



## **All Party Parliamentary Group for Families in the Early Years**

**Chair: Lucy Powell MP**

Vice Chairs: Bishop of Durham and Tim Loughton MP

Secretary: Ian Mearns MP; Treasurer: Earl of Listowel

Secretariat: Coram Family and Childcare

### **Removing barriers to work for parents of young children**

**Committee Room 10, House of Commons, Monday 21 October 2019.**

Lucy Powell MP welcomed the guests and speakers, and introduced the topic of what factors influence whether mothers stay in work after they have a baby. She said that the speakers will look at childcare, employment, the influence of new mothers' own families and networks, and discuss the solutions that will help to make sure that every parent can make genuine choices about their working and family lives.

Claire Harding, Head of Coram Family and Childcare, opened the meeting by presenting new research conducted by Understanding Society in conjunction with Coram Family and Childcare. She said that supporting mothers to remain in or return to the workplace increases family income, reduces the need for benefits and improves productivity by retaining women's valuable skills in the economy. Women taking long breaks at the start of their child's life will often find it hard to return to work at their previous skill or salary level. The research finds that women working part time who live in the areas of Great Britain where childcare is most expensive are less likely to return to work after having a baby than women who live in areas where childcare is cheaper. Childcare prices seem to be a particular barrier to work for such women who are earning a lower income. Single parents, and those with caring responsibilities, are also less likely to return to work after childbirth. Women who use informal childcare, such as having grandparents care for their child, are much more likely to return to work than those who do not have this option. This means that interventions which reduce the cost of childcare, or which support family networks so that more women can access informal childcare, could help to remove barriers to work for mothers.

Julia Waltham, Head of Policy and Campaigns at Working Families, discussed how parents could be supported in the workplace through improved access to childcare, flexible working and better job design to make jobs 'human sized'. She said that at the point at which parents make decisions about whether or not to return to work, access to affordable childcare is a significant consideration. The fact that most parents only become eligible for free childcare once their child turns three means that there is a cliff edge of support. She said that childcare vouchers, which are now closed to new applicants and being phased out, were a useful opportunity for employers to have a conversation with employees about their caring

responsibilities at home. While the right to request flexible working has supported some parents to get the flexibility they need at work, it is not portable from job to job, leaving some parents feeling like they cannot move to a new job. If employers were instead made to think about how jobs could be performed flexibly before those jobs went to market, employers could be made to think more closely about how they design jobs to fit people's lives. Finally, giving all parents the right to return to a job that they leave to have a child could support parents back into work, and making keeping in touch days mandatory could help parents to stay in closer touch with their employers.

Laura Dewar, Policy Officer at Gingerbread, spoke about the particular importance of childcare to single parents with pre-school aged children, and the issues they face, including those caused by requirements under the benefits system for single parents to work. The requirements for parents to work to access support through the benefits system have changed – while in 2008 a parent could look after their child at home until they were 16 years old, now Universal Credit rules require parents to look for work when their child is two and to be in work when their child is three. Meanwhile, just 15 percent of job adverts include flexible working options, meaning that parents seeking to return to work after taking a break to have a child will struggle to find a flexible working arrangement. This is especially important to single parents because they cannot share their caring responsibilities, such as collecting a child from childcare, with a partner. However, there are some positive stories that Laura has heard from parents, such as employers going out of their way to be flexible such as by creating job share roles. Too often, single parents trade down their work aspirations to fit around their childcare costs. Laura recommended a childcare deposit scheme to help single parents cope with the upfront costs of childcare, a review of the upper limits of childcare support via Universal Credit to recognise the cost of childcare today, and for BEIS to introduce a day-one right to flexible working.

Dr Elizabeth Reed, Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Southampton, discussed the influence of parents' attitudes to and experiences of work on their young children's beliefs and ideas about work. She said that when mothers work, their young children grow up to have behaviours and attitudes towards work which are different to other children. For instance, seeing their mother work makes young girls more likely to work as an adult, and makes young boys more likely to help out with caring responsibilities as an adult. However, children do not always go on to do what their parents did: for instance, young boys who grow up with a working mother who earns less than her male partner may grow up to be fathers who share housework more equitably with their partner and show more respect for their partner's income than their father did. Research suggests that showing is as important as telling, and that for children, seeing a parent helping with housework can be more influential than being told that helping with housework is a good thing to do. Elizabeth recommended that enabling a range of ways for mothers and fathers to participate in work can help them to make positive choices and to model positive behaviours which will influence their children's attitudes and behaviours in the future.

The meeting was then opened up to discussion from other attendees. A question was raised about the role that parental leave can play in supporting parents back into work. There was a discussion about the importance of communicating to parents the benefits to families of using shared parental leave (SPL), and about whether splitting the leave available via SPL into blocks dedicated to each parent, which must be used or lost, would encourage more parents to make use of it.

A concern was raised about whether by calling for support for parents to develop their networks and access more informal care campaigners would be accepting an inadequate formal care system. There was a discussion about recognising the important role currently played by informal care in supporting some mothers back to work and what pragmatism requires of campaigners who are calling for policy changes which seek to improve mothers' access to work. There was also a discussion about the early years workforce and how there is a need for a continued campaign for better pay, access to qualifications and continued professional development to ensure that childcare workers too can overcome barriers to work when they become parents.

The psychological impact on mothers of returning to work was discussed. It was pointed out that single parents can find this especially difficult because, for example, they lack a partner with whom to share the responsibility of waking up in the middle of the night when their baby wakes up. It was raised that many mothers are keen to return to work to reclaim a part of their identity, but at the same time there is often pressure on mothers not to do so and instead to care for their child.