

# Four reforms that shared parental leave needs <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Jackson, Sarah

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## EXCERPTS

Shared Parental Leave (SPL) was introduced to give parents more choice and fathers a more realistic opportunity to take a longer period of paid time off with their new child.

But, as there often is with any new policy – particularly policies that engender culture change – there have been teething problems. One has been awareness. When we surveyed fathers about SPL last year, a quarter didn't know about it. So, we welcomed the government's recent campaign to promote the scheme to parents.

Whether the campaign succeeds in raising awareness and, ultimately, use of SPL, remains to be seen. But as the advertising element of the government's campaign draws to a close, Working Families' has identified four reforms to the scheme which we believe could make a real impact on enabling more families to 'share the joy' of caring for their new child.

Currently, only employees who have been with the same employer for at least 41 weeks can take SPL. Maternity leave is a day one right – open to all employees from the start of their employment. Making SPL a day one right would send a clear signal that SPL isn't maternity leave's poor relation, and that it is no less valued. Parents need to give their employer eight weeks' notice to book a period of SPL; we'd see this requirement remaining in place, so employers have time to plan cover arrangements.

But what about the increasing number of UK parents that are self-employed? Whilst self-employed women can return to work earlier to create a pot of shared leave and pay for their employee partners, they cannot take their allowance in blocks. Things are even gloomier for self-employed men, who have access to neither leave nor pay, and their employee partners can't transfer anything to them. And if both parents are self-employed, neither can take SPL.

We believe that all new parents – no matter what their employment status – should have the opportunity to share parental leave in their baby's first year. That's why we're supporting Tracy Brabin MP's Private Members Bill currently before Parliament, which would enable self-employed women to share their leave and pay with their partners, and to take leave in blocks without losing pay.

And what about redundancy? If a father is made redundant, he loses his entitlement to SPL and pay unless he remains employed in the week before his leave was due to start. Fathers should retain the right to this pay if they are made redundant, in the same way mothers remain entitled to maternity pay.

Both parents being able to have time off together could be important for them if their baby dies or is stillborn. Our final suggestion is that SPL is amended so that parents have the choice to use it – as opposed to maternity leave – in such tragic circumstances, if that suited their needs better.

The way that SPL currently works creates barriers for parents using it – the irony being there are very often fathers. The government is undertaking a review of how SPL is working. I've written to the Minister leading this, asking him to consider the reforms we're suggesting; we are supported by twelve other voluntary and professional organisations, law firms and think tanks. We need to go beyond simply sharing the joy, that is, encouraging those parents lucky enough to be eligible for SPL to consider it, by extending eligibility to more parents, and making sure parents in redundancy situations don't miss out.

Ultimately though, we believe any ambition to 'increase the joy' must see a properly paid period of independent leave just for fathers introduced alongside SPL, helping the UK go further on the journey towards equality at home and at work.

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