need to cover the whole day rather than parents having to pay for expensive wrap-around care from private nurseries which is uncapped and can be very expensive.
- Whether there will be sufficient places to deliver free childcare, especially in rural areas.



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Attendees

Committee members

– John Griffiths AM

– Jenny Rathbone AM

Assembly Commission staff

– Liz Wilkinson (Committee Clerk)

The group consisted of four women all of whom had worked, or continued to work in professional jobs. Two of the four women were unemployed and actively seeking work having either taken redundancy or giving up work to look after children. Three participants worked in the private sector, and one (who was now unemployed) worked in the public sector.

General comments on experiences

None of the participants reported direct negative experiences as a result of their pregnancy or maternity leave, although some reported negative undertones among management towards women of a child-bearing age. Some participants reported concern about the impact of pregnancy on their future career prospects within the company within which they worked.

One participant reported that her employer (a private law firm) had been supportive during her pregnancy but she had subsequently faced barriers when returning to work.

One participant reported that she only advised her employer that she was four months following her job offer as she was concerned that it would have a negative effect on the outcome of her interview.

One participant who worked in a private law firm explained that, while there was no obvious discriminatory practices within the firm, comments made by her employer, seemingly in jest, had led to her delaying having children. Another respondent



suggested that women within the organisation she had previously worked for had delayed having children because of the risk of redundancy.

Support for pregnant women and those on maternity leave

While participants reported that their employers had been supportive, some participants suggested they were nervous about requesting things that they were entitled to, for example KIT (Keeping in Touch) days.

There was general consensus that the level of support received depends on an employee's relationship with their manager. One participant

One participant explained that employees who may be considering having children should not have to seek out relevant policies. She suggested that, if an employer is aware that an employee is considering having children it may affect her future career prospects.

Respondents emphasised the importance of employers having clear and easily accessible Human Resources policies, not only for existing employees but for prospective employees. It was felt that public sector organisations were more likely to make their policies publicly available than private firms.

Returning to work

One participant had returned to work part-time hours (in a private law firm) after her first child. She reported that, in reality, this involved working extra hours at home in order to ensure that the work she was expected to do was completed. Essentially, she was working a full-time job in part-time hours. There was an expectation from her employer that she would work extra hours at home if necessary.

The above led to the participant resigning after the birth of her second child.

Another participant had a similar experience. She explained that she had reduced her hours to part-time after having her child and had struggled to do her job within those hours. She also reported that she was doing a full-time job in part time hours and she had recently applied to increase to full-time hours.

Information





National Assembly for Wales

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee