

Women Aged 30-39: why are they the largest demographic to leave teaching every year?

A 2018-21 study by The MTPT Project

The names of the participants in these interviews have been changed.

08. Don't Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period

Our original survey did not ask teachers about the impact of the return to work period on their decision to leave teaching. However, during the qualitative interviews, 21 out of 27 participants who were mothers referred to the immediate period of their return – i.e. the few weeks bridging their transition from maternity leave back into work – or their experience of their first year back at work following their leave.

The majority of participants referred to this return to work experience in response to the follow up question included only in the interview, which asked them to describe their maternity leave experiences. Other comments were in response to the request to expand on the following reasons for leaving, chosen in the original survey:

- Family commitments – children
- Lack of flexible or part-time working arrangements in teaching
- Workload
- Lifestyle choice i.e. wanting to work fewer hours, seeking a better work life balance or to pursue other interests
- Pressure from educational monitoring bodies or school leadership and management
- Lack of progression opportunities in teaching
- School culture
- Mental health or wellbeing
- Lack of job satisfaction

In addition, participants referred to the return to work period when responding to the other follow up question posed during the interview:

- Are there any other factors that influenced your decision to leave teaching that you'd like to talk to me about now?

One participant spoke about her return to work in response to a self-selected reason included in her initial survey:

- Bullying from middle leadership following return from maternity leave

Given that such a high percentage of participants felt compelled to cover this return to work period when explaining what had led them to leave teaching, more emphasis should be placed on this experience in future research into retention amongst female teachers aged 30-39. As mentioned in **02. What did we do and how did we do it?** the initial survey was

designed in response to a number of reports on teacher retention and engagement. Some of these referred to the maternity period, or childcare / caring responsibilities as a factor in teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession, but – like the period of maternity leave itself – there remains little research that provides a detailed insight into the specific return to work stage.

Data that *is* available informs us that the rate of mothers returning to the workforce in education is higher than the average across all industries, with 87% of mothers working in education returning in comparison to 83% across all industries¹. This is comparable to what the NFER considers the 'similar professions' of nursing and healthcare, and social workers² where 85% of mothers return to work following maternity leave³. However, because of the conditions attached to teachers' enhanced maternity pay, mothers are obliged to return to work for 13 weeks (inclusive of holiday periods) – approximately a term if the return does not fall either side of the summer holidays – to avoid paying back the 12 weeks of half pay that increases teachers' maternity pay beyond the statutory six weeks of full / 90% pay. This contractual 'clawback' period is not exclusive to teaching, but exists under different terms at universities, and many private organisations⁴.

The 87% therefore, may be deceptive: teachers' decision to leave during this return to work period is simply delayed to avoid financial penalties. Indeed, in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, we saw that 7 participants (27%) did not return to teaching at all following their maternity leave, choosing to go without, or pay back their enhanced maternity pay⁵. The MTPT Project's 2022 Freedom of Information request to nine of England's largest multi-academy trusts revealed that anywhere between 2-13% of teachers leave within the first two terms of returning from maternity leave⁶, and in this report, we see that 23 of the 25 participants had left teaching by the time their youngest child was two years old. As the majority took between 9-11 months leave, this means that they remained at work for between 3-4 terms before deciding to leave – potentially less than a year following their return, or a short amount of time following the completion of the obligatory 13 weeks. Rather than just the immediate return to work period, therefore, we see that it is within the first year and into the second year of returning that mother-teachers are most vulnerable to attrition.

Currently, when we lose these teachers, it spells out disaster for the teacher workforce: according to data from the TES, 'soaring teacher vacancies' in all secondary subjects in the autumn of 2022 were 'having a "dire" and "severe" impact on schools'⁷ and whilst recruitment figures for 2022/23 indicate that primary targets may be met, 'the secondary school teacher target will be 34 percentage points below target'. The NFER tell us that when teachers do leave for caring-related reasons, less than half of them return⁸, wastage that we see across all industries with 2 million women economically inactive because of the demands

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214367/rrep777.pdf

² https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3344/teacher_labour_market_in_england_2019.pdf

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214367/rrep777.pdf

⁴ <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/enhanced-maternity-pay/>

⁵ www.mtpt.org.uk/light-research

⁶ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/user/emma_sheppard/requests

⁷ <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/secondary/teacher-recruitment-soaring-teacher-vacancies-impact-schools>

⁸ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1924/lfsa01.pdf>

of their caring responsibilities⁹. Whilst a certain rate of teacher attrition is natural, the comments included in this report will demonstrate that some of the loss amongst mother-teachers aged 30-39 is avoidable. Considering the ongoing national context of the teacher recruitment crisis, this is a loss we simply cannot afford.

As we have seen in previous reports, and will see once again here, maternity and sex-based discrimination plays a significant role in shaping teachers' experiences over the return to work period. The discrimination faced by pregnant women and returning mothers was well documented in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) 2018 report, and before this by a TUC survey and resulting report, *The Pregnancy Test: Ending Discrimination at Work for New Mothers*, in 2014¹⁰. Both studies detail the types of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that exist in the amongst employers, and how these influence women's professional experiences when pregnant, on maternity leave, and when they return to work. According to the EHRC report, the many different manifestations of pregnancy and maternity discrimination result in 54,000 women being forced out of the workforce every year.¹¹

Mothers working in education (either in primary, secondary or higher education settings) were included in this report and were mentioned in comparison to other industries. Mothers in education were:

- The least likely to report harassment during the pregnancy, maternity or return to work period
- The least likely to report that they had been treated with less respect by their line manager
- More likely than other industries to encounter issues related to lack of flexibility
- Least likely to have conversations about risk assessments initiated by their employers
- More likely to raise risks themselves, which were not identified by their employers
- Most likely not to discuss risks with their employer at all
- More likely than other industries to continue breastfeeding upon their return to work

Both the good and bad news from the EHRC report is reflected in the interviews with teachers that left aged 30-39, and those that stayed, and whilst we see some positive comments in this report, leavers' experiences of returning to work after maternity leave, fall into 12 more negative categories:

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|-----------------------------|--|
| A sense of overwhelm | “I was just inundated with work when I went back. Mentally and physically a lot more work.” – <i>Laura</i> |
| Sudden transition | “As an employee there isn't, you know, a lovely steady back to work, picking it up slowly. You're just thrown in there.” – <i>Sophie</i> |

⁹ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/women-returners/pwc-research-women-returners-nov-2016.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/pregnancy-test-ending-discrimination-work-new-mothers>

¹¹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

Too much change

“With the change, constant changing in the curriculum, the constant change in the teaching pedagogy kept changing and so I was worried that I wasn’t being able to cope with maintaining that.” – *Mylie*

Mental health and wellbeing

“I was quite late in getting diagnosed with postnatal anxiety. Probably not, not didn’t get a proper diagnosis until just before returning to work.” – *Seren*

Pressure to return

“I did feel slightly pressurised that I had to start maybe earlier than I was anticipating.” – *Stephanie*

Requests for part-time working

“With my firstborn, I was head of department, and the school wouldn’t let me go back part-time, so I had to go back as head of department. So I resigned my job because I felt like I couldn’t work five days a week as head of department and raise a family.” – *Monica*

Discrimination

“It certainly felt that I was on his tick list or a to do list and, I don’t know, remove me from his department or something – I’m not really sure. But that’s certainly how it felt. And when I had to get union assistance to help because I was basically crumbling.” – *Seren*

Relationships

“When I came back at the time, I had a very good head who was brilliant and that was fantastic.” – *Esther*

KIT Days

“They’re much better at having the proper KIT days where you kind of go in and I met with my manager and a couple of my other colleagues just to catch up on what happened and the changes that had happened over the year that I’d been away.” – *Catherine*

Returning in the holidays

“We had a little bit of a disagreement with the headteacher, who didn’t want me to come back for a couple of days and wanted me to either come back for at least a minimum of two weeks before I could then be entitled to my six weeks holiday, which I argued the point and she did in the end back down.” – *Sophie*

Working the clawback period

“It then became quite difficult returning from maternity leave to work notice because I think the school felt that in some way I’d misled them because I had initially intended to return to work fully.” – *Rosie*

A sense of overwhelm

Our initial survey of 498 teachers aged 30-39 indicated that workload was the biggest reason for leaving by far: 69% of respondents chose this as a reason for leaving, with 50% choosing 'mental health and wellbeing' as a push factor¹². It is therefore no surprise that 6 interview participants described feeling overwhelmed as they were integrated/reintegrated into the workplace:

"I was just inundated with work when I went back. Mentally and physically a lot more work." – *Laura*

"I went back, this time I went back and I had stepped straight back into a teacher who'd actually gone off on stress on her timetable, a part-time member of staff. And it was quite insane. I knew it was only going to be for eight months before the timetable changed. But I had five, at least five different classes across 13 different classrooms in the school, and kind of carrying books everywhere. And it was, it was crazy going back from that second maternity leave. In my mind, I thought it was going to get better after that." – *Olivia*

"She was still so tiny, and I just really wasn't ready. I really felt that pressure to come back for, you know, that start in September. You know, to get back into my classes and take on – we had quite a few KS4 and KS5 classes, which was great. But I felt a pressure from my Head of Department to be back in September so that I could take them on." – *Marie-Ann*

"I think I took nine months off and that didn't really feel like it was long enough to suddenly go back to working really, really long hours. I think that was really difficult. Probably didn't help that I was a bit depressed but then it's that vicious circle of returning quite early, crying baby, trying to manage childcare and really, you know, really busy, successful department." – *Marie-Ann*

"On my return, I was asked to do parents' evening straight away of children that I haven't even taught... And there was no flexibility of, I've literally just took maternity. And I don't feel up to leave my daughter in the evenings yet. So, there was no flexibility. It was literally a case of "you must do this." Rather than, is there another way that I could actually give feedback to parents?" – *Seren*

"When the time did come to decide whether or not I'd want to go back to work, I think, I hadn't realised up until that point, just what a toll it had taken on me. And I just really wasn't expecting to feel like that. I think I always thought in the back of my mind, I would go back to work. But having had that complete break from school life, I realised how much I didn't want to go back." – *Josephine*

¹² www.mtpt.org.uk/light-research

“As understanding as people were, you don’t slowly get put back into the teaching world, you are literally thrown in. And at the same time, you are dealing with the emotions of leaving a child, whether that’s, you know, we had a nursery, but perhaps some people might have family or whatever, but it is quite traumatic for a few months. You’re literally thrown straight back in. There’s no kind of, slowly building you back up. And that’s quite hard and because there isn’t a focus on any kind of wellbeing or mental first aid.” – *Sophie*

Participants’ use of language in these comments paints a clear picture of their emotional state on their return – ‘inundated’, ‘what a toll it had taken on me’, ‘quite insane’, ‘crazy’, ‘thrown in’, ‘quite traumatic’, ‘thrown straight back in’, ‘quite hard’, ‘really difficult’, ‘vicious circle’, ‘pressure’. Their comments describe two sources of this overwhelm: the workload they encounter upon their return, and the emotional impact of leaving their baby after a period of maternity leave. This overwhelming workload is described in both general terms – ‘inundated with work’, ‘mentally and physically a lot more work’ – as well as pointing to more specific tasks and expectations that, when combined with the demands of a new or growing family, participants found very challenging to complete.

Olivia describes the requirement of teaching ‘at least five different classes across 13 different classrooms in the school’ and ‘carrying books everywhere’ – a situation that lacks routine and stability and requires her to adapt to multiple different logistical contexts. This set up at work is not ideal at the best of times, but as Olivia would also have been experiencing similar challenges in her personal life (managing childcare logistics and new routines with her family, probably on disrupted sleep), she is offered little time to prepare for these demands, or stop for a breather. Marie-Ann echoes the challenge of the balancing act of these logistics both at home and school when she says, ‘it’s that vicious circle of returning quite early, crying baby, trying to manage childcare and really, you know, really busy, successful department’.

Here, Olivia and Marie-Ann describe typical causes of burnout defined in literature focusing on healthcare professionals – a comparable career to teaching. Workload, work / life balance, health risks including lack of sleep, and perceptions of control all contribute to employee burnout¹³, with working mothers particularly vulnerable to this kind of stress.¹⁴

Seren also describes how the little consideration given to her specific context as a returning mother contributed to feelings of overwhelm. In previous reports, we have seen that Seren struggled significantly with her mental health following her labour and during her maternity leave, anxieties that manifested themselves in a fixation on her daughter’s wellbeing¹⁵. A standard duty such as parents’ evening so soon after her return to work therefore presents her with the emotional challenge of leaving her baby for long stretches of time, which she was not yet ready for. Despite suggesting that there may have been ‘another way’ to introduce herself, or ‘give feedback to parents’, Seren is not met with any reasonable adjustments or solutions. Without this ‘flexibility’ or consideration of her circumstance, Seren is left feeling unsupported and overwhelmed.

¹³ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA428-1.html

¹⁴ <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1754209/burnout-rife-among-female-workers-despite-increase-hybrid-research-finds>

¹⁵ www.mtpt.org.uk/light-research

Marie-Ann talks about the academic pressures of her role as Head of ‘a really busy, successful department’ pointing to the ‘pressure’ of returning at a specific point in order to provide stability and quality teaching and learning to ‘quite a few KS4 and KS5 classes’. These are classes that would have had results sets attached to them, and would therefore have been of significant value to the school. They would also have played a large part in Marie-Ann’s individual performance management as a teacher and Head of Department. That she describes her department as ‘really busy, successful’ means that Marie-Ann has the pressure of maintaining high standards and expectations whilst also learning to balance her home life with full-time teaching and leadership responsibilities as a first-time mother.

Like Seren, Marie-Ann refers to the ‘really, really long hours’ that are often required of teachers and middle leaders – either in terms of the extra-curricular events they have to attend, or the planning, marking and administrative tasks that they take home with them to complete in the evening or weekends. Both Seren and Marie-Ann explain that part of the issue of these long hours was that they took away from their time with their babies, with Marie-Ann stating that she had already ‘return[ed] quite early’ from maternity leave and therefore not spent ‘long enough’ with her daughter.

This emotional overwhelm connected with leaving their babies, or a lack of time to focus on their own wellbeing is described by five participants. They use phrases such as ‘mentally... a lot more work’, ‘what a toll it had taken on me’, ‘I didn’t want to go back’, ‘dealing with the emotions of leaving a child’, ‘there isn’t any focus on any kind of wellbeing or mental first aid’, ‘I don’t feel up to leave my daughter in the evenings yet’, ‘crying baby, trying to manage childcare’, ‘she was still so tiny and I just really wasn’t ready’. There is a clear sense here that these participants were unprepared for the emotional challenge that returning to work presented, and lacked the support systems to help them with this transition.

Josephine and Oliva talk about the mismatch of their expectations, and the reality of their return to work. Having returned to ‘insane’ logistics, that she knew she would have to endure for at least eight months, Olivia says, ‘In my mind, I thought it was going to get better after that’. The implication in her comment, however, is that the situation did not improve, leading to her decision to resign. Josephine places far greater emphasis on this mismatch, saying ‘I hadn’t realised up until that point’, ‘I just really wasn’t expecting to feel like that’, ‘I always thought in the back of my mind, I would go back to work’, ‘I realised how much I didn’t want to go back’. For her, the disconnect was between her understanding of her working experience pre-baby and the priorities now associated with her identity as a new mother. The fact that Josephine ‘always thought’ that she ‘would go back to work’ following maternity leave implies that pre-baby, teaching (or the outcomes of teaching, e.g. financial stability, routine, community, sense of purpose) was very important to her. The realisation that she ‘didn’t want to go back’ is therefore surprising – ‘I just really wasn’t expecting to feel like that’ – a sentiment we also see in comments from Jenny: ‘I was really keen to get back to work and it was great for a little while and then all of a sudden it wasn’t. It wasn’t great.’

Josephine points to her time out of school on maternity leave as giving her the opportunity to reflect, potentially for the first time, on the reality of her life as a teacher. She explains

that the ‘complete break from school life’ allowed her to see ‘just what a toll’ teaching had taken on her and to question the expectations and working patterns that she had previously accepted as normality. We see a similar image used by Laura in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** who describes the period of maternity leave as ‘stepping off the conveyor belt of constant’. The period of calm that maternity leave can offer, therefore provides teachers with the opportunity to gain new perspective on how overwhelming they found their professional lives, and the headspace to consider whether or not they want to return to such environments.

Like Olivia and Josephine, the overwhelming logistics that Esther returned to changed her attitude to towards her role:

“I came back and I was a lot less engaged, if that makes any sense. I also came back, although I was a History teacher, I came back to a timetable of different subjects – subjects that I’d never taught before. So I had, like, Computer Science in Year 7, which is nothing to do with anything I understand or know. I did RE, I had to do Health and Social Care. I was even given Psychology A Level, where, as the Sociology A Level teacher, in Psychology, it’s a completely different subject. And that was Year 13. So they were off to university in about three months. So I felt like I came back to, obviously, I was a leadership team member, so it’s like, I’ll take what, you know, that’s my job to do whatever. But at the same time, I came back not teaching my own subject, which is quite disheartening and not, you know, not easy because you’re coming back and you’re having to learn a range of different subjects to teach.” – *Esther*

Both Esther and Olivia explain that they returned to someone else’s role, with Olivia saying that she ‘stepped straight back into a teacher who’d actually gone off on stress on her timetable’. With the words, ‘gone off on stress’, we get a sense here that this is a doomed role, and the requirements of the ‘insane’ timetable too much for a teacher to manage, even on part-time hours, and even without the additional demands of the return to work period.

Similar to Olivia’s ‘five different classes across 13 different classrooms’, Esther lists the five different subjects she was required to teach that were not her own subject, History, in order to fill staffing gaps. She describes how ill-equipped she felt to do this, from a subject-knowledge perspective: ‘a timetable of different subjects – subjects that I’d never taught before’, ‘nothing to do with anything I understand or know’, ‘it’s a completely different subject’. Instead of being supported at a time of significant personal transition, Esther would have been expected to learn the curricula and pedagogical approaches of five completely new subjects, presumably teaching in different rooms, on top of her leadership responsibilities – a huge workload that she describes as ‘not easy’ when ‘coming back’ from maternity leave. We see here how Esther was required to be jack of all trades, master of none, which reduces her sense of purpose and her perception of how much the school value her. Her emphasis on the number of subjects she was expected to teach that weren’t *hers* indicates that she felt taken advantage of, rather than taken care of, by her school.

Unlike Josephine and Jenny, who found their changed attitudes to their roles surprising, Esther is very clear about how this workload contributed to the loss of her sense of purpose

and motivation. She states, 'I was a lot less engaged', in part because she found it 'quite disheartening' that she was not timetabled to teach History, her 'own subject'. The rewarding nature of teaching and a passion for their subject have consistently ranked as some of the strongest factors motivating students to seek a career in teaching¹⁶, and this seems to be the case for Esther. Typically, the strong subject and curriculum knowledge possessed by experienced teachers means that they spend less time planning and preparing for lessons. They are often able to diagnose misconceptions amongst their students quickly, and respond confidently to their questions. More than ever, Esther needed the time gained by her strong subject knowledge: now that she returns home to the 'second shift' of working motherhood, she no longer has the opportunity beyond her contracted hours that she may have used previously to play catch up.

Like Head of Department, Marie-Ann, Esther also feels the pressure of being given exam classes – 'that was Year 13. So they were off to university in about three months' – and the impact of her teaching a subject that has 'nothing to do' with anything she 'understand[s] or know[s]' on these students' futures. However, her identity is shaped by her role as a senior leader and the accompanying duties of leadership. In her comments, she agrees that 'I was a leadership team member, so... that's my job to do whatever', but follows this up with how 'disheartening' it felt to have her first love – teaching History – taken away from her. At this time of fragility, there is a sense that it is the teaching of History that would have made the demands of a senior leadership role balanced alongside new motherhood worth it, for Esther, but without this, she is not necessarily willing to sacrifice her own wellbeing for the sake of the school's needs.

In Olivia, Marie-Ann, Seren and Esther's comments, and in later contributions from Catherine, we get the sense that their school assumed that they would be able to manage the challenges and requirements presented to them. Aged 30-39, all of the participants in this study are likely to have had between 8-17 years' experience in schools, even if they did not come into teaching directly from university. This report, however, highlights that the return to work period is a time of vulnerability, even for experienced teachers. This is a point at which women need additional support measures from their employers and colleagues to manage the transition, and time to re-establish a sense of routine and familiarity with their roles. Instead, there is the implication from Olivia, Marie-Ann, Seren and Esther's comments of a misinterpretation on the part of their school: upon their return, these experienced teachers are used to save the day in otherwise disorganised, high-pressure or high-needs contexts, when actually, as Sophie points out, a greater focus is needed on 'slowly building you back up', 'wellbeing' and 'mental first aid'.

Sudden transition

This lack of a gentle and supportive transition back into school was commented on by four participants:

¹⁶ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1332/91003.pdf>

“It was literally the day that I went back that I went straight into the classroom. It was, “these are the classes that you are teaching, this is what you need to do.” There was no time to really prepare for what I was meant to be doing. I was just told to go and get back into the classroom, basically.” – *Catherine*

“When I went back to school, it wasn’t like that at all. They didn’t ease you in in any way. From day one, it was back in the classroom, no kind of sitting down really with the rest of your team and discussing what the classes are being taught and where they were up to. I had a very brief list of what they’d been taught. Maybe again because they’d been taught by supply teachers. And the supply obviously finished before I came back. So I just had a list from the supply teacher of where they were up to and where they needed to go from there. It wasn’t a particularly smooth transition back into the classroom.” – *Catherine*

“I do think that, coming back into work, you know it was hard because you’re back into a full timetable.” – *Sophie*

“As an employee there isn’t, you know, a lovely steady back to work, picking it up slowly. You’re just thrown in there.” – *Sophie*

“Then just rocked up back to work on my first day back at the end of June, took over someone else’s class. And that was that. Went from absolute heaven to massively anxiety-inducing stress.” – *Kinga*

Catherine, Sophie and Kinga all comment on the negativity of this sudden transition, using the phrases, ‘straight into the classroom’, ‘get back in the classroom’, ‘hard’, ‘back into a full timetable’, ‘thrown in there’, ‘rocked up back to work’, ‘massively anxiety-inducing stress’, and previous comments from Olivia and Esther describe their return as ‘insane’, ‘crazy, ‘not easy’. Both Catherine and Sophie state that a phased, or better-supported return would have been preferable to this abruptness – ‘They didn’t ease you in in any way’, ‘It wasn’t a particularly smooth transition’, ‘a lovely steady back to work, picking it up slowly’.

As well as the logistics of classrooms, timetables and the new subjects mentioned by Olivia and Esther, Catherine identifies five reasons that this experience of a sudden return was so ‘hard’:

- No time was given to become familiar with the curriculum – ‘no kind of sitting down really with the rest of your team and discussing what the classes are being taught’
- No time was given to reintegrating with teams – ‘no kind of sitting down really with the rest of your team’
- A lack of understanding of students’ current learning and progress – ‘discussing what the classes are being taught and where they were up to. I had a very brief list of what they’d been taught’
- No time was given to prepare to teach new classes – ‘There was no time to really prepare for what I was meant to be doing.’

- No opportunity for a handover with the maternity cover – ‘supply obviously finished before I came back’

Both Catherine and Olivia talk further about this experience of taking over from colleagues without a decent handover opportunity:

“When I returned from maternity leave, they had a couple of teachers in my department leave throughout the year so they’d long term supply and I was given those classes when I returned. So they hadn’t had a proper teacher for almost a term and I was given those classes when I returned and told to sort that out which was quite difficult. And a lot of the classes I was given when I came back, I had them for one less a week rather than a series of lessons. They also had two other teachers teaching the same subject to them. So it’s very difficult to have a proper relationship with the classes and build a relationship with the classes.” – *Catherine*

“I went back, this time I went back and I had stepped straight back into a teacher who’d actually gone off on stress on her timetable, a part-time member of staff. And it was quite insane. I knew it was only going to be for eight months before the timetable changed. But I had five, at least five different classes across 13 different classrooms in the school, and kind of carrying books everywhere. And it was, it was crazy going back from that second maternity leave. In my mind, I thought it was going to get better after that.” – *Olivia*

Despite the employment of long-term supply, or teachers on fixed-term maternity cover contracts being standard practice, neither Catherine or Olivia describes this more straightforward staffing set up. Catherine explains that ‘they had a couple of teachers in my department leave throughout the year so they’d [had] long term supply’, and Olivia explains that ‘I had stepped straight back into a teacher who’d actually gone off on stress’. The fact that Olivia’s predecessor had ‘gone off on stress’ suggests that the school, department or the ‘insane’ demands of their timetable, made for an unhappy workplace. Similarly, the high rates of attrition described by Catherine suggest that teachers wanted to leave this working environment as soon as possible, rather than see out the end of the academic year. It may be unsurprising that, in her initial survey responses, Catherine chose ‘school culture’ and ‘pressure from educational monitoring bodies or school leadership and management’ as reasons that prompted her to leave teaching, and Olivia also chose ‘mental health and wellbeing’.

These issues of teacher attrition, and the upheaval that this causes to both staff teams and students is evident in both comments: the fact that colleagues left her department ‘throughout the year’ means that students in Catherine’s school would have experienced interrupted teaching, and lack of consistency, compensated by ‘long term supply’, which Catherine does not consider ‘a proper teacher’. The students that Olivia inherits would have also seen a teacher leave mid-way through the year, and potentially experienced disrupted teaching before this, if the colleague in question was suffering from stress and poor mental health. In both cases, it falls to the returning teacher to manage the consequences of these issues. For Catherine, this included the expectation to ‘sort out’ her new groups, ‘build a

relationship with them’, and manage a class split across three teachers in total, which Catherine found ‘quite difficult’. In Olivia’s case, this included taking on the logistics of a ‘crazy’ timetable that had already contributed to a colleague leaving due to stress.

Despite the challenging return following her second maternity leave, Olivia does refer to a more positive experience after her first leave:

“That first maternity leave I went back, went back part way through the year. And it was before funding got crazy. And I had a really bizarre timetable. I did lots of support work and intervention and it was quite nice going back then. So I didn’t have any marking or planning to do.” – *Olivia*

Here we can see the positive outcomes of easing a returning colleague back into the classroom in the way that Sophie and Catherine have previously suggested. Instead of a mid-year return resulting in the inheritance of disrupted classes and challenging logistics, Olivia talks about a timetable that involved ‘lots of support work and intervention’. This set up also addressed the issues of overwhelming workload explored in the previous section, as these intervention groups did not require ‘any marking or planning’. Olivia points to ‘funding’ as enabling this gentle transition back to work, funding which – on a national or school level – may have been lacking when she returned from her second leave.

However, although Olivia describes this return as ‘quite nice’, she still refers to her timetable as ‘really bizarre’ and – whilst it worked for her during this leave – it is questionable as to whether this supporting role would have felt as fulfilling and welcome to a teacher like Esther whose sense of purpose as a teacher was so tied in with delivering her subject to classes over which she feels she has ownership.

Too much change

It is inevitable that, over an extended period of teacher absence, staffing, students and systems may change. However, comments from 16 mother teachers across the whole study indicated the existence of a tipping point where too much change became unsustainable when combined with the demands of motherhood. In this report, we focus on the immediate return to work period, and have already seen in Catherine, Esther and Olivia’s previous comments how destabilising a great deal of change – be this new subjects, or different classrooms – can be during this specific transition.

Across all of the 27 interview participants, nine teachers spoke more generally about turnover within their teams, or at leadership level. In their study of the impact of high levels of teacher turnover, Ronfeldt et al. found that such attrition negatively impacts the ‘social resources’ within a school, which includes the ‘formation of staff cohesion and community’. When teachers are lost and replaced, greater pressure is placed on middle and senior leaders – as we have seen in Catherine, Esther and Olivia’s comments – and trust between colleagues, and

between teachers and students, must be rebuilt¹⁷. We have already seen the impact of these staffing changes on the trust, ‘cohesion and community’ in Catherine and Olivia accounts of returning to new or missing faces within their department teams, and in comments included later in this report, we will also see how returning to an ‘interim head teacher’, a ‘different head teacher’ and a ‘new Head of Humanities’ influenced June, Stacey and Seren’s decisions to leave teaching.

As well as staffing, Catherine refers to a change in atmosphere, and Mylie talks about curriculum changes at her school:

“After I came back from maternity leave, there seemed to be a change in the atmosphere at the school. It didn’t seem to be as friendly as it had been before I went on maternity leave.” – *Catherine*

“With the change, constant changing in the curriculum, the constant change in the teaching pedagogy kept changing and so I was worried that I wasn’t being able to cope with maintaining that. So, a lot of that can come from support from senior leadership could help there, and that’s not very often. The teacher’s kind of just chopped back in without much support.” – *Mylie*

In Catherine’s comment, we see the importance of relationships in creating stability at a time of vulnerability for mother-teachers. Given that – as well as the personal change of leaving her baby and introducing new routines at home – Catherine was managing the challenges of building relationships with students, sorting out classes following their time with a supply teacher and liaising with co-teachers across her groups, the lack of a ‘friendly’ atmosphere means that ‘community and cohesion’ she needed to feel safe and supported, was lacking.

Mylie uses the word ‘change’ or ‘changing’ four times in her short comment, and the ‘constant changing in the curriculum... and teaching pedagogy’ was echoed by 10 other secondary interview participants who also left teaching in 2017-18. Interestingly, this is the point at which the reformed GCSEs and A Levels were introduced, and there was a significant workload demand on schools to update their curricula accordingly. As we have seen with Esther, who wasn’t permitted the relief and ease of teaching her own subject having spent many years building up her subject and curriculum knowledge, Mylie worries about how she will ‘cope with maintaining’ this additional workload at a time when she is already undergoing a big transition returning to work.

Like the participants who talk about being ‘thrown straight back in’, Mylie describes being ‘chopped back in without much support’, and emphasises that support from senior leadership to manage this ‘constant change’, even though it ‘could help’, did not occur ‘very often’.

¹⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228303559_How_Teacher_Turnover_Harms_Student_Achievement

Mental health and wellbeing

Already, amongst their longer comments, participants have referred to the state of their mental health and wellbeing, and the way in which this was strained by their return to work experience:

Participant	Comment
Mylie	'I felt very nervous returning to work afterwards.'
	'I was worried that I wasn't being able to cope'
Marie-Ann	'I just really wasn't ready'
	'Probably didn't help that I was a bit depressed'
Kinga	'massively anxiety-inducing stress'
Sophie	'there isn't a focus on any kind of wellbeing or mental first aid'
	'it is quite traumatic'
Kallie	'stressful environment'
Monica	'signed me off sick'
Laura	'mentally... a lot more work'
Josephine	'what a toll it had taken on me'
Esther	'quite disheartening'

Table A: Comments about Mental Health and Wellbeing

For the nine participants cited in Table A, a number of factors contributed to their poor mental health: large amounts of change, overwhelming workloads, negative relationships at school, instances of discrimination, leaving their baby, and not feeling valued by their school.

In our previous report, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, we saw that Marie-Ann, Mylie and Seren were diagnosed with post-natal depression or anxiety during their leave, with Seren stating that her anxiety was not resolved before she returned to work:

"I was quite late in getting diagnosed with postnatal anxiety. Probably not, didn't get a proper diagnosis until just before returning to work." – Seren

Although Marie-Ann and Mylie do not identify their formal mental health diagnosis as continuing when they returned, post-natal depression ‘can start any time in the first year after giving birth’ and, if left undiagnosed or untreated, can ‘continue for months or years or get worse’¹⁸. As Marie-Ann returned to work after nine months, and teachers, on average take 8.5 months’ maternity leave¹⁹, it is also worth considering that undiagnosed, or emerging post-natal depression or anxiety may influence teachers’ return to work experience. Existing mental health conditions such as anxiety are associated with the risk of burnout²⁰, and according to the EHRC, ‘those with a long-term physical or mental health condition’ are more likely to feel forced to leave their jobs because of pregnancy or maternity discrimination²¹.

Pressure to Return

Three participants spoke about feeling pressured to return to work earlier than they would have liked to:

“Originally I was not going to go back to school at all because I really didn’t want to be that many hours but they convinced me that somehow that would be a good idea.” – *Sharon*

“Part of the agreement for me going part time was that I had to start in September, even though that was only nine months of my maternity leave, and actually, rightfully, I should have had a year. And I did feel slightly pressurized that I had to start maybe earlier than I was anticipating.” – *Stephanie*

“The second time I felt quite pressured to come back. So I didn’t, I didn’t take long enough. I finished at Christmas, and then I was back in July for the last few weeks of term to do that cheeky thing where you get paid for the summer holidays, but actually, it was way too early to be back. She was still so tiny, and I just really wasn’t ready. I really felt that pressure to come back for, you know, that start in September. You know, to get back into my classes and take on – we had quite a few KS4 and KS5 classes, which was great. But I felt a pressure from my Head of Department to be back in September so that I could take them on.” – *Marie-Ann*

The EHRC clearly state that whilst ‘Your employer can ask you if you would be willing to return earlier’ than 52 weeks, or the return date you have stated, they cannot ‘put pressure on you to return earlier than you want’, or ‘threaten you with being disadvantaged if you do not return earlier’²². However, the language from the these three participants – ‘they convinced me’, ‘slightly pressurised’, ‘quite pressured’, ‘really felt that pressure to come back’, ‘felt a pressure from my Head of Department’ – dangerously teeters into discriminatory behaviour.

¹⁸ <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-natal-depression/overview/>

¹⁹ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/percentage_of_teachers_on_matern#incoming-1115502

²⁰ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA428-1.html

²¹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

²² <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/faqs-employees/during-maternity-leave-contact-employer>

For Sharon, the school's motivation appears to be needing staff to fill hours, and in Stephanie's case, the school's desire to have a clean September start to staffing. However, whilst Sharon indicates that she has allowed herself to be persuaded – 'they convinced me that somehow that would be a good idea' – Stephanie is very clear about a set of conditions placed on her that forced her decision – 'part of the agreement for me going part time was that I had to start in September', 'I did feel slightly pressurized that I had to start maybe earlier than I was anticipating.' Threatening to disadvantage Stephanie in this way if she does not return earlier than she would have liked, by using her return date as part of her flexible working negotiation, is highly likely to be grounds for maternity discrimination.

Like Stephanie and Sharon, Marie-Ann points to a school-based 'pressure from [her] Head of Department' influencing her 'early' return when her baby was 'still so tiny' and she 'just really wasn't ready'. However, Marie-Ann's comment reveals more nuance to the pressure that teachers may feel when deciding upon their return to work date. The structure of the school year played a part in both Stephanie and Marie-Ann's early return, with a September start preferred by their school. There also seems to be an assumption from Marie-Ann that she is bound by the new school year – 'I really felt that pressure to come back for, you know, that start in September' – alongside the false understanding that she to 'do that cheeky thing' and return in July in order to benefit from her summer holiday pay.

We also see a sense of professional duty in Marie-Ann's comments when she refers to the department having 'quite a few KS4 and KS5 classes, which is great'. Like we have seen in Esther's comments in the previous section, *A sense of overwhelm*, Marie-Ann's status as an experienced teacher is a double-edged sword here: because she is valued as a teacher who will secure success for these exam groups, her school pressure her to return earlier than she would have liked; and because she understands her value to the school, and takes pride in her own professional identity ('which is great') and the outcomes of her 'busy, successful department', she sacrifices her personal desire to remain on maternity leave for longer, in order to honour a perceived good start to the year for her students and colleagues rather than returning part-way through the term in October, or November, for example.

Request for part-time working

Whilst we will not be writing a report exclusively about flexible and part-time working in this research series, it is a topic that has been raised in **06. We're on a Road to Nowhere** and will continue to appear in later reports. In our initial survey of leavers, 'lack of flexible or part-time arrangements in teaching' was the 7th most-chosen reason for leaving teaching, with 33% of survey respondents identifying this as a reason they had left teaching. Conversely, 27% of women aged 30-39 who had *stayed* in teaching stated that 'flexible / part-time arrangements' had contributed to their ability to do so – the fifth most-chosen reason for remaining in the profession²³.

²³ www.mtpt.org.uk/light-research

Existing research already showcases the benefits of flexible working: from acting as an attractive recruitment and retention tool, to protecting the wellbeing and work-life balance of all staff, not just parents²⁴. It is both researched and common knowledge that part-time and flexible working positions, are dominated, and most appreciated by parents, as they are ‘most prevalent among women in their late 30s and early 40s, which corresponds to the period in which women are most likely to decrease their employment workload to take on childcare responsibilities’²⁵. Enriching this existing data, our study has demonstrated that flexibility, flexible working and part-time working arrangements are undoubtedly a key retention strategy for mothers, particularly during the return to work period, and in the first two years following their return.

We see the difference that granting flexible working requests for returning teachers makes in comments from Abigail, Laura and Monica:

“If you’re in a role and you go for maternity leave, a lot of headteachers might let you come back part-time and will try and accommodate that.” – *Abigail*

“Then I went back after the first child, went back part-time and I felt it was a lot easier.” – *Laura*

“When I went back to teaching after her, I craved that switch off time, more and more. That’s why I wanted something more flexible.” – *Monica*

Both Monica and Laura emphasise their motivation for requesting part-time or flexible working: it both eases the transition back into work and allows parents to manage the juggle of home and work – ‘it was a lot easier’ – and it also provides busy working-parents with the headspace to preserve their positive mental health – ‘I craved that switch off time, more and more’. Even though Monica was not granted ‘something more flexible’, the fact that Laura *has* worked part-time, and Abigail knows that ‘a lot of headteachers might let you come back part-time and will try and accommodate that’ reflects the good practice that *does* exist in education.

Indeed, 29% of the workforce work part-time, and at primary level, this figure rises to 35%. Almost a third of all female teachers work part-time, and according to a NASUWT survey, 90% of flexible working requests are made by women, with a third of these requests coming from women aged 30-40 years old, predominantly to support with childcare.²⁶ This still puts part-time teachers in the minority, and these statistics still lag far behind the 40% of female employees who work part-time in the UK across all industries. The picture is increasingly discouraging the further up the leadership ladder we go, with just 13% of assistant heads, 11% of deputies and 5% of head teachers working part-time.²⁷ NASUWT tell us that ‘nearly a third of all respondents had their flexible working request denied’ and ‘for some groups (those

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/flexible-working-in-schools/flexible-working-in-schools--2#benefits-of-flexible-working>

²⁵ https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3476/part-time_teaching_and_flexible_working_in_secondary_schools.pdf

²⁶ <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/static/uploaded/6fd07ce3-6400-4cb2-a8a87b736dc95b3b.pdf>

²⁷ https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/a-raw-deal-for-part-time-leaders/

on the leadership spine or Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR) holders it was nearing 100%.²⁸

Unfortunately, the participants in this report, and in **06. We're on a Road to Nowhere**, have mostly negative experiences of requesting, or working part-time or flexibly:

“If you wanted to come back part-time after maternity, you would have to demote yourself.” – *Abigail*

“With my firstborn, I was head of department, and the school wouldn't let me go back part-time, so I had to go back as head of department. So I resigned my job because I felt like I couldn't work five days a week as head of department and raise a family.” – *Monica*

“It really did influence how I felt valued. As a teacher, I have given the school a lot over the six years that I'd worked there and worked my way up the department. And the fact that I ended up being not a very nice experience, being on maternity leave and trying to fight for the right time to go back part-time. I ended up having to get involved my trade union and go to meetings with my union representative to try to fight to be part-time and then to eventually have to hand in my resignation without saying goodbye to anyone was just really horrible.” – *Monica*

“Women who have maternity leave who were in a role of some management (so, Head of Sixth Form or Head of Department or Head of Year) were strongly encouraged that they had to go back full time or they would lose that position as management and although I wasn't in that I could see that that was getting more and more. When I started at the school in 2007, it was actually alright because there were job shares and, and you could progress. It was a different head teacher. And then when a friend of mine in the English department went off to have her baby, she was KS3 Coordinator. And they were talking about what she would do when she came back. And she was part-time. And I said, “Well I can job share with her”. That was it, she'd gone down to part-time and they tried to pressure her into giving up the KS3 Coordinator for English role. She had said, “what if I get a job share with her?” And the Head of Department blatantly told us, “oh, the Head has said she doesn't do job shares.”” – *Stacey*

In their 2018 report into pregnancy and maternity discrimination, the EHRC qualified the following instances as discriminatory, all of which we see in the previous four comments:

- ‘requests for flexible working leading to negative consequences’
- ‘a negative experience related to flexible working’
- ‘had flexible working requests declined on return to work and an alternative solution was not reached’

²⁸ <https://www.nasuwf.org.uk/static/uploaded/6fd07ce3-6400-4cb2-a8a87b736dc95b3b.pdf>

- ‘was not allowed to reduce number of hours when asked’²⁹

Although Abigail’s statement is generalised, the specific anecdotes from Monica and Stacey matched with the high denial rate for leadership and TLR holders found by the NASUWT survey, hint at the prevalence of these instances of demotion for women who want to work part-time or flexibly. Monica says, ‘I was head of department, and the school wouldn’t let me go back part-time’, and Stacey recounts a colleagues’ experience: ‘strongly encouraged that they had to go back full time or they would lose that position as management’, ‘she’d gone down to part-time and they tried to pressure her into giving up the KS3 Coordinator for English role.’

These denials of flexible working without ‘an alternative solution’ offered, even when Stacey suggests a job share, are examples of maternity discrimination, and based on the unestablished belief that leadership positions cannot be fulfilled part-time or flexibly. Patience and Rose tell us that the head teacher’s attitude to flexible working is one of the most significant barriers to requesters³⁰, and both Monica and Stacey’s comments, refer to the obstructive attitudes of their school leadership – ‘It was a different head’, ‘the Head has said she doesn’t do job shares’, ‘the school wouldn’t let me’, ‘women... were strongly encouraged’.

We have already seen in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** that women’s values strengthen or evolve when they become mothers, and in Monica’s case, we see that the school’s attempt to push against these values does not work in their favour. Monica is very clear that she ‘craved... switch off time’, that she wanted ‘something more flexible’ and that she ‘couldn’t work five days a week as head of department and raise a family’. When her school fails to negotiate with her, and instead behave in an authoritarian manner in their denial, it leads to a battle: ‘fight for the right to go back part-time’, ‘involved my trade union’, ‘try to fight to be part-time’, ‘hand in my resignation’. Monica refuses to compromise on, or sacrifice her values both at work and at home. Her identity as a teacher is as a Head of Department, and she challenges the discriminatory behaviour that attempts to give her ‘duties at a lower level’ or a ‘job was different in some other way against [her] wishes’ by accepting a demotion in order to secure her part-time hours. Equally, however, she refuses to work full-time as this impinges on her identity as a mother, and her ability to ‘raise a family’ in the way she wants.

Monica describes this as ‘not a very nice experience’ and ‘really horrible’, stating that it ‘really did influence how [she] felt valued’ by her school. In both this instance, and in the case described by Stacey, both school and teacher lose out. Not only did Monica’s school end up losing an experienced Head of a ‘busy, successful department’ who had ‘given the school a lot over the six years that [she’d] worked there’, Stacey also reveals the impact on this behaviour on other staff members. She refers to multiple other colleagues in her comment – ‘Women who have maternity leave who were in a role of some management’, ‘I could see that that was getting more and more’, ‘a friend of mine’, ‘they were talking’, ‘they tried to pressure her’, ‘she had said’, ‘Head of Department’, ‘the Head has said’ – reminding us that

²⁹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

³⁰ Patience, L. and Rose, L., *Flex Education: A Guide for Flexible Working in Schools*, Corwin, SAGE Publications Ltd., London, 2022

leadership decisions implicate numerous parties, and send a public message about the school culture to all staff, not just mothers.

As we saw in **05. We Don't Need Another Hero...?** mid-career professionals are more likely to watch and take note of the negative characteristics in potential role models to avoid becoming like them. In Monica and Stacey's school, the messages sent through the denial of these flexible working requests are very clear: teachers can only progress if they work full time; motherhood and leadership are incompatible; requesting change as a way of improving staff wellbeing will be met with punitive action. It is therefore more than possible, that the way that Monica and Stacey's KS3 Co-ordinator were treated, sent reverberations through the whole staff body, leading them to question whether the school – or even teaching – was a profession in which they would like to remain, if there was evidently no flexibility for them in the future.

Unlike the attitudes in Monica, Stacey and Abigail's schools, Kinga found that she was able to maintain her leadership position whilst working part-time:

“I returned to work – I was initially told that they felt it would not be appropriate for me to be in my leadership role that I've been in before I went on maternity, which was fine by me. And I was then told that I've got to maintain it... at that point, I was working five afternoons a week, but only spending half of those sessions really actually with the children. I spent so much of my time planning, again, ticking boxes, it really impacted on the job satisfaction. I became a teacher to teach. I was also in a position of being an advisor for the authority and supporting in other schools. And I wasn't getting the opportunity to do any of that, to support other staff to improve their practice. So, really, it just felt like there was a question about why it was bothering really. I wasn't in the classroom with the children enough, I wasn't supporting the teachers enough. I was literally doing bits of paper and ticking boxes for everybody else.” – *Kinga*

The fact that 'initially', Kinga was told that it 'would not be appropriate for [her] to be in [her] leadership role' is a clear indication of the school's negative attitude towards flexible working. Like Monica, Kinga is forced to choose between working at a level commensurate with her experience and parenting in a way that meets her needs as a mother. Ironically, the requirement to then 'maintain' this leadership role reveals that – on the school's part – there was no barrier to flexible leadership other than an attitudinal one. The communication in this process seems confusing, and unreliable, and does not take into account what Kinga actually wants from her professional life when returning to work, reducing Kinga's inclination to trust her senior leadership team over her pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work.

Interestingly, in comparison to Monica, Stacey and Abigail's colleagues, Kinga is happy with the initial offer of a demotion – 'which was fine by me' – as she says that she 'became a teacher to teach'. The school's definition of a leadership role meant that Kinga spent too much time 'planning', 'ticking boxes', and 'doing bits of paper', which ends up negatively impacting her job satisfaction, just like we have seen with Esther. Indeed, Kinga's frustration that she was 'only spending half of those sessions really actually with the children' could

confirm the school’s initial hunch that part-time leadership ‘would not be appropriate’, and it definitely does not seem to meet Kinga’s need to be ‘in the classroom with the children’. The outcome of the confusing communication around flexible working at leadership level seems to be unsatisfactory for all involved.

However, when *Kinga* defines her leadership role, it is very different to the school’s expectations: for her, leadership is ‘supporting in other schools’, ‘being an advisor for the authority’, ‘support[ing] other staff to improve their practice’ but she finds she has little time for this amongst the bureaucracy required of her by her school when working part-time. Throughout Kinga’s comment, we see an authoritarian approach from her school similar to the one Monica described, with language such as ‘told’, ‘they felt’, ‘got to’, ‘wasn’t getting the opportunity’. For both participants, a dialogue around how a flexible leadership role could work to benefit teacher, students and the school, is lacking.

Discrimination

The number of examples of discrimination that we have already heard in this report, which match the EHRC’s findings in their 2018 report on Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination, demonstrate how vulnerable the return to work period is for mothers:

EHRC-defined discrimination	Comment from Participant
‘disagreement with their employer about when they had to notify them about their intention to return to work’	“They were quite forceful with me in the first place, and that they wanted me to have this meeting to discuss what my plans were, even though I said that I wasn’t entirely sure at that point what my plans were going to be.” – <i>June</i>
‘faced disagreement about holiday accumulation or benefits entitled to’	“We had a little bit of a disagreement with the headteacher, who didn’t want me to come back for a couple of days and wanted me to either come back for at least a minimum of two weeks before I could then be entitled to my six weeks holiday.” – <i>Sophie</i>
‘being... put under pressure to hand in their notice or leave’	“he would rather that I didn’t come back, and that I actually would be allowed to leave without having to repay my maternity pay if I just left at that point, because otherwise they’d have to make redundancies. And so, it was sold to me that I would actually be doing the school a favour if I went.” – <i>June</i>

‘requests for flexible working leading to negative consequences’

“She’d gone down to part-time and they tried to pressure her into giving up the KS3 Coordinator for English role.” – *Stacey*

‘a negative experience related to flexible working’

“Women who have maternity leave who were in a role of some management... were strongly encouraged that they had to go back full time or they would lose that position as management.” – *Stacey*

‘were given duties at a lower level or job was different in some other way against their wishes’

“I came back to a timetable of different subjects – subjects that I’d never taught before. So I had, like, Computer Science in Year 7, which is nothing to do with anything I understand or know.” – *Esther*

‘had flexible working requests declined on return to work and an alternative solution was not reached’

“I was head of department, and the school wouldn’t let me go back part-time, so I had to go back as head of department. So I resigned my job because I felt like I couldn’t work five days a week as head of department and raise a family.” – *Monica*

‘was not allowed to reduce number of hours when asked’³¹

Table B: Examples of Discrimination

Seren and Rebecca give us two further specific examples of what discrimination can look like over the return to work period:

“When I returned, I had a new Head of Humanities who I hadn’t met before going on maternity leave because I went off in the March and he started in the September. I hadn’t met him, I hadn’t had any sort of return to work introduction really with him, or leading up to my return to working days, he didn’t really speak to me an awful lot. I think the way that he approached my return to work was primarily to blame the current results, which were the August results, despite me having left early March that, you know, he wanted to basically make me accountable for those results which was incredibly unfair given that I actually hadn’t even taught for much of the course leading up to that. And he didn’t, I think because he had no prior knowledge of me as a good teacher, and rather than someone who’d come back with mental health issues, and with a complete lack of confidence in who I was, and he just essentially never wanted to sit down, talk to me about everything. I had constant observations being done on my return to work from maternity. I had student voice being done behind my back without being told and then presented to me, and this was all his doing. And I’m sure there is an element, you know, that with my anxiety came a lot of paranoia. But it certainly felt that I was on his tick list or a to do list and, I don’t know, remove

³¹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

me from his department or something – I’m not really sure. But that’s certainly how it felt. And when I had to get union assistance to help because I was basically crumbling, he didn’t come to any meetings to discuss any of this, and he left all senior management to talk about it rather than him directly and so the matter never got resolved before I left, either.” – *Seren*

This anecdote from Seren has echoes of Monica’s experience in the previous section, *Requests for part-time working*, of fighting ‘for the right to go back part-time’, involving her union, being signed off sick, and eventually resigning without saying goodbye to her colleagues. It meets multiple criteria of the EHRC’s definition of discrimination:

- Seren is ‘treated so poorly’ she felt she ‘had to leave her job’ – ‘it certainly felt that I was on his tick list... remove me from his department’; ‘the matter never got resolved before I left, either’
- She is ‘treated with less respect’ and her ‘opinion was less valued’ than other colleagues – ‘he just essentially never wanted to sit down, talk to me about everything’
- She ‘received unpleasant / offensive comments from employer or colleagues’ – ‘the way that he approached my return to work was primarily to blame the current results’
- She was ‘treated in a way that humiliated or intimidated’ her – ‘I had constant observations being done on my return to work from maternity’; ‘student voice being done behind my back’
- She felt that she was ‘unfairly criticised’ and ‘felt treated unfairly by her line manager’ - ‘blame the current results... make me accountable for those results which was incredibly unfair given that I actually hadn’t even taught for much of the course leading up to that’³²

Like Monica, despite ‘union assistance’, this incident of discriminatory bullying was not resolved before Seren resigned, and even though ‘senior management’ were eventually involved, it is noteworthy that Seren points to this experience being instigated and perpetuated by one person. Regardless of school policies, or even the law, Seren’s comments show us that without proper training for middle leaders and immediate line managers, and safe communication channels for victims, mothers can be exposed to and endure discriminatory treatment for significant periods of time before escalating their complaints to the next level. As we have seen in Monica and Stacey’s account, however, the fact that it is *Seren* who resigns, and not the Head of Department, is a tacit condoning of this behaviour, witnessed by the whole staff body, not just the teachers immediately involved in the proceedings.

Rebecca’s experience of discrimination reminds us that breastfeeding – for as long as a parent chooses to continue – is a protected characteristic:

³² <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

“When I went back to work, things were quite difficult. There wasn’t much provision for breastfeeding. And the fact that I was breastfeeding became a really difficult issue to manage. And I don’t think there was really much consideration given to the fact that I was a) disabled and b) a new mother of a very young baby when I went back to work.” – *Rebecca*

The UK has ‘some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world’: at 6-8 weeks 47%³³ of babies are exclusively breastfed, and this drops to 1% by six months³⁴. Encouragingly, the EHRC show us that mothers working in education are some of the most likely to continue breastfeeding when they return to work³⁵, and an informal poll from The MTPT Project shows that, of the 680 teachers who voted, 78% breastfed their baby, with 53% continuing to breastfeed when they returned to work – through a mixture of reverse feeding, expressing, or simply through their supply adapting in response to a new feeding routine as their babies got older. Only 22% of teachers did not breastfeed at all, or only breastfed for a short amount of time³⁶. Considering that the average length of maternity leave for teachers is 8.5 months³⁷, this could mean that teachers are significantly bucking the trend when it comes to breastfeeding.

Despite this good news, and the fact that breastfeeding is included in the protected characteristic or pregnancy and maternity, laws surrounding breastfeeding at work are minimal. Employers are required to undertake a risk assessment, and provide breastfeeding employees with a place to rest, including somewhere to lie down.³⁸ The European Commission advise that best practice enhances these legal protections, and employers use ‘flexible hours, time off and facilities for expressing and storing breast milk’³⁹, and ACAS encourage the use of a formal breastfeeding policy, provision of a private, hygienic place to express and ongoing communication with breastfeeding colleagues about creating an appropriate environment.⁴⁰

Whilst Rebecca doesn’t go into too much detail, her comments about how the lack of ‘provision for breastfeeding’, and ‘consideration’ from her school regarding her personal context made her return ‘quite difficult’. Her employer may have adhered to the law, but the realities of a teacher timetable mean that without flexibility during the school day, or the effort to work with a breastfeeding or expressing mother to overcome barriers, it is difficult for breastfeeding to continue. Because ‘breastfeeding became a really difficult issue to manage’ for Rebecca, this characteristic is not being protected, and she is therefore facing discrimination. In addition, Rebecca mentions that she is disabled, and so this lack of ‘consideration given’ during her return to work means she is also being discriminated against on the grounds of disability.

³³ <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/breastfeeding#about-this-data>

³⁴ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/about/breastfeeding-in-the-uk/>

³⁵ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

³⁶ https://twitter.com/mtptproject/status/1572973268390350858?s=20&t=M3HfNpVCum2uuc0z39_Wlg

³⁷ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/percentage_of_teachers_on_matern#incoming-1115502

³⁸ <https://www.tes.com/magazine/teaching-learning/general/breastfeeding-teacher-sucks-it-doesnt-have>

³⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_projects/2002/promotion/ftp_promotion_2002_frep_18_en.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://www.acas.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/acas-guide-on-accommodating-breastfeeding-in-the-workplace.pdf>

Relationships

Five teachers talk about the importance of specific relationships to their return to work experiences. In Esther and Mylie's case, this included positive relationships that contributed to a supportive return:

"When I came back at the time, I had a very good head who was brilliant and that was fantastic." – *Esther*

"When I came back she was also another mother understood what it was like and was very supportive catching me up in a doable pace rather than when she left and trying to come back in were working with mainly male colleagues and at that point who just kind of assumed everything would be as it was beforehand." – *Mylie*

The fact that it was her head teacher who was 'brilliant', 'fantastic' following Esther's first maternity leave is important, as it is the head teacher who sets the tone of the school, and creates an environment that is supportive of returning teachers. This is hugely contrasted to Esther's second return where Esther 'didn't know what job [she] was going to be coming back to', and the context Stacey describes in the previous section, *Requests for part-time working*, where her head teacher created such an inflexible school culture.

Even without a head teacher's level of seniority, Mylie's comments indicate that just one ally can make a powerful difference to returning mothers. She identifies 'another mother' who 'understood what it was like' and who provided practical as well as emotional support by 'catching [her] up in a doable pace'. This positive support, however, is tinged with poignancy: Mylie benefits from her colleague's *negative* former experience of 'trying to come back in... working with mainly male colleagues... who just kind of assumed everything would be as it was beforehand.' As we saw in **05. We Don't Need Another Hero...?** the risk of attrition would have been heightened for this colleague due to this lack of role models, however this negative experience has made her determined to provide support for others – a commitment that positively impacted Mylie.

Unfortunately, June, Seren and Rebecca's comments include accounts of negative relationships over their return to work period which eventually contributed to their decision to leave teaching:

"When I returned, I had a new Head of Humanities who I hadn't met before going on maternity leave because I went off in the March and he started in the September. I hadn't met him, I hadn't had any sort of return to work introduction really with him, or leading up to my return to working days, he didn't really speak to me an awful lot." – *Seren*

"He didn't, I think because he had no prior knowledge of me as a good teacher, and rather than someone who'd come back with mental health issues, and with a complete lack of confidence in who I was, and he just essentially never wanted to sit down, talk to me about everything." – *Seren*

“I had a return to work interview with the executive head, and then the interim head teacher. Still during my, I think I’d been off on maternity for six months at this point, I went in to have the meeting. They were quite forceful with me in the first place, and that they wanted me to have this meeting to discuss what my plans were, even though I said that I wasn’t entirely sure at that point what my plans were going to be.” – *June*

“When I came back after my very short maternity leave, again I was constantly chasing people but because I’d handed in my notice, and they knew that I was moving on, they just refused to come and watch me, basically.” – *Rebecca*

We have already seen in the previous section that Seren’s experience of sex discrimination focused on a bullying relationship with her line manager, and the characteristics of this relationship are echoed in June and Rebecca’s comments.

For all three participants, negative experiences stem from a *lack* of relationship with a colleague who played a key part in their return: in Seren’s case, her Head of Humanities is ‘new’, she ‘hadn’t met’ him ‘before going on maternity leave’, and ‘he had no prior knowledge’ of her before her return to work. Equally, June refers to ‘the executive head’ who – because of their role across a number of schools – may have had limited familiarity with June, even as a senior leader. She then refers to an ‘interim head teacher’ who may have been new to both the school, June and her reputation prior to maternity leave. Rebecca’s comment is taken from her description of the early stages of an academy takeover, where an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality between staff who had worked at the predecessor school, and colleagues brought in by the academy chain, pervades her interview response. She refers impersonally in her comments to ‘people’, ‘they’ and – earlier in her interview – to ‘senior management’.

Although June’s relationship with her executive and interim head teachers is initially one of distance and unfamiliarity, the relationship became intense and ‘forceful’ quickly as these two leaders attempted to push her into providing them with information that she was not prepared to give at the time – ‘they wanted me to have this meeting to discuss what my plans were, even though I said that I wasn’t entirely sure at that point what my plans were going to be’. June’s comments suggest that this meeting was uninvited, instigated by the two leaders (‘they wanted me to have’) and that her needs or desires at this point were disregarded. Indeed, the use of ‘even though’ suggests that the leaders were not listening to June when she explained that she ‘wasn’t entirely sure’ what her plans were.

Contrastingly, Seren’s line manager stonewalls her from the very start: ‘I hadn’t had any sort of return to work introduction really with him’, ‘he didn’t really speak to me an awful lot’, ‘he just essentially never wanted to sit down, talk to me about everything’. Because of this behaviour, Seren found it impossible to *build* a relationship with her Head of Department. This ignoring and rejection therefore seems to be used as part of a bullying tactic which damages Seren’s self-esteem. The lack of ‘return to work introduction’ is disrespectful and devalues Seren as a colleague, and exacerbates the ‘complete lack of confidence’ resulting

from perinatal ‘mental health issues’. Faced with this, Seren’s identity as ‘a good teacher’, and the positive reputation and relationships that this would have helped to build, is lost.

Rebecca’s comment makes reference to her attempt to go through threshold at her former school when it became an academy. This process lasted the duration of her pregnancy and her return to work, with the school stipulating that colleagues who wanted to ‘go through threshold’ had to have ‘two good or outstanding lessons’ within a certain time frame. Rebecca was unable to evidence this as, like Seren, she found that she was completely ignored by ‘senior management’, disregarded because she had already ‘handed in [her] notice’ and was known to be ‘moving on’. Like Seren, Rebecca wants to rely on her ability as a teacher to build positive relationships, and prove herself in response to the hostile behaviour from line managers and senior leaders. However, despite ‘constantly chasing’, senior staff to ‘come and watch’ her, Rebecca is not given the opportunity to use her professional strengths to change these relationships.

KIT Days

We have already explored the use of KIT days in detail in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**. That they appear again in participants’ comments about their return to work experience demonstrates the blurred lines between different stages of pregnancy, maternity and the return to work which, for many mothers, are not defined in a clear, linear fashion.

The use of KIT days demonstrate this lack of linearity as they don’t have to be saved up for the end of maternity, adoption or shared parental leave, even though they are sometimes used in this way. KIT (or SPLIT) days can be used at any point (though we advise, for financial reasons, that they be taken after the 18 weeks of enhanced maternity pay has ended), which means that a sense of returning to work can begin when a mother still has a significant period of leave remaining.

Catherine and Seren explain how helpful their KIT days were when they used them just ahead of their return to work – Seren with the school she eventually left, and Catherine with her new employer outside of teaching:

“I started my KIT days at seven, seven and a half months, and they were really, really helpful in getting back to school because I worked about 40 to 45 minutes away from my home. And so, I wouldn’t actually see that many people from school because they didn’t live nearby. So, you know, I didn’t see an awful lot of colleagues or anything like that, apart from through social media and things. And so I’d say the only thing that going back to those days was, and it did feel that actually, you were just kind of there to earn the money and shuffle a bit of paper, as opposed to actually really getting to grips with how many things change and given how policies and things change in schools all the time relating to marking or, you know, it would have been nice to actually feel a bit more useful during that time and then maybe that would have helped my return as well.” – *Seren*

“They’re much better at having the proper KIT days where you kind of go in and I met with my manager and a couple of my other colleagues just to catch up on what happened and the changes that had happened over the year that I’d been away. And to kind of discuss how I wanted to come back and the working arrangements when I came back and things like that. So it was much better prepared.” – *Catherine*

Both Seren and Catherine’s comments demonstrate that, for them, KIT days served professional, personal and social purposes. For Seren, going into school enabled her to socialise at a time that she found quite isolating – ‘I wouldn’t actually see that many people from school because they didn’t live nearby’ – and Catherine mentions meeting with her ‘manager’ and ‘a couple of ... other colleagues’. In addition to this, an on-site KIT day provides Seren with the chance to practice the ‘40 to 45 minute commute’, an experience which would have posed new and different demands with the additional consideration of a young baby. This logistical preparation is also seen in Catherine’s comments – ‘discuss how I wanted to come back’, ‘working arrangements’, ‘it was much better prepared’.

As well as being of personal and social use, Seren and Catherine refer to the range of tasks that can be completed on KIT / SPLIT days: reading updated policies, meeting with managers and colleagues (something that Catherine found she did not have when returning to work after her first maternity leave as a teacher), and catching up on changes. However, despite finding her KIT days ‘really, really helpful’ in some respects, there is a sense of disappointment in Seren’s comments. She feels that her KIT days could have been better used – ‘you were just kind of there to earn the money and shuffle a bit of paper, as opposed to actually really getting to grips with how many things change’, ‘it would have been nice to actually feel a bit more useful during that time and then maybe that would have helped my return as well’. Here we see how important a sense of being needed, and having a clear professional identity is, to teachers. As we saw with Esther, when this teacher identity does not feel fulfilling or purposeful, it can be ‘quite disheartening’ for returning teachers.

Returning in the holidays

In **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, we saw how maternity pay and the rhythm of the school year influenced teachers’ decisions about when to return to work following their maternity leave. In this seventh report, we included Marie-Ann’s comments about returning for a few weeks in July ‘to do that cheeky thing where you get paid for the summer holidays’, a scenario that we see again in Sophie’s account below:

“I did have a little bit of an incident when it came to returning. So my maternity leave was, I was going to stop being paid. So what a lot of people do is come back towards the end of the summer for a few days and then take six weeks full paid, which obviously it’s a bit cheeky, I suppose to come back and then expect to be paid full time but a) it’s very common, and it’s almost the standard practice. And b) you don’t accrue any holidays while you are off on maternity leave. And so when I mentioned my friend

who came to the end of her maternity leave, and she didn't work in teaching, she then had accrued, you know, almost 20 days holiday, which she added on to the end of her mat leave. But we had a little bit of a disagreement with the headteacher, who didn't want me to come back for a couple of days and wanted me to either come back for at least a minimum of two weeks before I could then be entitled to my six weeks holiday, which I argued the point and she did in the end back down." – *Sophie*

The understanding that a teacher must return to work 'for a couple of days', 'for at least a minimum of two weeks' or 'for the last few weeks of term' (Marie-Ann) in order to qualify for full pay over the summer holidays, is a myth. As Sophie rightly explains, because of our fixed holiday periods, teachers lose out on paid holiday when parents in other industries can accrue their holiday to extend their leave. One way of mitigating this loss, so specific to teaching, is to use shared parental leave to return to work and be paid during the holidays, or to return to work on the first day of a block of holiday. Both approaches are legally valid and cannot be blocked by an employer.

The fact that Sophie still returns to work 'for a couple of days' before the holidays, suggests that neither she nor her head teacher are aware that there is no legal or policy document that dictates a teacher's return to work beyond giving 8 weeks' notice of their return date⁴¹. In fact, it is interesting that Sophie uses the exact same words as Marie-Ann – 'obviously it's a bit cheeky' – even whilst defending her choice to push for her legal entitlement. This commonality of wording, and the frequency that the question about start dates is asked within The MTPT Project and Shared Parental Leave for Teachers' networks, suggests that this myth, which financially disadvantages mother-teachers, is still being trotted out by HR and senior leaders in our schools.

The insistence on the part of Sophie's head teacher, that she 'come back for at least a minimum of two weeks' isn't just wrong, but also an example of maternity discrimination. According to the EHRC, mothers encountering 'disagreement with their employer about when they had to notify them about their intention to return to work' and facing 'disagreement about holiday accumulation or benefits entitled to' were both identified as discriminatory behaviours in their 2018 report.

Working the clawback period

We know that 7 of our interview participants, including Monica after her second child, did not return to work at all following their maternity leave, choosing to resign before, or whilst on leave⁴². Comments in this report show us that two further participants left once they had worked their clawback period of 13 weeks, choosing to resign, being encouraged, or forced to leave.

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.uk/employers-maternity-pay-leave/notice-period>

⁴² www.mtpt.org.uk/light-research

“Which possibly made it harder when I then started to resign quite near the end of my maternity leave.” – *Rosie*

“It then became quite difficult returning from maternity leave to work notice because I think the school felt that in some way I’d misled them because I had initially intended to return to work fully.” – *Rosie*

“If I was literally only going to come back to the school to sort of repay my maternity rights, you know, go back for the 16 weeks or whatever it was that he would rather that I didn’t come back, and that I actually would be allowed to leave without having to repay my maternity pay if I just left at that point, because otherwise they’d have to make redundancies. And so, it was sold to me that I would actually be doing the school a favour if I went.” – *June*

“I was due to hear back on the eighth of December and my doctor signed me off sick because my resignation was the 31st December so they signed me off sick for three weeks, so that I didn’t have to return full-time for that little bit after I handed in my notice.” – *Monica*

The requirement for teachers to return to work for thirteen weeks following their maternity leave in order to avoid paying back their occupational maternity pay (50% of their wage for 12 weeks) skews the data we have around the rates of attrition directly linked to motherhood. According to the Department for Work and Pensions, 87% of mothers working in education return to work after maternity leave, the second highest rate across the industries included in their report⁴³. However, Rosie and June’s admission that they *only* returned (or intended to return) in order to work out their clawback period suggests that we could be losing far higher numbers of teachers after these 13 weeks. Indeed, when June and Rosie are included in the figure of those leaving directly after maternity leave, a third of the teachers included in this study did not return to work, or were lost within the first term (i.e. the clawback period) following maternity leave.

Rosie and Monica’s comments show us that, as well as limiting mothers’ occupational mobility, preventing them from returning to new or promoted roles in different schools without suffering financial penalties, these 13 weeks can also be very unpleasant and difficult both for the individuals and schools involved. Rosie says that her return was ‘made ... harder’ and was ‘quite difficult’ because of her choice to resign, and that she felt as if she had betrayed her school who felt ‘misled’ by her choice. Rosie’s comment reminds us that women’s priorities may change when they become mothers, and even though she had ‘had initially intended to return to work fully’, the significant experience of motherhood and maternity leave lead her to change her mind.

Similarly, Monica, who resigned because she was not granted part-time hours as a Head of Department, spent September to December of her return ‘fight[ing] to go part time’, the strain of which eventually lead to her being signed off sick. Not only would this have been a horrible experience for Monica, it would also have impacted the stability of department and

⁴³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214367/rrep777.pdf

the emotional wellbeing of her team. Furthermore, it would have required her leadership team to organise the logistics, and budget for three weeks of cover for her classes. The fact that Monica was signed off is evidence that she was ‘treated so poorly’ she felt she ‘had to leave her job’, making her part of the 11% of mothers whose experience of pregnancy and maternity discrimination leads to this outcome.

In comparison to Monica and Rosie, June was offered a clean break, encouraged to resign without returning from maternity leave, with the 13 weeks of clawback waived if she agreed to do so. Whilst this meant that she and her school avoided the awkwardness, guilt, stress and upheaval we hear about in Monica and Rosie’s stories, and she was not financially penalised for leaving, the context of her resignation reads more like an example of discriminatory treatment: June was discouraged from returning – ‘he would rather that I didn’t come back’, emotionally manipulated – ‘it was sold to me that I would actually be doing the school a favour if I went’, and put in a position where she was asked to compare her own professional worth to others – ‘otherwise they’d have to make redundancies’. June’s use of language when recounting the event with hindsight – ‘sold to me’ – could even imply that the risk of redundancies in her school were not wholly accurate, or even true. June’s anecdote indicates that she was ‘put under pressure to hand in [her] notice or leave’⁴⁴ when she otherwise would have returned.

The experiences that lead to their resignations left all of these teachers feeling undervalued and – in Monica’s case – emotionally and physically unwell. June’s head teacher clearly expresses that he would rather retain other staff and lose her, and Monica is refused a flexible working request that is granted, and which works successfully in many other schools. Like Rebecca, who found that she was ignored and dismissed, Rosie returns to a school culture that is unpleasant and even hostile towards her because she has handed in her resignation.

⁴⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214367/rrep777.pdf

Suggestions for Schools and Individuals

Supporting mother-teachers over the return to work period is key to retention in the female, 30-39 demographic. That we could be losing a third of our mother-teachers within the first two years following their return to work after maternity leave is an equality scandal and a retention issue that could be resolved through supportive and informed school leadership.

Whilst situations may vary from individual to individual and between schools, this report shows that there are some key support measures that – if made into formal policy that is enacted on the ground by colleagues, middle and senior leaders, and HR leads – will make the return to work period a much more positive experience for mothers. Schools that support their teachers at this highly vulnerable time are likely to benefit hugely not just from retaining experienced staff, but from loyalty and appreciation across the school.

In general terms, the responses from these 21 participants have indicated that schools can take the following actions to support mother-teachers aged 30-39 as they return to work:

- Offer colleagues return to work coaching to help them to clarify what they want from their working lives now that they are mothers
- Provide informal mentoring or role models to returners, either within your own context, or by signposting them to external networks such as The MTPT Project, WomenEd, BAMEed, or Aspiring Heads
- Highlight any mental health support that might be available to colleagues in your Employee Assistance programme, and identify any Mental Health First Aid-trained colleagues, or Mental Health Champions within your school
- Work with colleagues to negotiate and design a return to work schedule that suits everyone – this might include phased returns, handover periods, flexibility, or the reduction of extra-curricular responsibilities in the first term or half-term back
- Make full and flexible use of KIT and SPLIT days, informing expectant parents of their right to these ahead of their leave, and paying them a day rate for any work completed for the school, and using them to cover professional development and coaching opportunities
- Encourage the use of KIT and SPLIT days purely for socialising purposes, or to meet new team members and line managers, particularly when staff turnover has been high during a colleague's maternity leave
- As a school leader, know who is returning and make time to give them a warm welcome back, in person
- Say 'yes' to flexible working requests at all levels, providing safe and open spaces for negotiation and problem-solving if the specifics of the teacher's initial request cannot be granted
- Tackle the issue of workload for all staff as a matter of priority, and be mindful of the workload placed on returning teachers

- Recognise that – regardless of their experience and apparent grit – the return to work period is not the time to overburden colleagues with challenges that they do not relish, even if you know them to be capable of working well under pressure
- Provide training for line managers, senior leaders and HR on the pregnancy, maternity and return to work period, including what counts as discrimination and how maternity pay and leave is applied in a school context – explore the Supporting Returners workshop available at www.mtpt.org.uk/shop for an easy and accessible way to do this
- Ensure that policy documents reflect up to date and accurate legal information and best practice, and that both returning parents, line managers, senior leaders and HR leaders have read and understood these documents
- Include breastfeeding and expressing provision in these policy documents, working in partnership with returning mothers to go above the legal requirements of support offered
- Formalise ‘check-in’ (not ‘check-up’!) meetings with returning colleagues in these policy documents so that returning mothers have the opportunity to share their experiences at an allocated time and in a safe space
- Resolve allegations of discrimination positively and discreetly, in open and supportive dialogue with individuals to limit reputational damage
- Ensure there are safe channels for reporting and addressing discrimination, and that returning mothers know what these channels are
- Waive the clawback requirements that limit mothers’ occupational mobility and discuss the best options for teachers who do not want to return – read about how and why this was achieved at [Greenwood Academy Trust](#)

For individuals who have read this report feeling that they are in the same or similar position to our 21 participants, but are not yet ready to leave teaching, there are some ways that you can make the return to work period positive and empowering:

- Return when you want to, including part-way through the year, or a term, or on the first day of a holiday period
- Propose KIT / SPLIT day tasks that work for you, that can be completed either on site or remotely, and include the opportunity to invest in your own personal and professional development
- Request coaching, or funding for coaching, to support your return to work
- Read any relevant school policy documents and connect with key networks to understand your rights, and how to address discrimination – The MTPT Project, Flexible Teacher Talent, Shared Parental Leave for Teachers, Maternity Action, Pregnant then Screwed, Citizens Advice and your union are all helpful organisations
- Explore other schools if yours is not the right environment for you now that you are a mother
- Explain any breastfeeding or expressing needs to your HR leads, SLT or line managers, and work with them to design a set up that enables you to continue your feeding journey in a way that works for you



- Communicate as openly as you can with trusted colleagues and leaders about how you are finding your return so that they can put appropriate support in place if need be
- Identify colleagues within, or external to your setting, who can act as informal role models to support you as you return

Want to find out more?

If you have any further questions about this report or our findings about the impact of the return to work period on teachers' decisions to leave teaching aged 30-39, please get in touch. We love engaging with professional and academic dialogue around things we might have missed, questions we haven't answered or ideas we might not have thought of.

More information about the MTPT Project's own coaching programmes for teachers on parental leave, returning to work, or balancing teaching / leadership with young families can be found at www.mtpt.org.uk/coaching

If you are an academic or a student and our work is helping with your area of study, we're more than happy to chat informally, or organise more formal events or presentations to share this work with a wider audience.

Just email Emma Sheppard on mtptproject@gmail.com or find her spending too much time on Twitter [@mtptproject](https://twitter.com/mtptproject)