

Use of shared parental leave dropped 17 per cent during Covid, study finds ^[1]

Low pay offered under SPL is a deterrent for parents, experts warn, but predict increase in applications as staff return to the workplace

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EXCERPTS

Use of shared parental leave (SPL) declined for the first time since its launch in 2016 during the pandemic, research has found, with experts saying it is more important than ever that firms support families.

A study by EMW found that just 11,200 couples applied to use the scheme between 2020 and 2021: a 17 per cent fall on the previous year, when a record 13,100 couples applied.

In comparison, the firm's analysis found that 598,000 women took maternity leave in the last year, indicating that just 2 per cent of women who took some form of parental leave last year used SPL.

Charlotte Woodworth, gender equality director at Business in the Community, said take-up levels of SPL were "already abysmal", and the news that they had fallen further needed to act as a "wake-up call" for employers.

"The shared parental leave system is complex, poorly compensated and most significantly rests on new dads being willing to take chunks out of a new mum's maternity leave," she said.

To properly support families, employers need to provide "properly paid, ring fenced paternity leave policies and working cultures that support true flexible working and a culture that better supports people to combine paid work with wider life," said Woodworth.

Through SPL, parents can share up to 50 weeks of leave, including up to 37 weeks of paid leave, between them in the first year after their child is born or placed within their family.

The rate of pay is £151.20 per week – half the UK minimum wage for full-time employees – and to be eligible parents must share responsibility for the child at birth, as well as meet work and pay criteria which differ depending on how parents want to share the leave.

SPL allows couples to take leave in blocks separated by periods of work, or take it all at once, and they can also choose to be off work together or to stagger both the leave and pay.

Claire McCartney, senior resourcing and inclusion adviser at the CIPD, said that the level of pay offered by SPL acted as the "biggest deterrent" for parents.

"We would encourage employers to enhance the level of pay they're offering where possible," she said, however, she acknowledged that not every organisation was in a position to do this.

McCartney also advised that "line managers should be educated on the different parental leave policies on offer in their organisation", as well as seeing managers properly support employees taking up these options.

However, Yvonne Gallagher, employment partner at Harbottle and Lewis, suggested that the pandemic could have caused the decline in applications from parents because of the increased flexible working over the last year.

"Many of those who were able to work from home during the pandemic restrictions are likely to have found greater scope to adjust their workloads to allow necessary flexibility," she said, adding that many flexible working requests seek the right to work from home on some or all working days.

Now that firms are returning to offices more regularly, she projected not only would there be an increase in requests for SPL as workplace attendance returns to normal, but that rates would exceed previous levels. "Employees have come to value levels of flexibility they had not previously experienced so employers are already preparing for more requests," she said.

In 2016, the first year of SPL was available, 8,700 couples applied for the scheme, according to EMW's research. The number of applicants then steadily increased by either one or two per cent every year, until the last year when the number of applicants decreased.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: parental leave ^[4]

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Source URL (modified on 3 Nov 2021): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/11/use-shared-parental-leave-dropped-17-cent-during-covid-study-finds>

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