



17 March 2011

The Hon. David Cameron MP
Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and
Minister for the Civil Service

Dear Prime Minister,

We would like to express our deep concern at reports that the Government will remove the obligation on employers of fewer than 10 staff to comply with current maternity and paternity leave arrangements.

Under the proposed arrangements, many new mothers and fathers will miss out on maternity and paternity leave. We do not accept that permitting individual employees to negotiate directly with their employers on this question will result in satisfactory leave arrangements. In an environment of rising unemployment and widespread pregnancy discrimination, employees are in a very weak negotiating position.

Maternity and paternity leave are fundamental rights for parents. These rights enable women and men to balance their family and work responsibilities and remain in the workforce during their childbearing years.

Statutory leave is essential to reducing the rates of pregnancy discrimination. Research from 2005 found that half of all pregnant women and new mothers experience some form of pregnancy discrimination and 30 000 women each year lose their jobs¹. Advice services, law firms and trade unions have reported significant increases in the rate of pregnancy discrimination since the onset of the recession².

Legislated maternity and paternity leave are of central importance in overcoming gender inequalities in paid work and in caring roles. Taking time off for caring responsibilities remains a key factor in the persistent gender pay gap³. The introduction of Additional Paternity Leave provides an important step towards gender equity in the division of caring responsibilities.

¹ Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005, *Greater expectations: Final report of the EOC's investigation into discrimination against new and expectant mothers in the workplace*

² Alliance Against Pregnancy Discrimination, 2009

³ W. Olsen & S. Walby, 2004, *Modelling gender pay gaps. Working paper series no. 17*, Equal Opportunities Commission

Maternity and paternity leave were originally introduced as health and safety measures and the health benefits are well-documented. The Marmot Review of socio-economic determinants of health found that paid parental leave is associated with better maternal and child health including lower rates of maternal depression, lower rates of infant mortality, fewer low birth-weight babies, more breast-feeding and more use of preventative healthcare⁴. The Marmot Review identified improvements in parental leave as a priority for overcoming health inequalities.

Maternity leave is of particular importance in promoting breastfeeding. Return to work is a major reason for women ceasing breastfeeding and women taking shorter periods of leave are more likely to cease breastfeeding earlier⁵. Over their lifetime, breastfed babies have reduced rates of many infectious and immunological diseases, reduced rates of some cancers, better cardiovascular health and reduced rates of obesity. Mothers who breastfeed have reduced rates of breast and ovarian cancer⁶.

Maternity and paternity leave are associated with achieving better child development outcomes. For this reason, the Graham Allen review of early intervention has recommended moving towards the significantly more generous maternity and paternity leave and pay arrangements provided in Sweden⁷.

Parents who are not entitled to maternity or paternity leave are forced to choose between remaining in their job or caring for their children. This has long term impacts on family income and workforce participation. In the current difficult employment market, parents who choose to take time off to care for their children risk ending up long term unemployed.

We do not think it appropriate to exempt any employers from current statutory obligations to provide maternity and paternity leave. The needs of parents and their children do not vary with the size of their employer's business. We recognize that employers with fewer than 10 staff may not have ready access to human resources expertise and may be uncertain of their obligations towards employees who are pregnant or new parents. We would encourage the Government to consider strategies to provide them with useful guidance and hands-on support in order to bridge this knowledge gap.

We ask that the Government reconsiders plans to remove the statutory maternity and paternity leave entitlements of employees of smaller businesses. This would result in serious and potentially long term negative impacts on mothers, fathers and their children at a time when many families are already under stress.

In response to the public interest in this issue, the contents of this letter will be made public.

⁴ Fair Society, *Health Lives, The Marmot Review: Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010*, 2010

⁵ K. Bolling, C. Grant, B. Hamlyn & A. Thornton, 2007, *Infant feeding survey 2005*

⁶ World Health Organisation, 2009, *Infant and young child feeding*

⁷ *Early intervention: the next steps*, 2011

Signed by



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cc.

Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Lord President of the Council

Rt. Hon. George Osborne MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer

Rt. Hon. Dr Vincent Cable MP, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills

Rt. Hon. Theresa May MP, Minister for Women and Equalities

Rt. Hon. Mark Prisk MP, Minister of State for Business and Enterprise

Rt. Hon. Andrew Lansley CBE MP, Secretary of State for Health

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