

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.

10. Teachers on Maternity Leave

All but one of the 41 interview participants aged 30-39 who were still teaching were asked to describe their maternity leave experiences, and 38 of these participants' responses are included in this report. As well as the specific question, *Can you describe your maternity leave experience to me?*, participants commented on maternity leave experiences when asked to expand on the following reasons for staying in teaching:

- Professional commitments, qualifications or a sense of duty
- KIT days, or CPD completed on maternity leave
- Mental health or wellbeing
- Feeling valued
- Professional development opportunities
- Progression opportunities within teaching
- Family context i.e. a manageable age gap, shared parental leave, a stay at home partner or parents supporting your child care
- Job satisfaction
- A change of school
- School culture
- Support from leadership and management
- Any other factors that influenced your decision to remain in teaching
- Financial
- Compatible childcare logistics

One participant was not asked the question (interviewer omission) and other participants spoke either exclusively about their extended career break in response to the question, rather than the specific maternity leave experience, or spoke immediately about their return to work experiences. These responses are therefore included in later reports.

31 of the participants in this report were secondary school teachers, 7 were primary school teachers. As we have seen in all of our reports thus far, the majority of participants were middle leaders or TLR holders (17), 7 were SLT members and 14 were class teachers. There was a higher percentage of class teachers (37% in comparison to 31%) and senior leaders (18% in comparison to 15%) represented in the group of 'stayers' included in this report in comparison to the interview participants who had *left* teaching aged 30-39 included in the equivalent report, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**.

The MTPT Project has acquired, or is responsible for collecting some of the key statistics about teachers on maternity leave. We now know that 3.4% of the teacher workforce are on

maternity leave at any given time each year – approximately 15,924 teachers according to 2022 Schools Workforce Census figures, or an average of two per school¹. A Freedom of Information request to nine of England’s largest MATs revealed a higher figure, with an average of 5.39% of their staff taking periods of maternity leave during the academic year 2021-22. When scaled up, this could mean that 25,244 teachers are on maternity leave every year. Just over half of these teachers begin their maternity leave when they are 37-38 weeks pregnant², and take an average of 8.5 months³ of maternity leave. In itself, the fact that none of this information was available before The MTPT Project’s 2018 and 2022 Freedom of Information requests, Twitter polls or original research, is telling: what value do we place on the demographic of teacher-mothers, and to what extent do we see their experiences of maternity leave as important?

Reports that do exist focus on teachers’ experiences of pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination, or are often amalgamated with the increasing need to create more flexible working opportunities in teaching, which can detract from a proper understanding of the specific maternity leave period. Whilst flexible working *is* raised in comments in this report, there is an equal split between participants who worked part time at the time of interview, and those who worked full time. Part time hours were predominantly worked by classroom teachers (13 out of 14) with all of the senior leaders included in this report working full time.

Requests for part time and flexible working are undeniably a feature of mother-teachers’ maternity leave experiences, however a blanket assumption that all teachers will consider part time or flexible working when on maternity leave is inaccurate. In short, there is far more to mother-teachers’ experience of maternity leave than the desire, or preparation to work flexibly upon their return.

As well as being the largest group of leavers after retirees, women aged 30-39 are also our largest group of teachers, making up a fifth of our total workforce. TeacherTapp responses suggest that 55% of these are mothers⁴⁵, whereas the headline figures from our initial survey and our qualitative interviews indicates that this figure could be between 81% and 90%. The sourcing approach for this MTPT Project study, and the fact that the TeacherTapp question received 9,525 responses would suggest that 55% is likely to be more realistic. However, there is a need for centralised data collection on this point if we wish to attain a truly accurate figure. Without this accuracy, much of our sector response to this demographic is likely to be based on guess work, good intentions and assumptions.

In **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, we outlined the attrition rate amongst women across all industries and highlighted that 13% of teachers do not return to work following maternity leave. This means, however, that 87% do – a figure that is higher than the national average of 83%⁶. This positive figure may have something to do with the 13 week clawback period that teachers must work in order to avoid paying back their enhanced maternity pay. This is

¹ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/percentage_of_teachers_on_matern#incoming-1115502

² <https://twitter.com/madamwait/status/1564605791604281347?s=20&t=1N63qXqpnsJix9exMJFerg>

³ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/percentage_of_teachers_on_matern#incoming-1115502

⁴ <https://twitter.com/iaincford/status/1694658081093820751?s=20>

⁵ NB This is an updated figure from TeacherTapp data used in previous MTPT Project reports (1-9).

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214367/rrep777.pdf

why we asked the nine largest MATs the number of staff leaving within two terms of returning to work following their maternity leave. According to this data, the retention figure is slightly lower at 84.4%, but this still remains above the national average.

Currently, two thirds of UK organisations offer enhanced maternity pay beyond the statutory six weeks at 90% pay and up to 39 weeks at £172.48. The Burgundy Book offers four weeks at full pay, two weeks at 90% pay and a further 12 weeks at 50% plus the statutory £172.48 per week. There is some variance where improved pay has been negotiated by unions or offered by local authorities. Two examples include Tower Hamlets where teachers in local government schools receive four weeks full pay, 6 weeks at 90% and 20 weeks at 50%⁷ and Haringey Council where teachers are offered the equivalent of 14 weeks full pay, paid either in full across 14 weeks, or as 8 weeks of full pay and a further 12 weeks at half pay⁸. This pay can be supplemented by taking periods of shared parental leave where teachers return to work, and get paid in full, over the school holidays, an entitlement that Kinza Barrett at Shared Parental Leave for Teachers has done much to promote and claim for the teacher community. Indeed, between 2021-2022, Shared Parental Leave for Teachers saw more than a fivefold increase in their client numbers⁹.

During teachers' periods of maternity leave themselves, an informal poll by The MTPT Project revealed that less than half (42.1%) of teachers felt that their school had been supportive during their leave. A quarter of respondents felt that their school had been unsupportive, and a remaining third felt their school had been neither supportive nor unsupportive¹⁰.

Comments from the 39 teachers included in this report regarding their experiences of maternity leave fell into sixteen different categories:

| | |
|--|---|
| Pregnancy | “When I told my line manager that I was pregnant, well, first of all they had already guessed, but they were nothing but supportive and they didn’t even give any sign that they were, you know, it would be inconvenient or disappointing.” – <i>Heather</i> |
| Positive Experiences of Maternity Leave | “It was brilliant for me to bond with my child and I wouldn’t have changed that. It was really important to be able to have the time to understand who our child is and what they’re like and to be able you know to be a good mum and set them off on the right start in life.” – <i>Clare</i> |
| Length and Timing of Maternity Leave | “I was able to take eight months off with my daughter and seven months off with my son. So having that nice long time at home was lovely.” – <i>Katie</i> |

⁷ <https://eastlondonneu.org/maternity-pregnancy/#:~:text=If%20you%20have%20worked%20in,6%20weeks%2090%25%20pay>

⁸ <https://www.minutes.haringey.gov.uk/documents/s90940/161212%20Family%20Friendly%20Policies%20doc.pdf>

⁹ Kinza Barrett, email message to The MTPT Project, 13th July 2023

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/mtptproject/status/1669307674024894464?s=20>

Maternity Pay

“I find it really sad that as a very qualified, relatively experienced teacher who worked really hard, that my maternity leave sucks. I’m taking four months off. I’m going back in October half term because actually, I can’t afford to take any longer than that off.” – *Caroline*

Communication with School

“I tried to keep in touch a bit with school, although there wasn’t that much of it. I think I probably would have liked to have done more” – *Kirsten*

Spouse / Partner Involvement

“My husband and I wanted to share parental leave, which we did. We both earned about the same, both being in teaching.” – *Andrea*

Support from School

“They were really supportive on maternity leave. It was a completely different experience, this time, to what it was the first time around. I think that’s probably been a huge factor in me wanting to go back to school.” – *Tamsin*

Progression

“Part of that is sort of why I’ve stayed in it, whilst I’ve been on maternity leave I’ve been made deputy head.” – *Lauren*

Flexible Working

“I negotiated to work three days a week and I dropped from being Head of Department, so I went from being Head of Drama to Drama Teacher. Then, when I went on maternity leave a second time, I think my timetable was much easier to cover and that sort of thing.” – *Shivani*

Recruitment and Staffing

“They haven’t actually replaced me while I’m on maternity because I’m a SENCO and that’s quite a specialised role and I know from other schools in the local area that they cannot get a maternity cover for SENCOs. At the moment, the Head Teacher and my administrator are covering my workload.” – *Nadya*

Negative Experiences of Maternity Leave

“I did find it a bit dull sitting at home for a year because a lot of time when they are little babies, they don’t do very much and they do a lot of sleeping. And there is not a lot to kind of do and stretch your mind on things and yeah... I was doing a very important job in bringing up a small person for a year but it wasn’t as stimulating as being at work is.” – *Lucy*

Discrimination

“When I initially went off, I applied to do the NPQSL, then I found out just after Christmas that I was accepted onto the course and was due to start in February – but then the guy running it said that I couldn’t be on it whilst I was on maternity leave because I couldn’t expect change while I was off. So that was a bit disappointing.” – *Lauren*

Mental Health

“There’s a lot of competition between mums and mums don’t really tell you the full story, they just paint a pretend picture of how wonderful their lives are and I just felt like I was, kind of swimming and just barely surviving and I found that quite hard. So I ended up coming off social media for maybe six, seven months because I felt too much pressure to be a part of that.” – *Juliette*

Teacher Identity

“I found maternity leave quite difficult because you go from being a full time working professional with loads of marking and planning and assessing and kind of forward-thinking to, well, when I first had my little boy I just didn’t have a clue what I was doing.” – *Kimberley*

“MaternityCPD”

“I’ve done some – read some books and a bit of some interesting conferences and events that I probably wouldn’t have gone to if I’d been at, if it had been normal term time.” – *Heather*

Attitudes Towards Returning

“As it came towards the end, I was looking forward to doing something else in my day. And I don’t think I would be a particularly healthy individual if I had stayed home all day with a one year old. And not really interact with other adults or young people.” – *Aisha*

As six reports focusing on the leavers’ interview responses have already been written, it is also now possible to compare the experience of women aged 30-39 who have remained in teaching, and those who left in the same aged bracket. In particular, this report corresponds to **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, exploring the maternity leave experiences of female teachers who left the profession aged 30-39.

There were nine shared categories of comments in this report and **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**:

- Pregnancy / Experiences of Late Pregnancy
- Positive experiences of maternity leave
- Discrimination
- Identity / Teacher Identity
- Mental health
- Maternity Pay

- Length and Timing of Leave
- Communication with School – KIT days were included as a separate topic in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** but are subsumed into the *Communication with School* category in this stayers' report
- Impact on the return to work / Attitudes towards returning

Comments in this report were categorised into five topics that participants did not refer to in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave:**

- Recruitment and Staffing
- Support from School
- MaternityCPD
- Spouse / Partner involvement

Although a separate report, **04. What's Love Got to Do With It?** explored participants' comments regarding how their spouse or partner had been part of their decision to leave teaching, none of the comments refer specifically to the period of maternity leave as they do in this report. What's more, there is no mention of shared parental leave in either **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** or **04. What's Love Got to Do With It**, whereas this is raised by four participants in this report.

- Progression (*during the maternity leave period*)

Again, although there is a separate report, **06. We're on a Road to Nowhere**, focusing on leavers' experiences of progression and professional development, there were an equal number of comments (10) in both reports that refer specifically to this progression happening, or being denied, over the late pregnancy or maternity leave period.

In both reports, participants refer to experiences of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, which are also described in **08. Don't Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** indicating that this is an ongoing issue in the education sector. The same is true for the topic of flexible working where, for both leavers and stayers, flexible working is mostly denied, offered on the proviso that the teacher in question will take a demotion, or the subject of unpleasant negotiations involving unions and appeals.

It is also notable that in this report, there are far more mentions of participants' school or teacher identity contributing to a positive experience of maternity leave. Participants also reveal a better understanding, and use of, KIT days in this report, in comparison to both **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** and **08. Don't Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period**.

The percentage of participants referring to actual diagnoses of post-natal depression or anxiety during their maternity leave period was slightly higher in this stayers report (10%) than in the equivalent leavers report (8%), **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**.

Amongst the stayers included in this report, the retention rate immediately following the maternity leave period is far higher than amongst the leavers. 27% of the participants included in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** resigned from teaching entirely during their maternity leave. In comparison, just 8% of the participants in this report left their roles during their maternity leaves. However, these three participants either secured a new role in a different school during their leave, or returned to teaching after only a brief period of unemployment.

Trigger warning: comments from participants in this report refer to miscarriage, premature babies, post-natal depression and the death of a student in one participant's class.

Pregnancy

Nine participants mentioned their experiences of pregnancy and – unlike in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** where comments focused on the later stages of pregnancy – these comments included references to the full pregnancy period, from announcement through to the third trimester.

Four participants commented on how supportive their schools had been during their pregnancies:

“I was really lucky the whole time I was pregnant. The school were really supportive with appointments. I never felt that they wanted me to move any appointments or anything like that. They were really supportive all the way through. I worked with the youngest, I worked up until I was 39 weeks + 2. So literally, until the midwife told me that I wasn't allowed to go to work anymore.” – *Valerie*

“The school were really good. They re-timetabled all of my classes so that I didn't have to climb stairs.” – *Valerie*

“Although I was pregnant, I never got any kind of feeling that it was inconvenient or a problem.” – *Heather*

“When I told my line manager that I was pregnant, well first of all they had already guessed, but they were nothing but supportive, and they didn't even give any sign that they were, it would be inconvenient or disappointing. Ah, I think they knew it was going to come at some point and actually I had been quite open about my plans, and I think that's a good thing. I really think they encouraged open dialogue about what your plans were.” – *Heather*

“I actually got a promotion when I was about 37 weeks pregnant, which again, showed me that my school believed in me and weren't in any way – it made me very secure in that year because I knew that they were fully behind me and they wouldn't like to discriminate against me or close down any opportunities for me.” – *Sadie*

“I’m pregnant again now and now I’m not worried about going back.” – *Helen*

In these comments, participants refer both to the practical and emotional support offered by their schools. For Valerie, this practical support included ‘re-timtabl[ing]’ her classes so that she ‘didn’t have to climb stairs’, and not asking her to ‘move any appointments’. In Sadie’s case, this meant being promoted at ‘37 weeks pregnant’ and ensuring that opportunities were not ‘close[d] down’ because of her pregnancy.

The emotional support described by all four participants includes a general sense of the school ‘being really supportive’, being ‘really good’, being ‘nothing but supportive’, being ‘fully behind’ the participants and believing in them. Helen, Sadie and Heather speak about *not* feeling ‘worried’, *not* being made to feel as if their pregnancy were ‘inconvenient or a problem’, ‘disappointing’ and feeling confident that they wouldn’t be discriminated against.

Whilst these four participants are very appreciative of the way they have been treated as pregnant employees – ‘I was really lucky’ – there are two problematic aspects to their comments. The first is the implicit understanding that pregnancy *could be* a disappointment, problem or inconvenience to their employer, and therefore a feeling of relief or gratitude that their employer does not voice these feelings in front of them. Unfortunately, this reflects the findings of the EHRC’s report into pregnancy and maternity discrimination, which revealed that only 25% of employers felt that it was ‘easy to facilitate all statutory rights relating to pregnancy and maternity’. Indeed, 26% of employers found the ‘uncertainty about whether mothers on maternity leave would return to work’ difficult, and 18% found ‘arranging and managing maternity cover’ difficult¹¹.

This undercurrent of a societal narrative that presents pregnancy as problematic for employers means that women feel grateful when their legal entitlements are honoured. Valerie’s comments, for example, regarding her ante-natal appointments, simply reflect her school adhering to the law, and the adjustments made to her rooming are a standard part of a risk assessment, which is also her entitlement as pregnant employee. Sadie’s promotion in her third trimester should be very normal, as it is discriminatory to deny an employee a position on the grounds that they are pregnant or on maternity leave¹².

However, because 77% of mothers report negative or discriminatory experiences, including ‘missing out on promotion’, feeling as if they are being put at physical risk, experiencing ‘harassment or negative comments related to pregnancy’, ‘being discouraged from attending antenatal appointments during work time’ or ‘being treated with less respect’¹³ whilst pregnant, during their leave or shortly after their return to work, Sadie, Heather and Valerie’s comments suggest that it is the discrimination that has become normalised, not the legal entitlements to protection.

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

¹² https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/your_rights_to_equality_at_work_-_training_development_promotion_and_transfer.pdf

¹³ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

When these rights are protected, comments from participants reveal the positive consequences: not only do schools benefit by retaining and promoting appropriate candidates to vacancies (Sadie), they also increase trust and staff loyalty. We see this in Valerie’s gratitude and acknowledgement of her school’s good practice; in Heather’s transparency regarding her family plans – ‘they knew it was going to come at some point and actually I had been quite open about my plans, and I think that’s a good thing’ – and in Helen and Sadie’s sense of security and stability – ‘it made me very secure in that year’, ‘I’m not worried about going back’.

Heather and Andrea also comment on the timing of their pregnancy announcements, and the practicalities that informed their decision to share their news:

“I was honest with them about it, so maybe they could plan ahead, but at the same time, I think it was mutually beneficial on both sides that we could think about the best ways to make it work, fit into wider succession planning, and how they could use my role for them to, whilst I was off, to give other people some chances in school for internal promotion to develop them, and to give them the chance to step up to a new – but I think there was a lot of good thinking and planning from leadership and management about how to make maternity leave and things like that work for everybody.” – *Heather*

“I was pregnant after being there not that long. I’d only been there a term when I became pregnant, but I’d had two miscarriage before but not while I was working there, so I didn’t say anything for quite a long time just to check that wasn’t going to happen again. Then I was worried it would receive [interruption in recording] because I’d not been there that long, but they were fine about it, and they were very pleased to hear that I was only planning to take five months off, which I did.” – *Andrea*

“I was pregnant again about a year and a half later, and this time I just went in when I was about three and a half months pregnant and just said, “Well, we are going to be moving during my maternity leave to Yorkshire,” so I said, “I won’t be returning”. Then spent most of the next six months trying to recruit teachers to replace me, which didn’t work out.” – *Andrea*

Although Heather’s previous comments have revealed that there was an ‘open dialogue’ regarding her family plans even before she conceived, it is important to remember that employees are legally entitled to wait until the 15th week before their baby is due to inform their employers of their pregnancy¹⁴. This is in part due to the lack of protection or formal leave entitlements for employees who miscarry before 24 weeks. If, for example, an employee announces their pregnancy at 12 weeks, but miscarries at 20 weeks, they are not entitled to a period of maternity leave. This means that any plans that have been put in place for their absence will no longer be needed. Equally, as we see in Andrea’s comments, making a pregnancy announcement following experiences of, or with concerns surrounding miscarriage, is a vulnerable process for many women.

¹⁴ <https://www.acas.org.uk/your-maternity-leave-pay-and-other-rights/telling-your-employer-youre-pregnant#:~:text=If%20you're%20entitled%20to,week%20your%20baby%20is%20due>

It is therefore the individual's choice to announce their pregnancy at a time that feels appropriate within the legal timeframe. In Andrea and Heather's comments, we see the factors that can influence this decision: the desire to 'plan ahead', consider 'succession planning' and what Heather describes as the 'mutually beneficial' aspects of an earlier announcement. Heather's comments imply that her involvement in this 'good thinking and planning from leadership' allowed her a certain degree of control of the situation, and enhanced her positive experience of pregnancy and he build up to her leave.

Rather than an 'inconvenience' or a 'disappointment', therefore, Heather's story demonstrates how schools can approach periods of maternity leave in ways 'that work for everybody'. Using a planned period of absence as a way to 'develop' others and 'give them the chance to step up' can generate engagement and motivation across teams, and empower other colleagues who want to progress in their careers. As we will see in later comments in the *Staffing and Recruitment* section of this report, planning for a period of leave that results in roles and responsibilities being covered effectively can improve the maternity leave experience for individuals as well as schools. It can also remove the prejudiced assumptions that a period of maternity leave will be an 'inconvenience', at improve attitudes towards expectant parents.

As well as her hesitations in response to her previous experiences of miscarriage, Andrea shares two further factors that influenced the timing of her pregnancy announcement. Firstly, the familiarity and trust between colleagues: Andrea explains that she had 'only been [at her school] a term when [she] became pregnant'. Despite the fact that her school 'were fine about it' when she did share her news, simply not knowing them very well meant that the trust, security and confidence we see in Heather's comments was simply not there yet.

Secondly, personal context – in this case Andrea's plans to relocate – informed the timing of her pregnancy announcement. In her comments, she implies that the motivation for announcing her second pregnancy (made well in advance of the legal requirements) is similar to Heather's: it provides the school with sufficient warning to consider 'succession planning' and recruit a replacement. Unfortunately for Andrea's school, their inability to recruit even after six months, reflects the wider recruitment and retention issues we are experiencing as a sector, but also confirms the employer concerns revealed in the EHRC's report, where 26% found the 'uncertainty about whether mothers on maternity leave would return to work' a challenging aspect of managing pregnancy in the workplace.

We have already heard in Valerie's comment that she continued to work until she was just over 39 weeks pregnant. Informal polls conducted by The MTPT Project reveal that 70.5% of teachers begin their maternity leave at 37-39 weeks¹⁵ and two further participants comment on the timing of the start of their maternity leave, and the factors that influenced this decision-making:

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/mtptproject/status/1706624044970156083>

“With my first daughter, my first child, and I went off on maternity leave at 35 weeks. I had quite a stressful pregnancy and I was signed off a little bit earlier than I wanted to go.” – *Tamsin*

“I found pregnancy quite stressful, particularly the last couple of months. I ended up getting signed off work, I think I was about 33 weeks pregnant and then my little boy ended up coming three weeks early, so it was the right call.” – *Juliette*

For Juliette, this earlier start ‘was the right call’ due to her son’s premature arrival, but Tamsin felt like 35 weeks was ‘a little bit earlier’ than she wanted. Both participants explain that this timing was – in part – influenced by the ‘stressful’ nature of their pregnancies. Whilst neither of them specify the exact situation, the fact that they were ‘signed off’, could have been for mental health reasons – ‘I had quite a stressful pregnancy’, ‘I found pregnancy quite stressful’ – or, in Tamsin’s case, the earlier start could have been instigated by her school as a result of pregnancy-related illness in the last four weeks before her due date.

Three participants explicitly mention the way in which their pregnancies impacted their physical or mental health:

“In my pregnancy, and I had chronic morning sickness, and I’d had gestational diabetes. But the problem was, because of the stress of teaching, I couldn’t regulate the hormones.” – *Leanne*

“It was probably the lowest point I’ve ever had in my entire life. And this is coming from someone who repeatedly lost babies as well while I was there.” – *Helen*

“I did actually get pregnant with my second child earlier than I intended. I just felt I had to leave teaching temporarily to find my mojo again.” – *Flora*

Unlike Tamsin and Juliette who do not mention whether their professional lives contributed to the ‘stressful’ nature of their pregnancies, Leanne, Helen and Flora see these things as intertwined. Whilst Leanne’s ‘chronic morning sickness’ and ‘gestational diabetes’ are a result of her pregnancy, these physical conditions were exacerbated by ‘the stress of teaching’.

For Helen, who contextualises her statement her statement with a reminder of her previous emotional resilience – ‘this is coming from someone who repeatedly lost babies’ – it is her school culture and the way she was treated during her pregnancy, which she describes as ‘vile’, ‘disgusting’, ‘beyond horrific’, that meant that this was ‘probably the lowest point... in [her] entire life’.

Equally, for Flora both the timing of her second pregnancy, which was ‘earlier than [she] intended’, and a sense of losing her ‘mojo’ for teaching, impacted her decision to take an extended period of maternity leave before moving to a new school.

Positive Experiences of Maternity Leave

13 of the 39 participants included in the report referred to their maternity leave as a positive time, using the words, 'enjoyed', 'fondly', 'amazing', 'really good', 'very positive', 'really positive', 'relaxed', 'so important', 'so good', 'really enjoyed', 'enjoyable', 'great', 'appreciated', 'lovely', 'nice', 'brilliant', 'important', 'huge leap forward', 'massively achieved', 'fantastic', to describe their experiences. Their comments ranged from simple statements, to more detailed descriptions of exactly what made the period of leave positive.

"I enjoyed my maternity leave." – *Aisha*

"I look back on it fondly." - *Kirsten*

"My actual maternity leave being off with my daughter was amazing." – *Leanne*

"It was a really good year." – *Sadie*

"Generally my maternity leave, my time away was very positive." – *Kayleigh*

"I went on maternity leave – in fact, my maternity leave started once I'd had him because he came a bit early – but my general maternity leave has been really positive."
– *Raya*

"It's been quite relaxed." – *Raya*

"It absolutely whizzed by, the year, so it was so important. You only get it once, so good to have that time, even to sleep. I really enjoyed the time off and I look back and think, 'oh this time last year, I was off.' It was a really enjoyable time" – *Alexa*

Bernadette, Katie and Clare explain that the opportunity to spend time with their new baby was what made their experience of maternity leave positive:

"It's been great to have all that time with Nico to get to know him, I suppose, and just to sort of live our lives." – *Bernadette*

"I really appreciated my maternity leave... Having that nice long time at home was lovely." – *Katie*

"It was brilliant for me to bond with my child and I wouldn't have changed that. It was really important to be able to have the time to understand who our child is and what they're like and to be able you know to be a good mum and set them off on the right start in life." – *Clare*

We know that Katie took eight months of leave and Bernadette took less than a year, but Clare did not state the length of her leave in her interview. However, all three of these participants and Alexa refer to 'all that time', 'that nice long time', 'the time', 'the year', 'that

time' as a positive aspect of maternity leave as it allowed them to 'get to know', 'bond with' and 'understand who [their] child is and what they're like', and 'set them off on the right start in life' or 'even to sleep'. This time also allowed them, spend time 'at home' and 'live [their] lives' and 'be a good mum'. There is a clear sense of value placed on the role and identity of motherhood and an appreciation of the duration of a protected period of maternity leave – 'You only get it once'.

Bernadette and Clare comment on the positive role that parent and baby activities or communities played in their maternity leaves:

"I did NCT classes and so I have quite a close network of friends with babies the same age" – *Bernadette*

'I mean, I did lots of things, I met up with people. I went out walking a lot; we got a lot of exercise, which was great.' – *Clare*

Where Bernadette refers to a 'close network of friends', with 'babies the same age' as a shared aspect of identity, Clare – in later comments – states that she found her maternity leave isolating. Whilst she states that doing 'lots of things', meeting up with people, 'walking a lot', getting 'a lot of exercise', were 'great' parts of her leave, we see that a simple positive / negative dichotomy does not paint an accurate picture of teachers' experiences of maternity leave.

Indeed, some comments from participants that initially seem to describe a wholly positive experience of maternity leave, are counterpointed with references to challenges or complexity. Even in the previous simple statements from Leanne and Kayleigh, we see similar hints of a more complex experience in the words 'actual', 'generally'. Comments from Juliette, Bernadette and Sadie also show this sense of nuance:

"I really enjoyed spending the time with my son but I found motherhood a lot harder than I anticipated it would be." – *Juliette*

"I really enjoyed it... it was a huge shock to the system to have Nico. Obviously a very positive one as well, but we definitely felt that shock... but the actual maternity leave experience has been really positive for me." – *Bernadette*

"From that year, I feel like I almost made a huge leap forward because when I came back, I came back feeling like I'd massively achieved something. I'd actually survived a year of being a parent, which at moments I didn't think I was going to do" – *Sadie*

"I found adapting to being a parent a really, really difficult thing and so I'm really grateful that I had the opportunity to have that time to actually adapt to that and to deal with all the various things that happen." – *Sadie*

For these three participants, whilst maternity *was* 'great', 'very positive', a 'really good year', something they 'enjoyed' and were 'grateful' for, it was definitely not an *easy* experience. For

all three participants, this is because the reality of motherhood was not what they expected: 'I found motherhood a lot harder than I anticipated it would be', 'a huge shock to the system', 'we definitely felt that shock', 'I found adapting to being a parent a really, really difficult thing'.

For Sadie, the eventual positive outcomes of 'a huge leap forward', 'feeling like I'd massively achieved something' were the result of surmounting the challenges that motherhood presented – 'I'd actually survived a year of being a parent, which at moments I didn't think I was going to do'. These challenges, she felt, were only overcome because of the length of time she was able to take to 'adapt' and 'deal with the various things that happen'. Combined with Bernadette's previous appreciative comments about 'all that time' and Sadie's repetition of the fact that she took the full 'year' of leave, there is the implication that this time was necessary to acquire and develop the skills needed to 'survive' new motherhood, as well as work through the 'shock' of the new way of life.

In comparison to Juliette, Heather found the positive experience of maternity leave to be unexpected:

"It's not exactly what I expected it to be – in a positive way, and now obviously thinking about September, the time seems to have gone very quickly, even though it didn't seem to be going quickly at the time, in the moment." – *Heather*

"I have really enjoyed my maternity leave. I think I was surprised how much and actually I thought – being someone who is very ambitious with my career – I thought I would miss work more, but I haven't, and that's not because I don't love my job, because I do, but it's obviously – looking after a baby is a pretty all-consuming experience but also actually, you know, it's having working in schools full time since I left university so nearly... it will be nearly 12 years or 11 years maybe at the point when I went it was actually really nice to have the chance to have some time out. And it's obviously not at all time off in that regard. It is really pretty tiring to look after a baby, but you know it's also different to have, not being responsible for the wellbeing of the outcomes of 900 students." – *Heather*

Here, although Heather agrees that 'It is really pretty tiring to look after a baby', and 'looking after a baby is a pretty all-consuming experience', she also emphasises that maternity leave was 'not exactly what I expected it to be – in a positive way', 'I was surprised'.

Interestingly, however, the reason that Heather gives for *not* anticipating to have such a positive maternity leave experience is because she is 'someone who is very ambitious with [her] career' and thought she would 'miss work more'. In doing so, Heather presents motherhood and professional ambition as a set of opposites, but finds herself fitting into opposing categories – 'I thought I would miss work more, but I haven't', 'that's not because I don't love my job, because I do'. With these comments, Heather hints at a social narrative unhelpful to mothers: that they can *either* love their careers *or* love their babies; that they will *either* want to be at work, *or* at home with their child, whereas Heather finds that it is possible to love, want and be both.

Both Heather and Helen refer to the opportunity to enjoy ‘some time out’ of school as one of the reasons that their maternity leaves were such a positive experiences:

“It was great for the first three months. Well, no, yeah. Three months. It was fantastic. I felt more rested, which is really ironic. I felt more rested than I ever had in the previous five years even with a newborn baby. It was just ridiculous that everybody commented on how well I looked and that sort of thing, and how not tired I looked. It was absolutely brilliant.” – *Helen*

Both participants refer to the length of time that they had been teaching before taking their maternity leave: ‘nearly 12 years or 11 years’, ‘working in schools full time since I left university’, ‘the previous five years’ implying that this break was welcome after more than a decade of the fast-paced lifestyle and heavy workload of teaching. In this way, both participants echo Laura’s comments in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, who described her leave as ‘like stepping off the conveyor belt of constant’.

Heather teases out the different type of demand presented by motherhood – ‘all-consuming’, ‘pretty tiring’, ‘not at all time off’ – and teaching – ‘being responsible for the wellbeing of the outcomes of 900 students’ – and yet both she and Heather refer to looking after a newborn as more restful than working in schools. Helen repeats twice that during maternity leave she felt ‘more rested’, and that ‘how well [she] looked’ and ‘how not tired’ was even commented on. Whilst Heather refers to the positive aspects of this ‘time out’ as ‘different’, Helen seems to find her overwhelmingly positive experience of maternity leave a surprise – ‘It was just ridiculous’, ‘It was fantastic’, ‘It was absolutely brilliant’, ‘really ironic’.

Length and Timing of Maternity Leave

Of the 38 participants included in this report, 21 referred to the length of their maternity leave. Twenty-two separate maternity leaves were mentioned across 18 participants, with Destiny, Charlotte, Joy and Jess referring to two periods of leave. Participants in this report took an average period of 10 months’ maternity leave, longer than the national average of 8.5 months for teachers. However, there were an equal number of participants taking shorter periods of 4-6 months leave (8 participants) as those taking 10-12 months of maternity leave. Six participants took between 7-9 months of leave.

Comments ranged from simple statements regarding the number of months participants had taken, or when they started and ended their leave, to comments about what had influenced their decision-making regarding the length of time taken, and the consequences of taking a certain length of maternity leave.

“I worked right up until my due date and then went on maternity leave” – *Kirsten*

“I had about nine months on maternity leave.” – *Aisha*

“I went on leave in April, (May, June, July, August, September, October...) So when my little one was six month old in October.” – *Tamsin*

“I went on maternity at, I think the Easter hit about 33 weeks, and I was on maternity again from 35. So I had six months of maternity completely away from school.” – *Tamsin*

“I had 12 months maternity leave.” – *Sadie*

“I only took six months off” – *Sienna*

“I have taken eight months maternity leave.” – *Heather*

“The first one, the eight year old, I wasn’t planning on coming back for a year. I took, I returned after 9, 10 months.” – *Destiny*

“I’ve been teaching 10 years now and I’m taking maternity leave from this April until next February.” – *Honor*

“When I’d been teaching for six years I took a five month maternity leave for my first child.” – *Honor*

“When I had my first eldest, she was born at Christmas and then I went back in July.” – *Flora*

“I have taken a full year each time.” – *Charlotte*

“I think I took about nine months, came back... yeah, I think both times it was nine months.” – *Jess*

One participant, Destiny, explains that she took an extended period of leave to raise her family before returning to teaching:

“I didn’t actually return... in between them until after my daughter was in primary.” – *Destiny*

Although most of these comments appear simply factual, two interesting patterns occur. The first is Honor’s prefacing statements, ‘When I’d been teaching for six years’, ‘I’ve been teaching 10 years’. This reference to length of service ahead of maternity leave was also seen in Heather and Helen’s previous comments – ‘it will be nearly 12 years or 11 years maybe at the point when I went’ (Heather), ‘the previous five years’ (Helen). Participants did not explain why they felt they needed to include this qualifying phrase, but they highlight the teaching experience distilled within this community of mother-teachers. This reference to length of service could also imply that the participants feel they deserved, or had earned their period of maternity leave – that they had performed their duty to the sector before stepping away to pursue their personal ambitions of starting a family.

The second trend is Sienna's use of the word 'only', which could imply that she found her six month maternity leave too short. As we saw in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, participants' perceptions regarding the length of maternity leave varied. For Hanna, for example, 10 months was 'quite a long period away', whereas for Marie-Ann, just one month shorter, nine months 'didn't really feel like long enough'. Similar variation in perceptions are seen from participants in this report:

"I was able to take eight months off with my daughter and seven months off with my son. So having that nice long time at home was lovely." – *Katie*

"I was able to take a year off, which was really lucky." – *Alexa*

"It absolutely whizzed by, the year." – *Alexa*

"I would still recommend to anybody that was going on maternity leave to take a year because you only get that chance once." – *Alexa*

"I didn't feel like I needed a year. I wanted to get back to normal, really." – *Flora*

"She was only about nine months, but that was ready for me." – *Flora*

"For each of them I had ten months off – about ten months off – maybe slightly over with the younger two, and that was my choice. I could have had longer but I went back – I went back just when – my son, my elder son was summer baby." – *Joy*

"With my first child I had a very short time off for maternity leave" – *Heidi*

"With my daughter I had a bit more time." – *Heidi*

Primarily, this variation in how long constitutes as a long enough period of maternity leave, demonstrates that such choices are highly personal and dependent on each individual and their personal and professional context. This choice is mentioned by Joy – 'my choice' – and implied by Flora – 'that was ready for me' – and both Katie and Alexa talk positively about the 7-12 months of leave they took, respectively – 'nice long time', 'lovely', 'really lucky'. It is worth noting, however, that the 'nice long time' of 7-8 months that Katie enjoyed, was considered as insufficient by Marie-Ann and Stephanie in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**.

Five factors influenced the length of leave that participants in this report chose (or felt forced) to take. The most commonly-referenced was the financial restrictions of maternity pay:

"With my first child I only had 6 months off because for financial reasons, I couldn't afford to have any other time off." – *Gemma*

"I would've stayed for the whole year if, financially, I could have afforded it... I think I would have probably had longer off." – *Bernadette*

“I’m taking four months off. I’m going back in October half term because actually, I can’t afford to take any longer than that off.” – *Caroline*

“Then, my girls, I went back – they’re both February birthdays and I went back in the January just, really because I didn’t – I couldn’t afford to stay off until the Easter and I didn’t want to go back half way through a term. I couldn’t get my head round doing that, so I just thought I’d go back in the January, and it was a bit, sort of, easier for me.” – *Joy*

“I am and was the main earner in our household and so it was one of the most heart-breaking things to me. It caused me quite a lot of emotional upset and it’s taken many years to get over, but I had to go back to work when my eldest son was five months old.” – *Jane*

Interestingly, only one participant (Seren), equating to 3% of the participants in the equivalent report focusing on leavers, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, mentioned maternity pay as restrictive or insufficient, whereas the 5 participants above represent 12.5% of those included in this report. In later comments, both Jane and Caroline mention that they are the higher earners in their couple, which offers an explanation for the financial pressure they felt to return to work at the end of the period of enhanced maternity pay (18 weeks / 4-5 months).

Like Joy, who chose her return date based on the structure of the school year – ‘I couldn’t afford to stay off until the Easter’, ‘I didn’t want to go back half way through a term’ – both Caroline and Aisha refer to the school holidays, and how this influenced the timing and length of their leave:

“The holidays are a really big influence in the fact that I feel happy in taking a relatively short maternity leave, knowing that I’ve got six weeks holiday over the summer and every six, seven weeks I’ve got at least a week off to spend quality time with my family.” – *Caroline*

“My son was born in August. So I finished school in July, as I normally would for the summer holidays. And so my maternity leave started on the day he was born. So that was quite tied in nicely with the academic year. So I missed that academic year. I went back from maternity leave in the last half term.” – *Aisha*

For Caroline, the long holidays enabled her to embrace compromise and find a sense of peace when forced to take ‘a relatively short maternity leave’. It is therefore the specifics of a teacher lifestyle in the long-term that allows Caroline to rationalise a choice she otherwise would not have made and ‘feel happy’ with this trade off, focusing on the ‘six weeks holiday over the summer’ and ‘at least a week off’ every half term to spend, ‘quality time with [her] family’.

For Aisha, the way the holidays fell allowed her to enjoy a period of fully-paid time off in her third trimester, ahead of her son’s birth, and take almost the whole ‘academic year’ before

enjoying another block of six weeks fully-paid time with her son over the summer holidays the following year. Whilst Aisha enjoyed a far longer period of leave than Caroline, her experience also emphasises the specifics of a life in teaching – in few other professions would a mother be able to take what was ostensibly a thirteen month maternity leave, with 2-3 additional months (July – August of both years) paid in full simply because their baby was born in late August / early September.

Tamsin and Leanne also mention physical and mental health when describing factors that influence the length of their maternity leaves:

“I was signed off a little bit earlier than I wanted to go. I took seven months maternity.” – *Tamsin*

“I went a month early.” (“I had chronic morning sickness, and I had gestational diabetes”) – *Leanne*

“In hindsight I probably would have had a year but I did have quite terrible postnatal depression” – *Leanne*

Leanne’s comment could imply that returning to work was preferential to staying at home for a longer period of time because of her diagnosis of postnatal depression, or they could suggest that she wasn’t in an appropriate state of mind to make the best choices regarding the length of leave she took. Whilst this distinction cannot be extrapolated from Leanne’s comment, some studies do suggest that mothers who return to employment at 7 months post-partum are less likely to experience symptoms of depression than those who do not¹⁶.

The role of participants’ spouses will be explored in more detail later in this report, but both Kirsten and Andrea explain that the use of shared parental leave impacted the length of time they took for maternity leave:

“It was relatively short in that me and my husband split it fifty-fifty. I did four and a half months, and he did four and a half months.” – *Kirsten*

“Actually, because I was sharing the leave with my husband, I was actually only taking much shorter than most people so it wasn’t frowned upon” – *Andrea*

The fifth factor, which informed Andrea’s decision around the length of leave she took, was her school’s context:

“I felt like I needed to get back there quick before endemic problems started to raise their heads.” – *Andrea*

During her interview, Andrea explains that two colleagues were pushed into sharing her Head of Department role whilst she was on maternity leave after her school ‘couldn’t find anyone in the faculty to step up’. She describes her department as one that ‘probably wasn’t

¹⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5446099/>

outstanding anymore', with colleagues who had 'fallen out with each other... in the past', and whose 'performance' could go 'off the boil' while she was away. Andrea does not state that there was any external request to return to work after a short leave, but her comments suggest that her school's context created a sense of internal pressure to 'get back there quick' that she may not have felt at the 'wonderful' school she later moved to.

The impact of the length of their maternity leave is commented on by three participants. Caroline and Jane comment on the emotional impact of a short period of leave:

"I feel sad that I'm only going to get four months. It's something that I've accepted but we're just going to have to move on with that." – *Caroline*

"I had to go back to work when my eldest son was five months old, which is so young and it was awful. It was a real wrench, but because I'd always known that – and it's alright, I got through it, we all got through it – because I knew I was having to go back so early." – *Jane*

In previous comments, both Caroline and Jane have explained that the only reason they did not take a longer period of leave was for financial reasons. Like Gemma, Bernadette and Joy, Caroline and Jane therefore does not have full control over the length of leave that they have taken. Their sadness comes not just from the fact that they are leaving their babies to return to work, therefore, but from the fact that this is a partially forced situation because of the restrictions of finances. This experience is described by these two participants as 'sad', 'awful', 'a real wrench' and, for Jane, a factor that tainted her whole experience of maternity leave, which she describes as 'terrible' because she 'knew [she] was having to go back so early'.

In previous examples, we have seen how decisions around the length of leave taken can impact other parenting decisions, specifically the extent to which the male partner is involved in the first year of a child's life. Heidi also reflects on how the length of her first maternity leave influenced her decisions regarding how to feed her children:

"It did affect... I didn't... I only breastfed for about a month for my son. No, two months, I think, with my son and with her I went up to eight months because I was thinking, "oh I got more time I can do this."" – *Heidi*

Although teachers are more likely to continue breastfeeding when they return to work in comparison to mothers in other industries¹⁷, Heidi's comments reflect wider findings that breastfeeding duration is impacted both by women's return to the workplace, and by their decision to share parental leave with their partner¹⁸. In both cases, the length of time spent breastfeeding is reduced, as we see when Heidi compares the 'very short time' she had on leave with her son who she only breastfed for 'about a month' and the 'bit more time' she had with her daughter, which resulted in eight months of breastfeeding.

¹⁷ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

¹⁸ <https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Shared-Parental-Leave-Report.pdf>

As well as her husband taking a period of shared parental leave, Andrea also states that she took a ‘short maternity leave’ of ‘five months’. Whilst she does not state that this was *because* of the context of her school or department, she does mention this twice:

“It was a good job I only wanted a short maternity leave because I did feel constantly worried that I’d get back and find there’d been all sorts of issues” – *Andrea*

“They were very pleased to hear that I was only planning to take five months off, which I did, and I chose.” – *Andrea*

There is a sense here that Andrea feels that her personal decision to share the period of leave with her husband is conveniently matched to her school context where she feels she is needed to manage ‘endemic problems’, ‘all sorts of issues’ at work. She states ‘it was a good job I only wanted a short maternity leave’ and that her school ‘were very pleased to hear that I was only planning to take five months off’. Andrea emphasises that this length of leave was her choice but, as seen in her previous comment, ‘I was actually only taking much shorter than most people so it wasn’t frowned upon’, this ‘short maternity leave’ seems to garner her favour and approval at a school where she clearly feels she is needed.

Maternity Pay

We have already seen in the previous section *Length and Timing of Maternity Leave*, how maternity pay impacts parents’ choices regarding how much leave they take, whether they are able to share this leave with their partner, and when they choose to return to work.

As with the topic of length of leave in both this report and **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, there is little consensus between participants regarding whether teachers have a good or bad maternity leave package. As a sector, schools and MATs fall into the two thirds of employers that offer an enhanced maternity leave package beyond the statutory maternity pay offered by the government¹⁹. For the majority, this means four weeks at full pay, two weeks at 90% and a further 12 weeks at half pay, in addition to statutory maternity payments. However, some local authorities offer even more generous packages. In almost every case, teachers must have been employed by their local authority, or MAT for a period of one year and 11 weeks before the expected week of childbirth to qualify for this enhanced pay, and they must return to work for an equivalent period of 13 weeks, full time, in order to avoid paying it back. Only one MAT known to The MTPT Project – Greenwood Academy Trust – have waived these requirements²⁰.

Since 2018, when support and profile-raising has been offered by the organisation Teachers’ SPL, an increasing number of mother-teacher have supplemented their maternity pay by taking blocks of shared parental leave and officially returning to work over the school holiday

¹⁹ <https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/enhanced-maternity-pay/#:~:text=Enhanced%20Maternity%20Pay%20is%20offered,this%20has%20increased%20to%2074.1%25>.

²⁰ <https://www.tes.com/magazine/leadership/staff-management/maternity-pay-schools-teachers-trust-making-radical-changes>

period, before re-starting another period of shared parental leave when term begins afresh. Data from the government's Shared Parental Leave evaluation found that shared parental leave was most predominantly taken by employees working in public administration, health and education (43%), who were over 35 and 'highly qualified' (degrees or higher qualifications)²¹. Between February 2021 and June 2023, 2,119 applications had been made to Teachers' SPL for support packages, and their website boasts that implementing the entitlement to shared parental leave in this way can result in 'up to 10 weeks extra at full pay'²².

Neither Mika nor Raya mention using shared parental leave in this way, but still consider teachers' maternity pay as 'quite reasonable':

"When I went on maternity leave I was working in Tower Hamlets and Tower Hamlets is a very good borough for maternity leave. I don't know if it's still the case now, but I got more weeks of pay, like 90% pay, than friends who worked in different authorities outside of London, and nobody made me feel awkward about it at all." – *Mika*

"You get quite reasonable maternity benefits and I am planning on having another child." – *Raya*

Mika is exactly right when she mentions that 'Tower Hamlets is a very good borough for maternity leave', as this is one of the local authorities that offers a more generous maternity pay package than the Burgundy Book as a result of negotiations with the NEU. Here we see how maternity pay can be used as both a recruitment and retention tool. For schools like Mika's, advertising a more generous, competitive offer, is highly likely to attract candidates in their late twenties and thirties keen to work for an apparently family-friendly employer. Instilled within this age bracket is experience that will positively impact both student outcomes and staff cohesion and development even when logistics may be disrupted due to an absence as a result of maternity leave.

As we see in Raya's comments, a significant motivator for *remaining* in teaching, is the 'reasonable maternity benefits' for a second and subsequent children. This was also mentioned by Andrea when discussing her decision to take shared parental leave: 'we were really both happy to stay in teaching until we had both children.'

As well as the benefit of receiving 'reasonable' or 'very good' maternity pay, Mika alludes to the supportive culture that accompanies this increased pay. Unlike Marie-Ann in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, who spoke about returning to work 'in July for the last few weeks of term to do that cheeky thing where you get paid for the summer holidays', Mika says 'nobody made [her] feel awkward about' making the most of the financial implication of her maternity leave, including the higher rate of maternity pay, even though she had friends 'in different authorities' who did not get to enjoy this benefit. It may be unsurprising to

²¹ <https://maternityaction.org.uk/2023/08/shared-parental-leave-evaluation-who-is-taking-shared-parental-leave/>

²² <https://www.teachersspl.co.uk/>

remember that Mika was also promoted at her employing school whilst on maternity leave, and returned to work part-time in this promoted position.

Seven of the eleven participants who mentioned maternity pay, however, felt that they were not paid enough:

“The knowledge that I wasn’t getting paid very much – it sort of gradually goes down and down – that kind of made me depressed as well.” – *Lydia*

“That’s terrible because it’s just so poorly paid so it felt like I was very poor.” – *Jess*

“It was just so badly paid really. I think it was about two weeks full pay, four weeks 90% or something, and then loads less. So yeah, the main issue was money really, maternity leave.” – *Jess*

Jess and Lydia’s view echoes Seren’s comments in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** that maternity leave for teachers is ‘poorly paid’, ‘badly paid’, ‘not that great’ (Seren). For Caroline and Alexa, the comparison with the rates of maternity pay in other industries made teachers’ maternity pay seem even worse:

“I find it really sad that as a very qualified, relatively experienced teacher who worked really hard, that my maternity leave sucks. I’m taking four months off. I’m going back in October half term because actually, I can’t afford to take any longer than that off. I have a mortgage to pay. My husband is nowhere near in my wage bracket, so therefore I’m the main wage earner, so I have little option other than to take four months and go back. It would be really nice if teaching professions had a comparable maternity package to somewhere like the armed forces. One of the women that’s just literally given birth in my NCT group works in the army and she gets six months off, full pay, and I just think, actually, as a profession that would be great for us as well – give us quality time to spend with our child and then go back refreshed.” – *Caroline*

“It was as <unclear> to be paid as other industries. So, friends of mine that were on a year’s maternity leave in the private sector had much more favourable maternity pay.” – *Alexa*

A higher percentage of participants in this report (11%) felt that maternity pay for teachers was poor, or poor in comparison to other industries in comparison to those in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** (4%), but how do we compare to ‘other industries’ in the ‘private sector’, or ‘comparable’ professions such as ‘the armed forces’ that Alexa and Caroline mention?

Claims from Pregnant then Screwed offer more accurate contextualisation, stating that 74.1% of private sector organisations offer enhanced maternity pay packages, with the ‘majority’ offering full pay for more than 6 weeks, with 12-13 weeks full pay as ‘the norm’ before dropping to statutory maternity pay. Whilst this is a slightly more generous offer than the education sector, we are not a ‘private sector organisation’.

Even when compared to a sample of other public sector industries, teachers' enhanced maternity pay is lower than all but some city council offers:

- Civil Servants, Ministry of Defence – 26 weeks at full pay²³
- Civil Servants, Department for Education – 26 weeks at full pay
- British Army – 26 weeks at full pay²⁴
- West Midlands Police Service – 26 weeks full pay²⁵
- Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust – 8 weeks full pay, 18 weeks at 50%²⁶
- Manchester²⁷ and Bristol City Council – 6 weeks at 90%, 12 weeks at 50%

Arguably therefore, if we consider mother-teachers (or women aged 30-39) a key retention demographic, increasing maternity leave pay so that it is in line with these better-paid 'comparable' sectors could be one way of recruiting and retaining them in the profession.

Communication with School

21 of the participants included in this report mentioned the contact that they had with their school during maternity leave – more than half of the interviewees, in comparison to quarter of those who spoke about this topic (including the use of KIT days) in our equivalent leavers' report, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**. It is also interesting to note that in our leavers' report, comments about the communication that participants had with their school during their leave fell neatly into four categories:

- Insufficient contact
- Too much contact
- Sufficient contact
- KIT days

In comparison, the 34 comments across the 21 participants in this report were far more nuanced, falling into 8 sub-categories:

- Insufficient or no communication at all (positive)
- Insufficient or no communication at all (negative)
- Regular contact (positive)
- KIT days
- Too much contact
- Emotional contact (negative)
- Specific incidents / contexts of contact, the positive or negative nature of which is ambiguous

²³<https://discovermybenefits.mod.gov.uk/civilian/leave/maternity-leave>

²⁴<https://www.army.mod.uk/umbraco/Surface/Download/Get/11403#:~:text=Up%20to%2052%20weeks%20of,13%20weeks%20will%20be%20unpaid.>

²⁵<https://foi.west-midlands.police.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/1651A-22-attachment.pdf>

²⁶<https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Maternity-Paternity-Adoption-Shared-Parental-Leave-Parental-Leave-Policy-exp-Dec-23.pdf>

²⁷<https://democracy.manchester.gov.uk/documents/s16376/Family%20Friendly%20Policies%20App%20C%20-%20Maternity%20Scheme.pdf>

- Contact with school due to lack of maternity cover recruited

Four participants spoke about having no communication, or hardly any contact with school during their period of leave, with their comments implying that this was a positive thing:

“I went on maternity at, I think the Easter hit about 33 weeks, and I was on maternity again from 35. So I had six months of maternity completely away from school.” – *Tamsin*

“During my maternity leave, but didn’t do an awful lot to do with work until probably the week before I went back” – *Aisha*

“During that time, I didn’t really have any contact with the school other than I did a little bit of work. I mean, off my own back because I’m a head of department when the exam results came in, but that was just before my son was born.” – *Aisha*

“They never really got in touch with me over maternity leave, which was quite nice. I thought I would be badgered with questions, but I wasn’t.” – *Verity*

“They’ve not contacted me unnecessarily or anything like that.” – *Raya*

The phrases ‘completely away from school’, ‘didn’t do an awful lot to do with work’, ‘didn’t really have any contact’, ‘never really got in touch with me over maternity leave, which was quite nice’, ‘they’ve not contacted me unnecessarily’ indicate that these participants are happy that they were able to remove themselves from their school context during their leave. For Verity and Aisha, the implication is that to be contacted would have been unwelcome because it was ‘work’ or would have felt like being ‘badgered’. Aisha’s comments, ‘I did a little bit of work’, ‘off my own back’, ‘when the exam results came in’ are qualified by two time periods: the first, ‘just before my son was born’, and therefore before she had another dominant focus to her leave, and then ‘the week before I went back’ as she prepared to return to work.

Although Tamsin, Aisha, Verity and Raya appear to have welcomed this time ‘completely away from school’, four participants indicate that they would have preferred some contact, rather than the lack of contact that they experienced:

“In my first maternity leave, I didn’t really stay in touch with school at all.” – *Charlotte*

“I tried to keep in touch a bit with school, although there wasn’t that much of it. I think I probably would have liked to have done more, just because I’m maybe not supposed to say this, but sometimes I was frankly quite bored. So I think that would have been good.” – *Kirsten*

“I was able to bond with my child, but I guess the isolation and also when previously you’ve have worked very hard to make your job successful and been told it was successful and then to be kind of just cut off from that was quite difficult. There were

occasional phone calls saying, ‘Oh how do we do this? What do we do?’ I did go in for KIT days.” – *Clare*

“On the day I had my final meeting with them which was in April I was told they’d had a strategy day with the Senior Leadership and I kind of thought well if they have had a strategy day without me being invited for a KIT that’s it.” – *Clare*

Although not explicitly stated in this comment, later comments from Charlotte indicate that this lack of contact made her maternity leave less enjoyable. Kirsten and Clare add more detail here, with Kirsten saying that she was ‘quite bored’ on maternity leave, and Clare stating that she experienced ‘isolation’, indicating that more contact with school would have lessened this boredom and feelings of isolation. Clare’s comment, ‘when previously you’ve worked very hard to make your job successful and been told it was successful’ also suggests that she struggled with a sense of purpose and identity attached to her role as a teacher whilst she was on leave, and that the lack of contact from her school exacerbated this feeling of loss.

In their comments, Kirsten and Clare also share a sense of who initiated the attempts at communication. Kirsten says she ‘tried to keep in touch a bit with school, although their wasn’t that much of it’, betraying possibly a sense of rejection, as if she felt ignored despite her proactivity. Clare, on the other hand, says that there were ‘occasional phone calls’, ‘KIT days’ and meetings initiated by her school, but her comments suggest that this still wasn’t sufficient, and she was left feeling ‘cut off’, which was ‘quite difficult’. Before her maternity leave, Clare was a Deputy Head, but because her flexible working request was denied, she left this role and found a new job during her maternity leave. The fact that she mentions the ‘strategy day with Senior Leadership’ which was conducted without her as almost the final straw in her choice to leave (‘that’s it’), implies that it was a specific type of contact that she wanted from school – leadership, decision-making contact that matched her identity as a successful leader. The lack of this form of contact impacted Clare’s perception of her school, and made her feel undervalued.

Eleven participants spoke about contact from their school – including the use of KIT days – as a positive thing:

"On maternity leave they kept in touch regularly, the headteacher himself kept in touch regularly.” – *Valerie*

“When I think I have enjoyed the most... and I have had the most connection with work. I’ve gone in regularly. I’ve done marking for my colleagues.” – *Charlotte*

“Even when I was away on maternity leave I kept in touch with what was going on in the department.” – *Lucy*

“It was a really enjoyable time, but I did try and keep some links with the department, so that it wasn’t a complete shock when I came back.” – *Alexa*

“There was a new GCSE change just as I left and so quite often they would drop an email saying, “Any advice on this?” or “What should we be doing about this?” A lot of people said, “You shouldn’t be answering emails on your maternity leave”, but I quite liked keeping my finger in the pie, because it did make it easier when I came back.” – *Alexa*

“It was quite nice to get together with professionals and talk about professional experiences and be able to share ideas and come up with ideas and soft of develop your practise because when you’re just staying at home, you don’t really get a lot of opportunity to do that.” – *Kimberley*

“Throughout my maternity leave they were definitely respectful of those boundaries, but not of cutting me out at the same time. Often I think there is some kind of tension between – obviously, you don’t want to feel pressurised to do things but you don’t want to be completely forgotten about either and I feel like they got that balance right. They also invited me to an away day back in March and they could have easily forgotten about or maybe thought, “she wouldn’t want to come”, but they asked and at that point I was still breastfeeding a lot and he was still waking at night and things like that so I thought I would like to come, but I would need to be able to bring my husband and him so they would be able to stay in a hotel room but for me to just to come I would need that to work and they were more than happy to accommodate that.” – *Heather*

It is notable that in almost all of these comments, a specific person or group of people are named as the point of contact – ‘headteacher’, ‘my colleagues’, ‘department’, ‘professionals’ – emphasising the importance of the specific relationships that we saw were so important to positive experiences of maternity leave in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**. Valerie’s comment, ‘the headteacher himself’, indicates a sense of value that someone of such importance would make the effort and take time out of his busy day to keep in touch with a classroom teacher on maternity leave. For Alexa and Lucy, who were both heads of department at the time of their maternity leaves, the reference to their departments also implies a sense of responsibility and ownership over their teams. In comparison, Charlotte and Kirsten simply referred to ‘school’ in their comments, and Clare referred to ‘them’ and ‘Senior Leadership’.

Participants offer different reasons for perceiving regular communication as a positive thing. For Charlotte, who is able to compare three experiences of maternity leave, and Kimberley, this contact made leave more enjoyable and increased a sense of community and intellectual stimulation – ‘enjoyed the most’, ‘quite nice to get together’, ‘share’, ‘come up with’, ‘develop’. However, for Alexa, the focus was on maintaining contact to ease her return to work – ‘so that it wasn’t a complete shock when I came back’, ‘it did make it easier when I came back’.

Charlotte, Lucy, Alexa, Kimberley and Heather give some detail about what this regular communication looked like for them: ‘marking for colleagues’, keeping in touch with ‘what was going on’, ‘answering emails’, ‘talk[ing] about professional experiences’, ‘shar[ing] ideas’,

‘com[ing] up with ideas’, ‘develop[ing] your practise’, being invited ‘to an away day’. These interactions emphasise the value of these mid-career teachers’ experiences. As we see with Alexa and Charlotte, their knowledge is needed, and contributions – as we see in Heather and Kimberley’s comments – valued. Interestingly, we saw a similar sense of value in **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** where Olivia, Marie-Ann, Seren, Esther and Catherine returned to challenging expectations at school under the assumption that – as experienced teachers and leaders – they could cope with these demands. For these leavers, however, the challenges were too overwhelming at a time when they were already dealing with the stress of transitioning back to work from maternity leave.

Five participants (13% of those included in this report) specifically mentioned KIT days when describing their maternity leave experiences, in comparison to six leaver participants who talked about them in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** or **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** (20% and 10% of participants included in each report, respectively). Of the six leavers who referred to KIT days, only two described positive experiences, and four explained that they did not take any KIT days at all, or didn’t even know what they were. In comparison, all five participants in this report who mention KIT days describe positive experiences and four participants emphasise that they completed ‘quite a few’, ‘quite a lot’ or ‘lots and lots’ of these formalised keeping in touch days:

“Because I’d managed to get in to quite a few KIT days, that really helped.” – *Bernadette*

“KIT days and things like that are really important as a way of keeping your hand in... and then you’ve got the time to go and read and follow things up.” – *Honor*

“People are understanding if you take your baby on KIT days and stuff like that.” – *Honor*

“In the last two, I have been much more in touch... going in, doing quite a lot of KIT days, doing marking, which is nice because it keeps you connected so it doesn’t feel as scary going back.” – *Charlotte*

“It was my decision to stay in touch very closely with my team by email and do lots and lots of keeping in touch days even though I was taking quite a short leave.” – *Andrea*

“I’ve done quite a few KIT days as well where I’ve gone in and helped out with interviews or data things.” – *Lauren*

Honor, Charlotte, Andrea and Lauren add yet more practical examples of what keeping in touch activities can look like – ‘read and follow things up’, ‘marking’, ‘keeps you connected’, ‘stay in touch very closely with my team by email’, ‘helped out with interviews’, ‘data things’. We saw with Heather that in order to complete such activities and remain in contact, accommodations are sometimes needed for mothers on leave. Her school were able to support her ‘breastfeeding’, fatigue due to her son ‘still waking at night’, and need to ‘bring

[her] husband' to provide childcare so she could participate appropriately in the 'away day', and Honor shares a similar experience of taking her baby with her on KIT days, stating that 'people are understanding'.

Through all of these comments, we see that choice, feeling in control of the communication, and balance was important to participants. For Tamsin, Aisha, Verity and Raya, this was the choice *not* to communicate with school during their leave. For Alexa, this was the option to answer emails and respond to questions if she wanted to instead of adhering to the should and 'shouldn'ts' of other people, because she 'quite liked keeping [her] finger in the pie'. For Lucy, Andrea and Bernadette, this was the confidence to keep in touch when they initiated contact. When this control and choice was offered by their schools, Heather, Kimberley, Honor and Charlotte felt empowered, but when participants felt they lacked control (Kirsten, Clare) their experiences were disempowering, reduced their sense of purpose and value and – in Clare's case, lead to resignation.

Heather's praise, therefore, that her school 'got that balance right', provides leaders with the most succinct message regarding communication on maternity leave. Her description of being invited to, and accommodated to attend, the 'away day' expresses a clear sense of feeling valued. However, she repeats a number of times the importance of balance, and exemplifies what this looks like in practical terms: 'they were definitely respectful of those boundaries', 'not of cutting me out', 'there is some kind of tension between... you don't want to feel pressurised to do things, but you don't want to be completely forgotten about either', 'they could have easily forgotten about or maybe thought, "she wouldn't want to come", but they asked'.

Five participants in this report spoke about receiving negative contact from their schools, with this negative contact focusing on too much communication, flexible working requests and an ongoing preoccupation with something to do with work.

Shivani stated that her school's contact during her first maternity leave when she was a Head of Department was unwelcome, and too frequent:

"They were emailing me all the time and obviously you have the choice as to whether you look at them or not, but then if I didn't, they'd text me." – *Shivani*

"It was very different the second time compared to the first. The first time I felt like I was being pestered a lot of the time. But then, I had a much more important job then." – *Shivani*

"They were in touch quite a lot. They were quite keen for me to do keep in touch days. Yeah... I did feel... I went back in for my first keep in touch day when my first son was 8 weeks old. So I did feel under a lot of pressure, but then the second time I just chose not to keep in touch and I didn't go in at all. I took my son in with me on the day that I went to say I wanted two and a half days, and that was the only day that I went in, in about 14 months. And so that was much more restful, I felt." – *Shivani*

Shivani's comments, 'emailing me all the time', 'they'd text me', 'being pestered a lot of the time', 'they were in touch quite a lot' paints an intrusive picture of the contact from her school. This is particularly true of the use of text messages to almost invade Shivani's personal life even after she had exercised the 'choice' not to look at her emails. Although Shivani says, 'obviously you have the choice', the text messages take this choice away from her as it is likely that her phone – unlike an email account – would have been physically with her most of the time when she was on maternity leave. Although the EHRC's 2018 report into pregnancy and maternity discrimination found that only 4% of mothers felt they had too much contact from their employers, it lists 'too much contact from their employer during maternity leave'²⁸ as a form of discrimination, and warns against 'repeated and persistent contact' which could constitute as harassment²⁹. Shivani's description of this contact during her first leave, 'I did feel under a lot of pressure', 'pestered', appears to fit this definition of discrimination.

By her second maternity leave, Shivani describes two changes that impacted her contact with school: the first is her demotion from Head of Department – 'a much more important job' – to class teacher, and the second was her strengthened boundary and choice 'not to keep in touch' and not to 'go in at all'. As a result of this lack of contact, Shivani states that her second maternity leave was 'very different' and 'much more restful', aligning her experience more closely with that described by Verity, who found the lack of contact from their school, 'quite nice'.

Tamsin and Helen both describe negative experience of communicating with their school when requesting flexible working for their return to work:

"I was signed off a little bit earlier than I wanted to go. I took seven months maternity, and from about five months, I was asking if I could go back part time, and the headteacher wouldn't confirm whether she could give me the hours or not. And it was getting later and later in my maternity, and it was getting closer for me going back without confirmed reduced hours. I was asking for 0.6 or 0.8. And then fortunately, the role I'm in at the moment, the SENCO role was originally advertised as a 0.6 contract. So I handed in my notice and I moved to a different role." – *Tamsin*

"In the February I put in my request to go back to three days and basically that's when it all started to go wrong. I finished in the late November and then up until the February time it was great until that time, and then – like I say – from the February when I put my request in, it all just went downhill from there. They just dragged their feet about it. They made it impossible for me to go back really, by offering me meetings that I know I couldn't go to." – *Helen*

"I lost four months of sitting in meetings with unions and phone calls and emails and it was just constant." – *Helen*

²⁸ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

²⁹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/faqs-employees/during-maternity-leave-contact-employer>

Here we see a variety of factors that made this contact negative: firstly, both Tamsin and Helen focus on their school's failure to confirm a working pattern for their return to work – 'the headteacher wouldn't confirm', 'it was getting later and later in my maternity, and it was getting closer for me going back without confirmed reduced hours', 'they just dragged their feet about it'. Legally, employers have three months to accept or reject a flexible working request, and as Tamsin and Helen's timelines are not clear in their comments, it is possible that their schools honoured this timeframe. However, both participants imply that this lack of confirmation created uncertainty and anxiety, and impacted negatively on their experience of maternity leave. Helen states this clearly when she says, 'it all started to go wrong', 'it all just went downhill from there', and Tamsin implies feelings of stress in the phrase 'it was getting later and later in my maternity, and it was getting closer for me going back'.

Helen describes two further aspects of this contact that made it negative: the perceived blocking of productive communication by her employer – 'they made it impossible for me to go back really, by offering me meetings that I know I couldn't go to' – and the time she was required to spend on unwelcome activities – 'I lost four months of sitting in meetings with unions and phone calls and emails'. Helen's comments remind us of Monica's experience shared in **08. Don't Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** – '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'.

Whilst Tamsin and Helen place the responsibility for this negative contact at their employer's door, Valerie, Bryony and Leanne describe an interior emotional, rather than actual, connection with their school:

"I've spent most of my maternity leave worrying about my Year 11 passing or not." – Valerie

"While I'm off, I think it's a bit hard because, you know, you have GCSE classes that you know you're going to be missing. Because you're off for a year, there are basically a lot of schools that are going to three year GCSEs. You might not have the class for a year, then you're gone for a year and it's your job to try to pick them up when you come back. So there is an expectation that you have done some planning before you go off to get the kids through the GCSEs." – Bryony

"There was the niggling feeling of coming back to work in the back of my mind the entire time." – Leanne

"It is something I'm quite mindful about – is that my absence at the moment is having an impact on my colleagues and most importantly on the children and parents at school." – Nadya

Here we see that although these participants are not referencing KIT days, their preparation to return to work or even communication from their employers, thoughts of work are still intruding into their maternity leave. They use the words, 'worrying', 'a bit hard', 'niggling feeling', 'quite mindful about' suggesting that the knowledge of their eventual return to work

impacted negatively on their maternity leave experience. As we saw in previous comments from Andrea, Nadya focuses on the 'impact' that her 'absence' will have on her 'colleagues', 'the children and parents at school' as we know from later comments that she has not been replaced as a SENCO. Her workload, therefore, falls on other people during her maternity leave who may not have the capacity to give it the time or expertise it needs.

Both Valerie and Bryony mention the specific responsibility of KS4 exam classes – 'worrying about my Year 11 passing or not', 'GCSE classes', 'get the kids through the GCSEs' – and Bryony refers to the interruption that a period of maternity leave can have on a 'three year GCSE', resulting in a 'pick ... up', 'missing' flow for students. She explains that her experience of maternity leave is affected because planning for her year of absence is required in order to limit this perceived damage to students' learning. The implication here is that concerns regarding whether this planning was sufficient, or what will be waiting for her when she returns, negatively impacts on her experience of leave.

Comments from Lauren, Kayleigh and Bryony share specific experiences of remaining in contact with school during their leave, which are described without a clear indication of whether this communication was positive or negative, welcome or unwelcome:

"I've been managing to sort of keep my hand in with school stuff. I've got my laptop at home and I've been doing bits and pieces and, like I said, where the school has been recently set up, there's things that – not through any fault of the school or anything – but only I know how to do because I am a bit more IT literate and data literate and things like that, so I'll get random emails or phone calls going, "do you know how to do this?", or "are you stuck, can you help out?" So I've been doing things like that." - *Lauren*

"I was doing controlled assessments, squishing them in, marking them while I was off maternity leave, getting them done before I went off." – *Bryony*

Although Lauren and Bryony talk about 'doing bits and pieces', answering 'random emails or phone calls', 'doing controlled assessments', 'marking', it is unclear whether this was something they chose to do, or felt prevailed upon to do. Lauren does state 'I've got my laptop at home' and 'I've been managing to sort of keep my hand in', indicating that the contact she describes was her choice. However the phrases, 'where the school has been recently set up', 'not through any fault of the school', implies that she feels obligated to provide support rather than wanting this as an ideal experience of maternity leave. Equally, Bryony appears motivated to complete the controlled assessment marking, but the use of 'squishing them in', suggests that this task intrudes on other activities that she prioritises during her maternity leave.

Whether Kayleigh's contact with her school during her maternity leave was positive or negative, is equally ambiguous. Although her anecdote and the events instigating her frequent contact – the death of a child – are tragic, her ability to remain in touch seem to be one way of honouring her students:

“My maternity leave was slightly strange in a weird way. I took the whole year off, I don’t live very far from school so I was able to pop in and do my keeping in touch days, but actually in the year I was off a child in the class that I went away from unfortunately died, and I felt a huge responsibility to still go in and see the kids because they were a tricky class, a very loyal class, when they got to know you, and they decided they liked you, they would not be budged from, and you were their teacher. So I think they struggled with having a maternity cover anyway and then unfortunately with one of them being so poorly, I think they found it really quite challenging so I was in relatively frequently. The leadership changed while I was away.” – *Kayleigh*

Here we see the huge part that Kayleigh’s role as a teacher plays in her identity. She describes her relationship with ‘a tricky class’, as ‘loyal’ and ‘a huge responsibility’, describing a group of students who ‘would not be budged’ from what they saw as ‘their teacher’. Kayleigh clearly feels a strong connection and sense of belonging with this class, at her school and, as she doesn’t ‘live very far from school’, her local community as well.

Whilst the experience of teaching a student that is ‘so poorly’ and who ‘unfortunately died’ is therefore a huge tragedy, Kayleigh’s ability to ‘pop in’, ‘do my keeping in touch days’, ‘go in and see the kids’, be ‘in relatively frequently’ and support the class with their struggles, challenges and changes at this difficult time, appears to be incredibly important to Kayleigh, and part of her commitment to her class, not just as students, but as real human being that she felt for, strongly. Arguably, this communication provided some empowerment and a small sense of control over very difficult circumstances for Kayleigh. Had she *not* been permitted this frequency of contact, these events – and therefore her maternity leave – could have been even more traumatic, as she would not have been able to fulfil what she clearly sees as her duty to these children.

The contact that Andrea and Alexa had with their school – with Andrea remaining ‘in touch very closely’ and Alexa being contacted ‘quite often’ by colleagues – was influenced by the staffing context in their school, as neither were replaced by a maternity cover during their leave:

“Probably was in touch more with my team than most people are because there was no stable replacement to my role.” – *Andrea*

“Because we weren’t able to recruit for my maternity cover, so I did still have quite a lot of contact with my department.” – *Alexa*

More attention will be paid to schools’ ability, or choice, to recruit maternity cover teachers later in this report, but it is worth noting that not doing so impacts not just the school and staff, but also the experience of the colleague taking a period of leave. Andrea’s reference to ‘no stable replacement’, Alexa’s previous comment about the ‘new GCSE change’ that took place just before she began her maternity leave, and Lauren’s position in a school that had ‘been recently set up’ also demonstrate that the school’s context, including its staffing

structure, and the context of the wider educational landscape, can have a knock-on effect on the amount of contact that teachers receive during their maternity leave.

Progression

Eight participants in this report shared comments about progression and promotional opportunities that occurred during, or were impacted by their period of maternity leave. Four participants stated that they had interviewed, and been promoted at the school they were employed at during their leave, either whilst pregnant or when on maternity leave:

“Within that time, there was some changes within the school. And I was given the opportunity to apply for promotion to Assistant Head Teacher. I had a lot of in depth conversations with my husband about whether it was right time and whether it was the right role for me. And I felt that it was so I went for it and was lucky to secure that position. And so that’s what I went back to when I returned from maternity leave.” – *Tamsin*

“Part of that is sort of why I’ve stayed in it, whilst I’ve been on maternity leave I’ve been made deputy head.” – *Lauren*

“I was even allowed to apply for a promotion in essence while I was pregnant, and I got that promotion.” – *Mika*

“I had a new job to go back to, which was a promotion, and I just felt almost ready for the next stage of my life.” – *Sadie*

During Tamsin’s first maternity leave, she sought a new role at a different school, which led to her promotion to Assistant Head, which she had not yet started at the time of interview:

“Fortunately, the role I’m in at the moment, the SENCO role was originally advertised as a 0.6 contract. So I handed in my notice and I moved to a different role.” – *Tamsin*

These four participants do not let the physical absence of maternity leave prevent them from pursuing career progression. The phrases, ‘right time’, ‘right role’, ‘why I’ve stayed in it’, ‘ready for the next stage of my life’, ‘fortunately’, reveal their motivation for promotion, and associated positive wellbeing. Even though both Tamsin and Mika stated they worked full time at the time of interview, they also both mention part-time working in association with their promoted position, supporting this positive wellbeing further. For Tamsin – whose school did not confirm her flexible working request within a timeframe she wanted – the advertised role gave her exactly what she was lacking at her former school. For Mika, part-time working over the immediate return to work period – ‘when I came back I asked to work part time and that was fine’ – would have enabled both a manageable transition back into work, *and* the career progression she desired.

Two language patterns occur in these comments regarding promoted positions. The first, ‘given the opportunity’, ‘lucky’, ‘even allowed’, ‘fortunately’, from Tamsin and Mika, implies that their promotions were based on chance, or the grace of their employers, rather than an entitlement well-deserved to them as experienced practitioners and the strongest candidate at interview. To some extent, even Lauren’s passive, ‘I’ve been made’ removes the credit for her promotion from herself and suggests that it was something decided by her school, rather than something she sought and earned. This compares to the more assertive phrases, ‘handed in my notice’, ‘moved to a different role’, ‘I had a new job’, ‘I got that promotion’ where Tamsin, Mika and Sadie seem to acknowledge that they are the ones in control of their achievements and occupational mobility.

These four participants represent 11% of those included in this report, in comparison to just one participant, Gauri, (9% of participants included) in **06. We’re on a Road to Nowhere** who received a promotion whilst pregnant with her second child, working in an international school. Comments regarding career stagnation because of, or following a period of maternity leave, were far more common in this report. In the equivalent leavers report, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, there were no mentions of promotion whilst pregnant or on leave. In fact, one participant, Hanna, shared the experience of not being informed of a promotional opportunity whilst on leave and therefore missing out on the opportunity to apply for a role she was interested in.

This comparison, combined with Lauren’s comment, ‘why I’ve stayed in it’ suggests that providing mother-teachers with opportunities to formally progress during their maternity leave can result in the retention of these mid-career teachers. These opportunities should include following the legal guidance regarding communication with colleagues on maternity leave, as we have seen in Lauren and Sadie comments; avoiding discriminatory practice based on the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity as we see in Mika’s case, or inviting discussions around flexibility or part-time working on job advertisements as we see in Tamsin’s story.

Two participants commented that they felt that maternity leave had had either no impact on their career progression, or that a period of maternity leave might result in professional stagnation:

“With my second child I went on maternity leave as a KS3 Co-ordinator, and when I came back, I was still KS3 Co-ordinator. I hadn’t lost anything particularly.” – *Verity*

“My time out on maternity that maybe a little bit stuck for a while with progression because there might not be the opportunity to...” – *Heather*

The conclusion of Heather’s comment is a little difficult to follow on her transcription as she began a stream of consciousness that did not fully explain why she felt she might be ‘a little bit stuck for a while with progression’. Certain comments however, suggest that had she not started a family, she would have begun pursuing Deputy Head positions at this point in her career:

“By the time I took my maternity, I’d done three years as an Assistant Head and I was starting to think I might be ready to take the next step to Deputy Head position but I...” – *Heather*

She speaks about ‘hoping to have a second child’, feeling that now might ‘not be time to move schools’, and the possibility that there ‘wasn’t going to be an opportunity [for progression]’ at her school, but also says that she’s ‘being given the opportunity to... potentially take that next step’. From this reflective stream, we see the different factors that Heather feels she has to weigh up before making decisions regarding her occupational mobility, all of which are influenced by her anticipation of taking periods of maternity leave.

Whilst Verity feels she ‘hadn’t lost anything particularly’, comments from participants in **06. We’re on a Road to Nowhere** suggest that she is at risk of stagnation following her maternity leave. The fact that she worked full time at the point of interview reduces some of this risk as our leavers report found an correlation between career stagnation and part-time working. Comments from Nadya and Shivani, which focus on the negative impact of a period of maternity leave on their career progression, emphasise the contribution of either a flexible working request, or the impact of part-time working:

“I’m currently on my second lot of maternity leave. My first lot of maternity leave wasn’t – in terms of impact of my teaching career, wasn’t as good because, as I said in my previous answer, I actually returned to work and I wasn’t allowed to go part time.”
– *Nadya*

“I negotiated to work three days a week and I dropped from being Head of Department, so I went from being Head of Drama to Drama Teacher.” – *Shivani*

Shivani’s experience reflects the four participants (Monica, Kallie, Abigail, Stacey) in **06. We’re on a Road to Nowhere** and **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period**, who either experienced a demotion because of their part-time working request, or assumed that they would not be able to retain their middle or senior leadership position if they wished to work part-time. For Shivani, this shift from ‘a much more important job’, to ‘Drama Teacher’ was a positive one, as it meant that her second maternity leave was more ‘restful’, as she was not being ‘pestered’ by her school regarding her Head of Department role.

Unlike Shivani, Nadya did not take a demotion immediately following her maternity leave in order to secure her part-time hours. However, her comments ‘I wasn’t allowed to go part time’ show that this decision was enforced by her school, not one that she took freely. Comments later in her interview reveal that this had a negative impact on her ‘teaching career’ because, some time later, she sought a part-time position in her former school, but this was at middle, rather than senior leadership level, and therefore took ‘a step back’ that she feels she has ‘had to take because of having had children’.

Spouse / partner influence

Of the nine participants who mentioned the role that their partner or spouse played during their maternity leave, four referred to the use of shared parental leave, or their partner acting as the primary carer during the participant's immediate return to work period:

"Me and my husband split it fifty-fifty. I did four and a half months, and he did four and a half months." – *Kirsten*

"My school have a timetable that starts in mid-June so it makes sense for me to go back now and then it also works out quite nicely. He'll do two months and then I will take over again when it comes to the summer holidays." – *Heather*

"I only actually went back for a week in September and I have been off since then. I am going back next week and my husband is doing two months shared parental leave. He works for the government and he is having, so he is going to be from next week, he is going to be doing two months and kind of allowing me to go back for this part of the summer term." – *Heather*

"When I first came off maternity leave, my husband stayed at home for a time and looked after the children. Only for a few weeks." – *Katie*

"My husband and I wanted to share parental leave, which we did. We both earned about the same, both being in teaching." – *Andrea*

"My husband went to be the additional... shared paternity leave twice and he was, experienced a lot of the kind of discrimination that women experience when they go on maternity." – *Andrea*

"Being able to do shared parental leave was great. We'd always planned to do that and because we were both teachers and because we knew the school couldn't really deny it to a man, having given it to so many women, that really meant that we were really both happy to stay in teaching until we had both children." – *Andrea*

"My husband taking the second half of the parental leave meant I didn't have to think about childcare, which was very straightforward, and then when he went back to work when our daughter was nine months old." – *Andrea*

"Actually, because I was sharing the leave with my husband, I was actually only taking much shorter than most people so it wasn't frowned upon... I had lots of support for that." – *Andrea*

One of the benefits noted by the CIPD's study into fathers taking extended periods of paternity leave, was that this arrangement enabled 'mothers to return to work earlier and progress in their careers'³⁰. Whilst the 'earlier' return is true for Andrea and Kirsten, who

³⁰ https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/managing-extended-paternity-leave_tcm18-88297.pdf

took between four and a half, and five months of leave, both Katie and Heather took eight months – just below the average length of maternity leave for a teacher, which stands at 8.5 months³¹. Rather than forcing a shortening of maternity leave, therefore, these participants demonstrate that the option of shared parental leave empowers choice amongst couples.

For Kirsten and Andrea and their partners, this was the choice to share the length of leave exactly equally. Andrea's comments, 'we were both teachers', 'the school couldn't really deny it to a man, having given it to so many women', 'we both earned about the same' imply that both the value, and concrete manifestations of this value of equality, are at the heart of her relationship with her husband. This is emphasised when Andrea mentions three points pertaining to discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy and maternity, and sex. Firstly, she states that her husband, 'experienced a lot of the kind of discrimination that women experience when they go on maternity', corroborating the CIPD's findings that 'dads who had taken extended paternity leave will be more understanding of mums when returning to work if they've taken time out themselves'³².

The second is the championing of fathers' rights, free from sexist attitudes around parenting – 'we knew the school couldn't really deny it to a man, having given it to so many women'. We see here that Andrea wants an equality of experience for her husband at home, as much as she enjoys the professional benefits that a shorter period of leave provides her as a woman. The third point is the allusion to the discriminatory attitudes that women are faced with when they take time away from work for maternity leave. Andrea says that her 'much shorter' period of maternity leave 'wasn't frowned upon' and gained her 'lots of support' at work. Within these comments is the implication that the longer periods of leave more often taken by mothers, *are* frowned upon and *aren't* supported by employers.

Heather, Andrea and Katie mention that their husband's use of shared parental leave, or ability to become the primary carer also positively impacted their return to work experience. For Heather, shared parental leave enabled her to return to work at a point that felt convenient to both her and her school – 'My school have a timetable that starts in mid-June, 'allowing me to go back for this part of the summer term'. Heather's comments, 'it makes sense', 'it also works out quite nicely', indicate that the ability to fulfil a sense of professional duty to her school and do what is right for her family, gives her a sense of control and positive wellbeing.

Katie mentions that her 'husband stayed at home for a time and looked after the children' immediately following her return to work, and even though this was 'only for a few weeks', it is likely that this provided her with the peace of mind that Andrea shares when she says, 'I didn't have to think about childcare', making this aspect of her return to work 'very straightforward'.

This straightforwardness that Andrea describes is a stark comparison to the experiences of mothers aged 30-39 who left teaching. In **08. Don't Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the**

³¹ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/percentage_of_teachers_on_matern#incoming-1115502

³² https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/managing-extended-paternity-leave_tcm18-88297.pdf

Return to Work Period, participants described the emotional challenge of placing young babies in childcare settings – ‘She was still so tiny, and I just really wasn’t ready’ – *Marie-Ann* – or managing the sense of overwhelm that came from navigating childcare logistics and the return to work all in one go – ‘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... it is quite traumatic’ – *Sophie*. Contrastingly, the use of shared parental leave allowed the four participants in this report, to share the logistical load, focus on their return to work, and reduced the emotional wrench of leaving their baby.

Research from both the UK and internationally indicates that when men take extended periods of paternity, or parental leave, women’s careers benefit. Reports from Anderson, Kamerman and Moss³³, and the CIPD measure these benefits both anecdotally and in figures such as women’s increased participation in the labour market, and lower gender pay gaps. Combined with the experiences shared by these four participants and the comparison with the leavers’ experiences, none of whom mentioned the use of shared parental leave, it is not unreasonable to suppose that increased take up of shared parental leave from fathers and non-birthing partners could improve retention in the education sector, a female-dominated industry. With one fifth of teachers coupled with another teacher³⁴, promoting shared parental leave for teacher-fathers, and improving pay and conditions to make it more attractive, could be one way for MATs, local authorities and the DfE to boost the retention of mothers. Indeed, as Andrea states, the ability to take shared parental leave ‘really meant that [she and her husband] were really both happy to stay in teaching until [they] had both children’.

Four participants spoke about different forms of emotional and practical support that their husbands were able – or unable – to offer them whilst they were on maternity leave, and how this impacted their experience. Juliette and Clare’s comments focus on a *lack* of support, either as a result of their partner’s job, or because of the restrictions of paternity leave:

“I spent the first eight to nine months of my pregnancy dealing with emotions and sleep deprivation and just pure exhaustion because my partner works nights as well, and so I ended up doing a lot of the leg work a lot on my own.” – *Juliette*

“My husband was um, had not been on a proper teaching contract, um which allowed him to have any paternity leave whatsoever, so he had one day off the day after my son was born and then was working in a school all the way through so he has not benefitted from any paternity leave.” – *Clare*

Interestingly, none of the comments in any of the equivalent leavers’ reports – **04. What’s Love Got to Do With It?**, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** – explicitly refer to husband or partner’s involvement during the late pregnancy or maternity leave period. Husbands and spouses are mentioned in comments referring to childcare arrangements in **09. Take Good Care of My**

³³ https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2019-report/parental-leave-policies?language_content_entity=en

³⁴ <https://teachertapp.co.uk/articles/personal-lives-teacher-couples-impartiality-and-who-has-the-best-subject-departments/>

Baby, or in broader comments about their influence on the mother-teacher's decision to leave in **04. What's Love Got to Do With It?**

In comparison, Tamsin and Heather credit their husbands for providing the emotional and practical support needed to secure promotions (Tamsin) and engage with professional life (Heather) whilst on maternity leave:

"I was given the opportunity to apply for promotion to Assistant Head Teacher. I had a lot of in depth conversations with my husband about whether it was right time and whether it was the right role for me." – *Tamsin*

"They also invited me to an away day back in March and they could have easily forgotten about or maybe thought, "she wouldn't want to come", but they asked and at that point I was still breastfeeding a lot and he was still waking at night and things like that so I thought I would like to come, but I would need to be able to bring my husband and him so they would be able to stay in a hotel room but for me to just to come I would need that to work and they were more than happy to accommodate that. In the end actually we decided by the point it came around he was a lot better, feeding a lot less in the night and things like that so I felt confident to leave him at home with my husband and that actually worked out for the better." – *Heather*

In Tamsin's comment, we hear an echo of the sounding board role and joint decision-making described five participants in **04. What's Love Got to Do With It?**, emphasising the importance of the partner or husband's influence on mother-teachers' decision-making. Just like Stacey in **04. What's Love Got to Do With It?**, who said, 'we had to think, "how can we do this?"' when she was deciding to leave teaching, for Tamsin, the decision to apply and accept her promotion could not be made by her alone, but rather required 'in depth conversations' with her husband, considering the 'right time' and what was 'right' for her.

In Heather's anecdote, we see a reversal of the traditional gender roles described by seven participants in **04. What's Love Got to Do With It?** which saw them following their husband's relocations, or taking on the childcare or moving to roles that enabled them to manage the childcare logistics more easily in order to protect their husband's jobs and salaries. Instead, we see Heather's husband prepared to attend the 'away day' to support her, remaining in a hotel room or at home with their baby in order for Heather to take advantage of professional opportunities.

Two participants commented on the impact that their partner's salaries had on their experience of maternity leave:

"I am and was the main earner in our household and so it was one of the most heart-breaking things to me. It caused me quite a lot of emotional upset and it's taken many years to get over, but I had to go back to work when my eldest son was five months old." - *Jane*

“My husband is nowhere near in my wage bracket, so therefore I’m the main wage earner, so I have little option other than to take four months and go back.” – *Caroline*

In both cases, these participants took shorter leaves than they would otherwise have liked. Not only does this emphasise the importance of the financial implications of an extended period of maternity leave, it also highlights the assumption within our maternalistic leave policies that women are the lower wage earners in heterosexual couples. Without this assumption, the expectation that families survive, financially, on significantly reduced pay for 52 weeks, would not stand up to scrutiny. Whilst 72.4% of heterosexual couples³⁵, and 62% of female teachers adhere to this trend, with women earning less than their male partners, Jane and Caroline fall into the minority of 38%³⁶ of female teachers who are the ‘main wage earner’ in their households.

Support from school

As well as commenting on the frequency, type and impact of the communication they had with their school during maternity leave, 7 participants described how their schools did or did not support them during this time. Comments included the following simple statements from Heather and Raya:

“I felt I had been really well treated throughout my maternity leave.” – *Heather*

“In terms of how I’ve been dealt with by the school has been really good.” – *Raya*

As well as ‘really well treated’, ‘really good’, other participants (below) also used the phrases ‘everything was fine’, ‘treated quite well’, ‘quite amenable’, ‘people are understanding’, ‘they supported me’, ‘the culture was very supportive of maternity leave’, ‘really supportive’.

Mika identifies two specific aspects that made her feel supported:

“I don’t know if it’s still the case now, but I got more weeks of pay, like 90% pay than friends who worked in different authorities outside of London, and nobody made me feel awkward about it at all. Everything was fine.” – *Mika*

“I felt like I was treated quite well really and then when I came back I asked to work part time and that was fine and yeah, they were quite amenable really.” – *Mika*

Firstly, unlike Tamsin, Helen and Clare, who did not have positive experiences of making a flexible working request at the end of their maternity leaves, Mika’s states that her school were supportive and ‘quite amenable’ when she ‘asked to work part time’.

³⁵ O’Connor, B., *Rise of the Female Breadwinner: Woman earns the most in one-in-four households*, Royal London, May 2020, accessed at: <https://www.royallondon.com/media/press-releases/archive/female-breadwinner-rise/>

³⁶ TeacherTapp, *What Teachers Tapped This Week #18-29th January 2018*, 2018, accessed at: <https://teachertapp.co.uk/teachers-tapped-29-january/>

Secondly, Mika's school made her feel supported and empowered when taking up her maternity pay entitlements. Her comment, 'nobody made me feel awkward about it', however, is a complex one: in making this statement regarding her slightly elevated rate of maternity pay, she implies that there are colleagues within schools who *could* have made her, and other mothers 'feel awkward'. This phrase could even suggest that Mika herself thinks that this pay is a privilege, rather than an entitlement, or that she was anticipating ill-feeling or remarks from colleagues. However, given that our current maternity pay packages leave new mothers with just 50% of their earnings after six weeks at a time when they need income more than ever, arguably, the opposite is true – that even the slightly elevated maternity pay that Mika receives, is insufficient. Whatever the implication of this comment, Mika is clear that her school created a supportive culture for her to enjoy her maternity pay and leave.

During their maternity leaves, Honor and Bernadette comment on how their schools supported them to remain included in school life:

"People are understanding if you take your baby on KIT days and stuff like that." – *Honor*

"They supported me to come in to Year 12 open evening to pitch my new qualification. They sat down with me on several occasions to think about how this qualification will work." – *Bernadette*

In both examples, this support was in-person. Honor mentions 'KIT days' where, like Heather, whose school were happy for her to bring her baby to the 'away day' she describes in her anecdote, her baby was welcomed onto school site. She states that people were 'understanding' of this need, and it appears that her baby was therefore not used as a barrier to justify her exclusion.

Bernadette identifies 'Year 12 open evening' and 'several occasions' where she 'sat down with' colleagues at her school to prepare to deliver a new KS5 qualification. As well as these physical interactions, this would have involved hearing Bernadette's input and intentions for the course, and therefore continuing to value her ideas as a professional during her leave.

Andrea, Tamsin and Shivani describe two contrasting experiences of maternity leave, either within the same school, or in two different settings:

"I was working, when I had my first maternity leave, actually both of them, I was at a very, very [unclear] comprehensive school in London and the culture was very supportive of maternity leave. Lots and lots of people had had it before." – *Andrea*

"By the second one I didn't feel valued, I just felt like the whole job and workload was totally unmanageable." – *Andrea*

"They were really supportive on maternity leave. It was a completely different experience, this time, to what it was the first time around. I think that's probably been a huge factor in me wanting to go back to school." – *Tamsin*

“Interestingly, at the same school, my second experience of it was completely different and it seemed to change by that time. I negotiated to work three days a week and I dropped from being Head of Department, so I went from being Head of Drama to Drama Teacher. Then, when I went on maternity leave a second time, I think my timetable was much easier to cover and that sort of thing.” – *Shivani*

Both Andrea and Shivani describe maternity leaves taken in the same school. For Andrea, the first was ‘very supportive’ but by the second she ‘didn’t feel valued’. For Shivani, the opposite was true: as a Head of Department during her first maternity leave, she has previously described feeling ‘pestered’ and ‘under a lot of pressure’. The reason her second experience was ‘completely different’, she feels, is a direct result of her demotion to Drama Teacher, where the logistics of her ‘timetable’ and the fact that she was in a less ‘important job’. As a result, she had the more ‘restful’ maternity leave she wanted.

For Tamsin and Andrea’s, the consequence of this lack of support from their schools over one of their maternity leaves is straightforward: both left their unsupportive school, and found a new role in a school they are much happier in. For Andrea, who compares the difference between her first experience of leave – ‘the culture was very supportive’, ‘lots and lots of people had had [maternity leave] before’ – and her second period of leave – ‘By the second one I didn’t feel valued’, ‘the whole job and workload was totally unmanageable’ – this coincided with a relocation where she secured a role in an ‘absolutely wonderful’ school where the workload that ‘is absolutely how [she] want[s] it to be’.

Equally, in this comment, Tamsin describes her *new* school, which she joined towards the end of her first maternity leave after her previous school was unsupportive during her leave, and who delayed a clear confirmation or denial of her flexible working request. Tamsin’s story highlights particularly how schools lose out when they fail to support staff over the maternity leave period, as she went on to serve as a SENDCO and then receive a promotion to Assistant Head Teacher in her new school.

Whilst they do not explicitly reference the support offered by their schools, both Kayleigh and Raya describe the changes that occurred during their maternity leaves, which have impacted them in some way:

“The leadership changed while I was away, the Head, because I became, I got my threshold just before I went on maternity leave and the Headteacher changed while I was away so I came back to a shifting SLT which made me feel quite uncomfortable and I wasn’t completely sure what was going on.” – *Kayleigh*

“There’s been some quite big changes in my school during the time that I was off. So, we got a different Head of Department and we’re going through this academisation. That’s been a bit stressful because – just because they’re huge changes that massively affect my job and I’m not there to know what’s going on all the time.” – *Raya*

As we have seen in **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period**, significant change at school during a teacher’s period of maternity leave can have a

destabilising effect on returning teachers. Changes referred to in the leavers report included changes in staffing, curriculum, job role, school culture and logistics such as classroom changes. Kayleigh's comments, 'made me feel quite uncomfortable', 'I wasn't completely sure what was going on', echo Seren, June and Stacey's experiences in **08. Don't Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period**, all of whom refer specifically to a change in departmental or senior leadership negatively impacting on their return to work experience. It is also worth the reminder that Kayleigh a student in Kayleigh's class passed away whilst she was on maternity leave, adding yet another huge change for her to return to.

Although Raya acknowledges that her school have 'been really good' and have not contacted her 'unnecessarily', she acknowledges that the 'big changes' of 'a different Head of Department' and 'academisation' have resulted in a 'stressful' maternity leave experience. She anticipates that her job will be affected 'massively' as a result of these changes, but does not know exactly how, and her physical absence during her leave means she's 'not there to know what's going on'.

Flexible Working

As we have seen in previous reports, flexible working acts as a significant retention measure for teachers over the first five years of their return to work. Where flexible working is denied or done badly during this time, we see mother-teachers aged 30-39 leaving the sector, taking forced demotions, or stagnating in classroom or middle leadership positions.

Of the 38 participants included in this report, 19 worked part-time at the time of interview, including 6 at middle leadership level, or who held a TLR. None of the senior leaders in this report worked part-time, or mentioned any formal level of flexibility in their role.

Other than one previous comment from Mika, who secured a promotion during her leave, and initially returned to this promoted position on part-time hours (but stated that she worked full time at the time of interview), the experiences of five of the six participants who referred to flexible working requests made during, or as a consequence of their maternity leave, were negative.

For Tamsin, Helen and Clare, this was because the negotiations around their flexible working requests were conducted whilst they were still on leave (rather than close to their return to work date). All three experienced stressful negotiations that impacted their enjoyment of maternity leave:

"I took seven months maternity, and from about five months, I was asking if I could go back part time, and the headteacher wouldn't confirm whether she could give me the hours or not. And I was getting later and later in my maternity, and it was getting closer for me going back without confirmed reduced hours. I was asking for 0.6 or 0.8. And then fortunately, the role I'm in at the moment, the SENCO role was originally advertised as a 0.6 contract. So I handed in my notice and I moved to a different role."

– Tamsin

“In the February I put in my request to go back to three days and basically that’s when it all started to go wrong. I finished in the late November and then up until the February time it was great until that time, and then – like I say – from the February when I put my request in, it all just went downhill from there. They just dragged their feet about it. They made it impossible for me to go back really, by offering me meetings that I know I couldn’t go to.” – *Helen*

“At no stage was it ever suggested that a part-time application would be unwelcome” – *Clare*

“I was led to believe that the part-time thing would not be an issue and of then course I am being dragged into meeting after meeting, having to liaise with union Reps to sort out what was going on so that was actually then quite a stressful situation.” – *Clare*

Further accounts of making flexible working requests will be included in later reports focusing on the return to work period, but comments from these three participants have been included in this report because their requests, and negotiations, began fairly early in their maternity leaves, rather than towards the end as they were preparing for their return to work. Tamsin and Helen state that these conversations began five and three months into their leave, respectively, and Clare in her interview talks about a maternity leave that ran from September to April. However, her reference to attending ‘meeting after meeting’ implies that this process took some time, and therefore it is likely that it interrupted her experience of maternity leave some time ahead of her intended April return which never actually transpired.

All three participants use words and phrases that emphasise the unpleasantness of this experience – ‘it all started to go wrong’, ‘it all just went downhill from there’, ‘quite a stressful situation’ – with Helen even stating that ‘the last few months of [her] maternity where beyond horrific of trying to get back to work’. The actions of the school or specific school leaders take centre stage in these accounts: Tamsin states that her ‘headteacher wouldn’t confirm whether she could give [her] the hours or not’, that the decision was not made even as it got ‘later and later in [her] maternity leave’, and Helen saying that her school ‘dragged their feet’ and ‘made it impossible for [her] to go back by offering [her] meetings [she] couldn’t go to.’ Similarly, Clare suggests that her school acted deceptively as ‘at no stage was it ever suggested that a part-time application would be unwelcome’, and conveys a sense of betrayal when she says ‘I was led to believe that the part-time thing would not be an issue.’

Unlike Monica in **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** who eventually left teaching altogether, Tamsin, Helen and Clare responded to the pushback they received from their schools by securing new positions on flexible hours, in different schools. For Tamsin, we have seen that this eventually lead to a promotion to Assistant Head Teacher during a subsequent maternity leave, and for Helen, it enabled her to work in a ‘wonderful place’ with a ‘family-friendly, really lovely, kind atmosphere’. For Clare, however, as we see with Shivani below, securing a part-time position required her to take a demotion from Deputy Head Teacher to Department Team Leader.

“I negotiated to work three days a week and I dropped from being Head of Department, so I went from being Head of Drama to Drama Teacher. Then, when I went on maternity leave a second time, I think my timetable was much easier to cover and that sort of thing.” – *Shivani*

Whilst Shivani has spoken positively about the impact that this semi-voluntary demotion had on her second maternity leave, Clare’s subsequent journey involved a search for ‘any part-time work’, working part-time as ‘the Team Leader of a department’, but only receiving 0.6 of the TLR and struggling with workload expectations. In her interview, she even states that she ‘might even fall into the people who have quit teaching’ following her resignation shortly before her interview, whilst on her second maternity leave.

The frustration and disillusionment that Clare describes in her interview is similar to that of Rochelle, Esther and Stacey in **06. We’re on a Road to Nowhere**, who found that professional development and progression opportunities were closed to them, and their occupational mobility limited when they began working part-time. Whilst 12 other participants in this report work part-time as classroom teachers, it is unclear whether these arrangements will continue to be satisfactory for Shivani and Clare if they have already experienced, and feel themselves capable of fulfilling, middle or senior leadership roles.

Unlike the previous four participants, Nadya accepted to return full time after her flexible working request was denied:

“My first lot of maternity leave wasn’t – in terms of impact of my teaching career, wasn’t as good because, as I said in my previous answer, I actually returned to work and I wasn’t allowed to go part time.” – *Nadya*

“Me being on maternity leave and wanting to come back part time – it was easier to try and push me out by insisting that I come back full time.” – *Nadya*

Nadya explicitly states that she feels that the rejection of her flexible working request was an attempt on behalf of her school to ‘push [her] out’ rather than facilitate part-time working. If this belief is accurate, it compounds unreceptive attitudes to flexible working in education, viewing part-time working as too challenging to consider – ‘it was easier to try and push me out’. Nadya’s experience once again reflects that described by Monica in **08. Don’t Leave Me This Way: Experiences of the Return to Work Period** – ‘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’.

However, like Tamsin, Helen and Clare, Nadya eventually responded to the rejection of her flexible working request not by leaving teaching entirely, but by moving to a ‘friendly’ school where the ‘head teacher is very supportive towards parents with young children’. At the time of interview, she was working as a part-time SENCO, a role her interview response suggests she values and respects, but ultimately considers a ‘step back’ from her former senior leadership role.

Lisa and Honour offer positive comments about flexible working, demonstrating the wider uses, or impact that flexibility can afford:

“It was different the second time because I had more friends that had children that were all working flexibly.” – *Lisa*

“When I was expecting my second child I went part time. I would have been about three months pregnant.” – *Honor*

Honor reminds us that part-time working is not just for mother-teachers when they return from maternity leave. It is a way of supporting staff in a variety of contexts, including those managing the challenges of pregnancy alongside parenting other children.

We also see the positive impact that a culture of flexible working can have on the wider maternal community. Having found her first maternity leave ‘isolating’, it is the part time working schedules of her friends that result in a different experience second time round for Lisa – potentially with more opportunities for socialising, and the support and sense of community that goes alongside. Indeed, peri-natal support groups and resources encourage socialising with friends and family, and other mothers to limit feelings of isolation and the risk of poor peri-natal mental health³⁷. As ‘maternal mental health is one of the most crucial determinants of a child’s mental health’, children’s physical health and their performance at school³⁸, arguably a flexible working culture that provides new mothers with more opportunity to connect with their friends and colleagues who are not on maternity leave, will have a positive impact on our wider society.

Discrimination

As in previous reports, instances of pregnancy and maternity discrimination have unfortunately been present in participants’ references to varied aspects of their maternity leave. Throughout this report, we have seen the following examples of pregnancy and maternity discrimination, which merit an additional emphasis:

“When I initially went off, I applied to do the NPQSL, then I found out just after Christmas that I was accepted onto the course and was due to start in February – but then the guy running it said that I couldn’t be on it whilst I was on maternity leave because I couldn’t expect change while I was off. So that was a bit disappointing.” – *Lauren*

“It doesn’t make me upset to think that I’d have to go back to work afterwards, which sort of ruined my maternity before because I was constantly fighting to try and get back and they just wouldn’t allow it, and I lost four months of sitting in meetings with unions and phone calls and emails and it was just constant.” – *Helen*

³⁷ <http://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/Postnatal-Depression-A4-2015.pdf>

³⁸ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/maternal-mental-health/>

“Me being on maternity leave and wanting to come back part time – it was easier to try and push me out by insisting that I come back full time.” – *Nadya*

For Lauren, guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission is clear: employers ‘must not stop you doing training because you are pregnant, on maternity leave or due to take maternity leave’ and that to do so ‘would almost certainly be unlawful sex discrimination’³⁹. The refusal to explore appropriate adaptations to the NPQSL that Lauren refers to, therefore, means that ‘the guy running’ the course has acted in a discriminatory manner. The justification that the NPQSL requires participants to implement or ‘expect change’, which Lauren is told she cannot do ‘while [she] was off’ allows ‘the guy running’ the course to block Lauren from accessing the qualification and developing in the same way as peers who are not on maternity leave.

The reason such behaviour is discriminatory is because it delays an employee who is pregnant or on maternity leave from securing a qualification and therefore puts them at a disadvantage in comparison to colleagues who do not fall under the protected characteristic of pregnancy or maternity. If the average period of maternity leave for a teacher lasts for 8.5 months, and they must then wait for the subsequent cohort of their desired qualification to start, this delay can be for at least a year, if not longer. Realistically, the demands of balancing family and work responsibilities as well as additional study, or previous negative experiences with training providers, might be off-putting for mother-teachers, meaning that they may decide never to complete the qualification they had hoped to start whilst on maternity leave.

Thankfully, later in this report, we will learn that Lauren completed self-directed “maternityCPD” of her choice, and we already know that she was promoted to Deputy Head whilst on maternity leave. Whilst the ‘the guy running’ the NPQSL failed to see Lauren’s potential to rise to a challenge blocked her from completing this qualification, her school’s understanding of pregnancy and maternity discrimination ensured that she did not lose out in the long run.

The examples from Nadya and Helen regarding their flexible working requests are slightly more nuanced, since employers can legally deny a flexible working request if they have a valid business reason for doing so⁴⁰. However, two definitions of ‘negative or possibly discriminatory experience’ included in the Equality and Human Rights Commissions report into Pregnancy and Maternity Discrimination include instances where women, ‘had flexible working requests declined on return to work and an alternative solutions was not reached’, and were ‘not allowed to reduce number of hours when asked’⁴¹.

These two definitions match the experiences described by Nadya and Helen – not only were their flexible working requests denied, they also experienced negative consequences as a result of their requests: ‘which sort of ruined my maternity’, ‘I was constantly fighting to try

³⁹ https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/your_rights_to_equality_at_work_-_training_development_promotion_and_transfer.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://www.acas.org.uk/responding-to-a-flexible-working-request/if-the-request-is-not-possible>

⁴¹ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

and get back', 'I lost four months of sitting in meetings with unions', 'it was just constant', 'it was easier to try and push me out by insisting that I come back full time'.

Recruitment and Staffing

Five participants mentioned an aspect of recruitment or staffing at their school that influenced their experience of maternity leave:

"I know when I was off they couldn't get a qualified... well, they could get a qualified teacher, she was an NQT. So literally, she has never taught before apart from in her training year." – *Bryony*

"Because we weren't able to recruit for my maternity cover, so I did still have quite a lot of contact with my department." – *Alexa*

"They haven't actually replaced me while I'm on maternity because I'm a SENCO and that's quite a specialised role and I know from other schools in the local area that they cannot get a maternity cover for SENCOs. At the moment, the Head Teacher and my administrator are covering my workload." – *Nadya*

"I felt like I was valued in... to the extent that they couldn't even find anyone to do the job while I wasn't there." – *Andrea*

"There was no stable replacement to my role." – *Andrea*

"Then spent most of the next six months trying to recruit teachers to replace me, which didn't work out." – *Andrea*

Even between 2013 to 2018 when Bryony, Alexa, Nadya and Andrea took their maternity leave, the education sector was struggling with a recruitment and retention crisis. The staffing gaps that these five participants describe could be a result of this wider workforce issue, or they could be due to poor contingency planning on behalf of their school leadership teams, who failed to consider what appropriate cover arrangements would look like during these colleagues' absence.

Andrea and Nadya explicitly refer to the conflicting emotions that resulted from this situation. Andrea at once feels valued, and yet recognises that her absence creates instability in her department. Nadya is conscious that – in the 'specialised role' of a SENCO – she has a specific set of skills and experience that is difficult to replace, and so feels somewhat special, but is also very aware of the additional workload her absence represents for 'the Head Teacher' and her 'administrator'. Bryony, too, recognises her experience as valuable as she points out that her replacement was not 'a qualified teacher', but 'an NQT', who Bryony feels has 'literally... never taught before apart from in her training year'.

As well as an implied sense of guilt – both for adding to others’ workloads and leaving students with an inexperienced teacher – this inability, or decision not to recruit a maternity cover also impacts Andrea and Alexa’s experience of maternity leave. They both had ‘quite a lot of contact’ with their schools and, in Andrea’s case, she deliberately planned a short maternity leave in order to limit the ‘endemic problems’ she felt would start ‘to raise their heads’ during her absence. Bryony has also shared that to mitigate the loss of her experience, she felt she had to mark ‘controlled assessments, squishing them in, marking them while [she] was off maternity leave, getting them done before [she] went off’.

By her second pregnancy, Andrea’s decision to resign and relocate means that the school’s inability to find a replacement impacted less on her maternity leave. However, the fact that her school spent ‘six months’ trying and failing to find this replacement once again emphasises the recruitment and retention challenges we are experiencing within the education sector.

When a period of maternity leave results in such staffing challenges, it is understandable that it is seen as a burden or inconvenience to a school. Indeed, the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that 24% of employers found additional maternity leave difficult to facilitate because of the ‘difficulty of finding suitable skilled temporary workers’ or even any ‘short-term temporary workers (22%) to cover absent mothers’⁴². However, with a predominantly female workforce, periods of maternity are – arguably – one of the more predictable absences that schools can expect to cover as part and parcel of their staffing management.

Negative experiences of maternity leave

We have already seen in previous sections that five factors have resulted in a negative maternity leave experience for our participants:

- Maternity leaves that were too short, or where participants felt forced to return to work earlier than they wanted to because of finances (Jane described this as ‘terrible. It was really terrible.’)
- Unwelcome or insufficient contact from school
- Flexible working requests that were denied, or that required union involvement, or where confirmation of the request was delayed
- Demotions or feelings of stagnation as a result of maternity leave
- Lack of support from spouses / partners

Three further negative aspects of maternity leave were raised by nine participants. The first, commented on by four participants, was that they found maternity leave boring:

“Maybe I’m not supposed to say this, but sometimes I was frankly quite bored.” –
Kirsten

⁴² <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/pregnancy-and-maternity-discrimination-research-findings>

“I get bored at home. I get lonely... It’s a bit too quiet at home.” – *Flora*

“A bit boring. I really missed being out of the loop at work.” – *Lucy*

“I did find it a bit dull sitting at home for a year because a lot of time when they are little babies, they don’t do very much and they do a lot of sleeping. And there is not a lot to kind of do and stretch your mind on things and yeah... I was doing a very important job in bringing up a small person for a year but it wasn’t as stimulating as being at work is.” – *Lucy*

“When I was on maternity I was a bit bored so it was quite nice to get together with professionals and talk about professional experiences and be able to share ideas and come up with ideas and sort of develop your practise because when you’re just staying at home, you don’t really get a lot of opportunity to do that.” – *Kimberley*

In her comment, ‘Maybe I’m not supposed to say this’, Kirsten alludes to the restrictive culture surrounding motherhood that can prevent mothers from sharing the reality of their experiences. While Lucy acknowledges that she ‘was doing a very important job in bringing up a small person for a year’, her experience of early motherhood involved not having ‘a lot to do’, because her baby didn’t ‘do very much’ other than ‘a lot of sleeping’. As we hear from Flora and Kimberley, as well as Lucy and Kirsten, not only can mothers be ‘bored’ on maternity leave, they can lack the intellectual stimulation, community and pace of life that work offers.

As we have seen from the previous section, *Teacher Identity*, this boredom might be particularly challenging for teachers whose identity is based on a highly structured day, interaction with sometimes hundreds of people on a daily basis, and challenging demands on their concentration and task-management.

Lucy also comments that ‘being out of the loop at work’ contributed to her sense of boredom. Four further participants also found maternity leave to be isolating:

“Maternity leave was quite isolating” – *Clare*

“I found maternity leave quite difficult. I found it quite lonely. I found it quite depressing.” – *Lydia*

“My maternity leave was quite isolating. It was quite depressing. I didn’t have very many friends who had children as well. I felt quite isolated and it was a very cold winter that I had maternity leave. I couldn’t leave the house very much and it was quite – yeah – depressing. And the knowledge that I wasn’t getting paid very much – it sort of gradually goes down and down – that kind of made me depressed as well. So I didn’t really enjoy maternity leave at all.” – *Lydia*

“I hated maternity leave. I found it isolating. I lacked stimulation and felt like I lacked support, particularly with my first pregnancy, because I was the first of all my friends to have a child.” – *Lisa*

“I found it isolating... I didn’t have any friends that were off work at the same time as me. It was different the second time because I had more friends that had children that were all working flexibly.” – *Lisa*

“I found it hard to socialise with other mums.” – *Juliette*

“I went to an antenatal yoga group to make friends before I had him and then we kind of stayed friends when the babies came along. I kind of felt that a lot of people you meet along the way, they are not real friendships, they are forced friendships.” – *Juliette*

Both Lydia and Lisa identify that being one of the first of their social circles to have a baby was part of the cause of their isolation – ‘I didn’t have very many friends who had children as well’, ‘I didn’t have any friends that were off work at the same time as me’. Interestingly, Juliette, calls the friends made in the ‘antenatal’ groups encouraged by many peri-natal mental health charities as a positive antidote to the negative effects of isolation ‘not real friendships’ but ‘forced friendships’. According to Juliette’s comments, even where a community of mothers is available, it will not necessarily stem feelings of isolation if there is no shared interest beyond being a mother.

Finally, four participants found that aspects of the transition to motherhood were ‘quite hard’, ‘incredibly difficult’, ‘a huge shock to the system’:

“I found maternity leave quite difficult because you go from being a full time working professional with loads of marking and planning and assessing and kind of forward-thinking to, well, when I first had my little boy I just didn’t have a clue what I was doing and so I found it quite hard and I also found the lack of educational conversation quite difficult, so you’d go to parenting groups and see other parents and have conversations with them but it would be like, “he’s not sleeping at night”, “what do I do about him not sleeping at night”, “oh, he doesn’t eat food – what do I do about him not eating food?” And I felt like I kind of lost a little bit of my intelligence. I felt, yeah, just quite removed from thinking like an intellectual and planning, so I spent all this time getting my degree and spent all this time looking at educational literature and you have a baby, go off on maternity leave and then it stops and it was a very, very strange experience, so I found it quite hard.” – *Kimberley*

“I really enjoyed spending the time with my son but I found motherhood a lot harder than I anticipated it would be.” – *Juliette*

“Maternity leave, it was... it felt... even though it was lovely to have my little boy, for me it was a hard time.” – *Juliette*

“I found it incredibly difficult. I think, as an older mother, but as a 35, 36 year old mother, I think me and my partner were really enjoying our lives and had quite a lot of disposable income. We were going on big holidays quite a lot, and so it was a huge shock to the system to have Nico. Obviously a very positive one as well, but we definitely felt that shock, and we had a long time where we were sort of grieving a little bit for our old lives.” – *Bernadette*

“So yeah maternity it was ok. I watched a lot of ‘Strictly ...’ and you know, tried to work out what was happening.” – *Clare*

Within these comments, participants describe six transitions that contribute to a negative experience of maternity leave. Firstly, Kimberley describes how her life went from being very busy, to not very busy at all – ‘a full time working professional with loads of marking and planning...’ to ‘then it stops’ – and the impact that this had on her sense of purpose – ‘you have a baby, go off on maternity leave and then it stops’.

Kimberley describes the transition from being an expert – ‘a full time working professional’, ‘I spent all this time getting my degree’, ‘spent all this time looking at educational literature’ – to being a novice – ‘I just didn’t have a clue what I was doing’ – as ‘quite hard’. This is echoed by Clare whose comment ‘tried to work out what was happening’ reflects the confusion and overwhelm of early parenting.

Both Kimberley and Clare comment on the change in the type of conversations or input they were able to engage in, from ‘educational conversations’ and ‘thinking like an intellectual’, to quite banal conversations focused on parenting – “‘he’s not sleeping at night’”, “‘oh, he doesn’t eat food’”, or watching ‘a lot of Strictly’.

Bernadette describes the challenge of moving from a life where she felt she had a good degree of control and freedom – ‘me and my partner were really enjoying our lives and had quite a lot of disposable income’, ‘we were going on big holidays quite a lot’ – to a life that was more restricted by the demands of parenting – ‘we were sort of grieving a little bit for our old lives’.

Later comments from Juliette reveal two reasons that she found maternity leave difficult: the first was due to the delayed grief of her parents’ death, and the second the disparity between a version of motherhood that she potentially ‘anticipated’ herself, and felt those around her projected – ‘a pretend picture of how wonderful their lives are’ – in comparison to the reality of her own ‘hard’ experience.

Mental Health

The emotional challenges presented by the transition to motherhood have already been explored in previous sections of this report. These have included participants’ feelings of isolation due to too little contact from their schools; the boredom of life with a newborn, particularly in comparison to the fast-paced routine of school; financial pressure, or other

factors forcing them to return to work earlier than they otherwise would have liked, and what Lydia describes as the depressing reality of maternity pay.

Participants have also alluded to the contrast, and the emotional challenge this entails, of moving very quickly from a teaching or school leadership role where they feel very competent, to being placed in a position where they have to learn a whole set of new skills from scratch, as a mother. For some – as we see Juliette and Kimberley mention – this return to novice status was unexpected: ‘I found motherhood a lot harder than I anticipated it would be’, ‘I just didn’t have a clue what I was doing’.

Four participants speak more formally about the impact of a period of maternity leave on their wellbeing and mental health, with Leanne and Juliette referring to their experiences of postnatal depression or anxiety:

“I did have quite terrible postnatal depression.” – *Leanne*

“There’s a lot of competition between mums and mums don’t really tell you the full story, they just paint a pretend picture of how wonderful their lives are and I just felt like I was, kind of swimming and just barely surviving and I found that quite hard. So I ended up coming off social media for maybe six, seven months because I felt too much pressure to be a part of that.” – *Juliette*

“My little boy ended up coming three weeks early, so it was the right call. But I think a lot of that anxiety flew over – switched over into my maternity time. And there are personal reasons for that, I don’t mind sharing. Both my parents passed away and I think, when I had my little boy, a lot of that grief took me. Because I didn’t have family to share my little boy with. So I think I spent the first, at least the first, maybe eight to nine months of my pregnancy dealing with emotions and sleep deprivation and just pure exhaustion.” – *Juliette*

Juliette’s semantics challenge the common social narrative that maternity leave is the most blissful time in a mother’s life. Whilst we have already seen that this is partly true for many participants in this report (*Positive Experiences of Maternity Leave*), Juliette’s experience illustrates how difficult this period of maternity leave was for her. This was both because of her delayed grief – ‘anxiety’, ‘grief’, ‘dealing with emotions’ – and because of the expectations and culture surrounding motherhood – ‘competition’, ‘paint a pretend picture’, ‘swimming’ – versus the reality that she experienced – ‘just barely surviving’, ‘quite hard’, ‘too much pressure’. Given this experience, it is no surprise that Juliette felt that ‘going back to work’ did her ‘more good than being on maternity leave’.

16% of participants in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** make reference to the impact of maternity leave on their mental health, in comparison to 5% of participants in this report. Interestingly, references to postnatal depression were higher in the equivalent leavers’ report, **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave**, with three participants making specific reference to it and one further participant talking about a traumatic birth experience and ‘anxiety’, which she refers to as her ‘illness’. Whilst these data sets are small, this finding could indicate

that peri- and postnatal mental health plays a part in mother-teachers' decision to leave the profession. Understanding these conditions should therefore be a consideration for school leaders and line managers when supporting colleagues over the maternity leave and return to work period.

In comparison to Leanne and Juliette, Shivani and Heather describe their maternity leave experiences as positive for their mental health, primarily because it gave them a break from school life:

"I took my son in with me on the day that I went to say I wanted two and a half days, and that was the only day that I went in, in about 14 months. And so that was much more restful, I felt." – *Shivani*

"I felt more rested, which is really ironic. I felt more rested than I ever had in the previous five years even with a newborn baby. It was just ridiculous that everybody commented on how well I looked and that sort of thing, and how not tired I looked. It was absolutely brilliant." – *Helen*

Both participants use the word 'restful' or 'rested', with Helen adding, 'not tired', 'how well I looked' – an experience which may seem ironic compared to Juliette's description of the 'sleep deprivation' and 'pure exhaustion' of new motherhood. These statements, however echo comments from five participants in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** who described the positive impact of maternity leave on their mental health, particularly because of the break it gave them from their school environment – 'I didn't really think about work an awful lot... And I really enjoyed not having the stress and the pressure that I'd had previously' (Josephine), 'I really enjoyed being away from school' (Sharon), 'being able to switch off from work' (Monica), 'I was having a good time on maternity leave and I didn't want to go back' (Kallie), 'It was like stepping off the conveyor belt of constant' (Laura).

That maternity leave was 'restful' for Shivani and Helen emphasises the intense pace of school life – the 'conveyor belt of constant' described by Laura in **07. Experiences of Maternity Leave** – and the toll that this can take on teachers' mental health and wellbeing. For Shivani, her 'important job' of Head of Drama meant that she continued to feel 'pestered' and under 'pressure' on her first maternity leave, and her subsequent choice to reduce her hours and position to Drama Teacher is indicative of the workload and associated overwhelm of this middle leadership position. Given Helen's previous description of the unpleasant experience of making a flexible working request at her first school, it is also unsurprising that leaving this unsupportive environment temporarily would have felt restorative.

Teacher Identity

We have already seen the importance of teacher identity to 16 participants in this report in the previous sections, *Communication with School* and *Progression*. In some cases, participants have spoken about positive affirmations of their teacher identity and sense of

worth. In other cases, when speaking about how important their role as a teacher is to them, participants have spoken about concerns regarding the absence that their maternity leave represents, and feelings of obligation or guilt resulting from a sense that they are irreplaceable to their settings.

Comments from three participants demonstrate the different ways that their schools enabled them to nurture a positive sense of their teacher identity whilst they were on maternity leave:

“I was given the opportunity to apply for promotion to assistant headteacher ... I went for it and was lucky to secure that position. And so that’s what I went back to when I returned from maternity leave.” – *Tamsin*

“I had a new job to go back to, which was a promotion, and I just felt almost ready for the next stage in my life.” – *Sadie*

“The fact that my school were willing to accommodate me, the fact that I was still breastfeeding and make that work, I think – again – all part of feeling valued.” – *Heather*

For Tamsin and Sadie, teacher identity was enhanced by their promotions, helping them to feel as if their time away from school on leave was simply part of their journey: in these cases, rather than acting as a source of conflict, the mother identity and teacher identity are working harmoniously with each other. For Heather, her school’s behaviour and the resulting sense of value that she felt, confirmed that becoming a mother did not erase her teacher identity; instead, both roles are celebrated and accommodated by her school.

As a consequence of their school’s approach, both Lucy and Heather describe a sense of confidence and security introducing and sharing their new mother identities with their colleagues:

“I don’t feel like being a mum makes me... nobody views me as a lesser person at the school if that makes sense?” – *Lucy*

“When I was on maternity leave, I felt I had been at the school long enough, and given kind of enough of myself to the school and to the students that I kind of earned my maternity leave, and at the same time I felt I had been really well treated throughout my maternity leave.” – *Heather*

Part of the reason that Nadya and Andrea felt similarly valued by their school was because they felt irreplaceable in their roles:

“They haven’t actually replaced me while I’m on maternity because I’m a SENCO and that’s quite a specialised role and I know from other schools in the local area that they cannot get a maternity cover for SENCOs. At the moment, the Head Teacher and my administrator are covering my workload.” – *Nadya*

“I felt like I was valued in... to the extent that they couldn’t even find anyone to do the job while I wasn’t there” – *Andrea*

“First maternity I felt really valued but only because others couldn’t be found to perform at the same level, and by the second one I didn’t feel valued, I just felt like the whole job and workload was totally unmanageable.” – *Andrea*

For Nadya and Andrea, the teacher identity is defined by being important to a community, in that they are unique to the point of being irreplaceable – ‘they haven’t actually replaced me’, ‘they couldn’t find anyone to do the job while I wasn’t there’. In Nadya’s case, this feeling stems from her specific skills and knowledge set as a SENCO, and the lack of similarly experienced colleagues in her area, and for Andrea, it is her ability to ‘perform’ at a certain level that makes her feel special, or different to other teachers. In the previous section, *Recruitment and Staffing*, we have already explored however, how this aspect of teacher identity – whilst making participants feel valued and worthy – is also associated with guilt and conflict.

Unlike Tamsin, Sadie and Heather, three participants – including Lucy – described maternity leave experiences that did *not* involve a balance between both mother and teacher identity:

“I was doing a very important job in bringing up a small person for a year but it wasn’t as stimulating as being at work is.” – *Lucy*

“I feel that going back to work has probably done me more good than being on maternity leave.” – *Juliette*

“As a mother – I find motherhood very rewarding – but your reward centres aren’t hit in the same way.” – *Bernadette*

Here we see that Lucy, Juliette and Bernadette do not downplay the significance that the mother identity holds – ‘I was doing a very important job in bringing up a small person’, ‘I find motherhood very rewarding’ – but they do push against the structures that pit one identity against another. Whilst on maternity leave, Lucy’s whole purpose, for example is ‘bringing up a small person’, and her teacher identity is entirely absent. Equally, whilst on leave, Bernadette’s only source of ‘reward’ come from her mother identity, but this does not fulfil the need for a different type of ‘hit’ she gets from teaching. For Juliette, the early version of her mother identity was marked by ‘competition’ and ‘surviving’, ‘grief’ and ‘anxiety’ – it is understandable therefore, that she would want to curtail a period where this identity was dominant, in favour of returning to her teacher identity that did her ‘more good’.

As well as the ‘stimulating’ nature of teaching that Lucy describes, Kimberley and Clare share further aspects of the teacher identity that were *not* fulfilled for them during their maternity leaves:

“I found maternity leave quite difficult because you go from being a full time working professional with loads of marking and planning and assessing and kind of forward-

thinking to, well, when I first had my little boy I just didn't have a clue what I was doing." – *Kimberley*

"I was able to bond with my child, but I guess the isolation and also when previously you've have worked very hard to make your job successful and been told it was successful and then to be kind of just cut off from that was quite difficult." – *Clare*

As Kirsten and Lisa have implied in previous comments, the mother identity is also associated with 'isolation' and being 'cut off' for Clare, suggesting that the teacher identity means community and connection.

Both participants identify that motherhood – particularly first time motherhood – involves starting from scratch at a point in time when the participants in this report (17 of whom were middle leaders and 7 of whom were senior leaders at the time of interview) are just getting into their stride as experienced and competent professionals. Kimberley says, 'you go from being a full time working professional... to, well, when I first had my little boy I just didn't have a clue what I was doing', and Clare says 'you've worked very hard to make your job successful and been told it was successful and then to be kind of just cut off from that was quite difficult.' In both cases, the teacher identity equates to success, knowledge and skills ('marking and planning and assessing), and respect ('been told it was successful').

For Tamsin, her former school's delay in confirming the possibility of part-time hours implies a dismissal of her teacher identity.

"Fortunately, the role I'm in at the moment, the SENCO role was originally advertised as a 0.6 contract. So I handed in my notice and I moved to a different role." – *Tamsin*

Rather than return to an environment where this identity was not valued, however, Tamsin pursued an opportunity that matched her sense of purpose as a teacher, without compromising on the flexible working that was important to her identity as a mother.

"MaternityCPD"

Numerous comments thus far have emphasised the significant part that being a teacher or school leader plays in participants' sense of identity. It is unsurprising, therefore, that comments from eight participants describe their positive experiences of "maternityCPD" – a phrase coined by The MTPT Project in 2016 to describe the different forms of personal and professional development that can be completed whilst on maternity leave (or paternity, adoption or shared parental leave, or when on a career break with young families).

Although the phrase was coined and popularised by The MTPT Project's social media presence and subsequent Accreditation programme, the concept of completing intellectual, training or developmental activities in this way, pre-dates the organisation's founding. Far from inventing the concept of "maternityCPD", therefore, The MTPT Project simply gave this activity a name, and unified those undertaking "maternityCPD" (and "paternityCPD") into a

community. However, it is interesting that seven of these eight participants refer to maternity leaves taken after The MTPT Project's founding, in 2016, 2017 or 2018, with Heather even explicitly mentioning The MTPT Project as part of her "maternityCPD".

At this point, it is important to understand the legal implications of what can easily be interpreted as 'working on maternity leave'. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, employers 'cannot require an employee on maternity leave to work', even though they can ask an employee to use KIT or SPLIT days to do so⁴³. However, since employers also 'must not stop you doing training because you are pregnant, on maternity leave or due to take maternity leave' and that to do so 'would almost certainly be unlawful sex discrimination'⁴⁴, a teacher *choosing* to complete professional development activities during their leave is fully entitled to do so.

Five participants describe such "maternityCPD" activities and the impact they had on their experience of maternity leave:

"I've been involving myself in the Chartered College stuff, so I've been going to network meetings and things like that instead... a conference when he was like 8 weeks old. I mean, he was brilliant and he was perfectly quiet the whole day amazingly, which was great." – *Lauren*

"They also invited me to an away day back in March and they could have easily forgotten about or maybe thought, "she wouldn't want to come", but they asked and at that point I was still breastfeeding a lot and he was still waking at night and things like that so I thought I would like to come, but I would need to be able to bring my husband and him so they would be able to stay in a hotel room but for me to just to come I would need that to work and they were more than happy to accommodate that. In the end actually we decided by the point it came around he was a lot better, feeding a lot less in the night and things like that so I felt confident to leave him at home with my husband and that actually worked out for the better." – *Heather*

"I've done some – read some books and a bit of some interesting conferences and events that I probably wouldn't have gone to if I'd been at, if it had been normal term time." – *Heather*

"I want to go back and use maybe the time that I have had out and the time to reflect and think about being developed then actually go back and be a bit reinvigorated with what I can do with my school." – *Heather*

"About four months in things had started to get easier in terms of his routine and naps and that's really, that's when I discovered things like The MTPT Project and WomenEd and I met with somebody from Teach First who was wanting to go and meet new ambassadors and talk about new things, and at that point, and actually having

⁴³ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/managing-pregnancy-and-maternity-workplace/faqs-employers/managing-maternity-leave-contact>

⁴⁴ https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/your_rights_to_equality_at_work_-_training_development_promotion_and_transfer.pdf

the time out not being at school and being able to actually engage more in those things I have actually enjoyed, so you know – having the time to then look through all the suggestions for how you could actually use some of the time out for your own CPD.”
– *Heather*

“When you’re on maternity leave you’ve got a bit of mental space to do really interesting things which you might have been too tired to do when you’re at work full time. So, this Saturday I went to a whole day teaching conference in Leeds and took the 8-week old baby with me because, well, why not? And then, I’m home now all week. Well, obviously I’m home for months, so I can follow up lots of the things I’ve heard about. I can go away and actually read the books instead of just following someone on Twitter. KIT days and things like that are really important as a way of keeping your hand in... and then you’ve got the time to go and read and follow things up.” – *Honor*

“At the very start of my maternity leave I was finishing my NPQML which I’ve now finished.” – *Honor*

“I’ve been in some INSET days when they look interesting. That’s been very enjoyable.” – *Charlotte*

“It was quiet nice to get together with professionals and talk about professional experiences and be able to share ideas and come up with ideas, and sort of develop your practice because when you’re just staying at home, you don’t really get a lot of opportunity to do that.” – *Kimberley*

Within the comments from these eight participants, we get a clear sense of what can constitute “maternityCPD”:

- Network meetings
- Conferences
- Reading
- Reflection
- Strategic planning
- Presenting and speaking opportunities
- Wider section connections
- NPQs
- Research
- School INSET days
- Discussion and idea generation

We also get a clear sense of the positive impact that this “maternityCPD” has on participants’ experience of maternity leave, and their wellbeing. They describe their experiences using the words and phrases, ‘brilliant’, ‘great’, ‘reinvigorated’, ‘discovered’, ‘engage’, ‘enjoyed’, ‘really interesting things’, ‘very enjoyable’, ‘quite nice’. Participants describe a sense of achievement, control and proactivity, where they decide how to use their leave, and where

to set their limitations (or not!) – ‘I’ve been involving myself’, ‘I’ve been going to’, ‘well, why not?’

This positive sense of wellbeing also comes from feeling valued and included in their school, or other network. Participants talk about being welcomed into spaces – ‘network meetings’, ‘conference’, ‘away day’, ‘hotel’, ‘whole day teaching conference in Leeds’, ‘INSET days’ – and of having their presence sought out and thoughts appreciated – ‘they also invited me’, ‘they asked’, ‘they were more than happy to accommodate’, ‘meet new ambassadors’, ‘talk about new things’, ‘get together with professionals and talk about professional experiences and be able to share ideas and come up with ideas’. Interestingly, Heather points out that this inclusion is not necessarily the norm, or expected – ‘they could have easily forgotten about me, or maybe thought “she wouldn’t want to come”’ – and Lauren’s reference to her baby being ‘perfectly quiet’, suggests that participants are conscious that their presence at these events takes additional consideration, or could potentially cause disruption.

Enjoying their maternity leave in a way that suits them, and feeling valued and included by their school and wider networks also serves to re-engage teachers with their practice. Heather talks about her anticipation of returning to work ‘reinvigorated’ specifically to ‘do’ something with her reflections in her school, and Honor compares the fatigue of full time teaching with the ‘mental space to do really interesting things which you might have been too tired to do when you’re at work full time’ afforded by maternity leave.

These comments reflect the findings of Booth et al., who remind us of the link between effective professional development and teacher retention, particularly in retaining teachers beyond the first five years of teaching. However, their study *Mid-Career Teachers: A Mixed Methods Scoping Study of Professional Development, Career Progression and Retention* found that ‘there is little specific evidence on what constitutes effective professional development’ for mid-career teachers, and that ‘multiple factors’ such as ‘professional identity’, ‘feelings of self-efficacy, home life and career ambitions’ and – specifically for women with caring responsibilities – ‘access to paid professional development’ opportunities – will influence the form that professional learning takes amongst this demographic. Unfortunately, the learning needs of this group were found to be ‘unmet, especially for those... with family commitments’, with further barriers including ‘conflicts with work schedules’ and ‘competing family commitments’⁴⁵.

When work schedules are removed from the equation during maternity leave, therefore, and family commitments are not set up in conflict with professional learning, but rather aligned with it, we see the successful “maternityCPD” experiences described by participants in this report.

Participants identify five factors that influence the type of “maternityCPD” they chose to complete:

- The age of their baby (and what this meant in terms of their babies’ routines)

⁴⁵ <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/6/299>

- Breastfeeding
- Consideration of other participants at in-person events
- Childcare support needed
- Attitude of CPD providers

Three participants identify that certain activities were more compatible with younger babies, with both Lauren and Honour taking their babies to conferences at 8 weeks old, and Honor finishing her NPQML ‘at the very start’ of her maternity leave. Heather also makes reference to how a baby’s demands change as they grow, and therefore enable different forms of “maternityCPD”. Initially, she says that ‘back in March’, the fact that she was ‘breastfeeding a lot’ and her baby ‘waking at night’ caused her to seriously reflect on the logistics required to attend the ‘away day’ she was invited to. However, she describes the evolution of her son’s needs – ‘About four months in things had started to get easier in terms of his routine and naps’ – and the way this impacted her ability to attend the away day, and other face-to-face opportunities either alone or with greater ease.

Lauren’s comment, ‘he was perfectly quiet the whole day, amazingly’, reveals a concern that her son would cry and disrupt the conference for other delegates, whereas Honor does not consider this a risk – ‘I went to a whole day teaching conference in Leeds and took the 8-week old baby with me because, well, why not?’. The fact that Lauren’s son was ‘perfectly quiet’ reminds us that very young babies spend a lot of their time sleeping and can be settled, as long as their needs are met⁴⁶. At this age, they are also portable, and can be carried in slings, reducing the need for the access arrangements required for buggy users.

In order to access her school’s ‘away day’, Heather explains that she needed childcare support – whether to enable baby to attend with her, or to look after her baby while she attended alone: ‘I would need to be able to bring my husband’, ‘I felt confident to leave him at home with my husband’. Interestingly, however, none of the other participants mention any support with childcare, but instead seem to have chosen activities that they could complete at home whilst looking after their babies, or where their babies could accompany them. It is for this reason that the attitude of CPD providers is mentioned as a factor that enabled participants to complete “maternityCPD”.

We also see in these comments a subversion of the commonly held narrative that a period of maternity leave is *detrimental* to women’s careers. Instead of viewing this as a time where they are deskilled, participants saw maternity leave as an *opportunity* for professional development. Heather and Honor point out that the freedom from the working week and the fatigue of full-time working enables them to take advantage of professional development they would otherwise have missed out on – ‘events that I probably wouldn’t have gone to if I’d been at, if it had been normal term time’, ‘the time out not being at school’, ‘really interesting things which you might have been too tired to do when you’re at work full time.’ They also both mention the additional time that maternity leave affords to ‘reflect and think’, ‘look through all the suggestions’, and enjoy ‘a bit of mental space’ to pursue their own professional interests, rather than completing training according to their school’s agenda.

⁴⁶ We acknowledge that all babies are different and that this might not be the case for all babies

Heather and Charlotte both mention supportive schools as their CPD providers, and Kimberley, Honour and Lauren refer generally to ‘professionals’ and the organisers of a ‘conference in Leeds’, and ‘a conference’. Honor also alludes to an accommodating NPQ provider, and Heather and Lauren mention four supportive networks by name – The MTPT Project, WomenEd, Teach First and the Chartered College of Teaching. The role of individuals and organisations as gatekeepers to women’s professional development during their maternity leave is further commented on by Lauren and Bernadette:

“When I initially went off, I applied to do the NPQSL, then I found out just after Christmas that I was accepted onto the course and was due to start in February – but then the guy running it said that I couldn’t be on it whilst I was on maternity leave because I couldn’t expect change while I was off. So that was a bit disappointing.” – *Lauren*

“I’m leading a new vocational course which is a year 12 digital media qualification, and we’ve never done anything vocational in our school before, and so they talked to me about that in the October before I came back in the February and they gave me something that I could research, and that I could really get my teeth into, they supported me to come in to year 12 open evening to pitch my new qualification. They sat down with me on several occasions to think about how this qualification will work and have given me, because they know, that I will be missing my leadership responsibility, they’ve given, they’ve really given me something that I can get my teeth into. ” – *Bernadette*

We have already explored in the previous section on *Discrimination*, why ‘the guy running’ the NPQSL that Lauren wanted to attend acted in a discriminatory manner. It is important to note, however, the negative impact that just one gatekeeper can have, in comparison to the positive experience shared by Bernadette who refers to ‘they’ (presumably her senior leadership team) and the pro-active steps taken to ensure she could develop with her new leadership of digital media.

Like Heather’s anecdote of the ‘away day’, and Charlotte attending school INSET days, Bernadette’s completion of “maternityCPD” – ‘something that I can get my teeth into’ – is aligned with her school’s priorities. Introducing the idea to Bernadette so far ahead of her return to work, however, introduces the fine line between teachers *choosing* to complete “maternityCPD” for their own interest, and the expectation to work during their maternity leave, as influenced or directed by their employer. Legally, employees can use KIT days or SPLIT days to work during their maternity or shared parental leave, and the tasks completed on these days have to be mutually agreed by employee and employer.

It would be wholly appropriate for Bernadette to complete the ‘research’ and subsequent ‘year 12 open evening’ and meetings she describes as KIT or SPLIT days. If, however, these activities were undertaken in her own time on maternity leave then she is entitled to use her time in this way, as long as it is her own choice. Although Bernadette does not mention KIT or SPLIT days explicitly, her language – ‘really get my teeth into’, ‘missing my leadership

responsibility’, ‘given me something’ – implies that this opportunity was a gift from her school, and its delivery designed in accordance with one another.

This question of what teachers should or shouldn’t do with their parental leave is explored in two further comments from Honor and Bryony:

“We should find ways to use maternity leave wisely and you know, keep teaching and being really good.” – *Honor*

“I think there is a lot of pressure for you to do stuff even though you are on your maternity leave.” – *Bryony*

Here we see opposing opinions on the topic, with Honor considering “maternityCPD” a ‘wise’ use of time and necessary to be a ‘really good’ teacher, whereas Bryony describes the ‘pressure... to do stuff even though you are on your maternity leave’, which is – legally – a protected time to spend recovering from childbirth and raising your new child. Once again, it is important to emphasise the aspect of *choice* when discussing “maternityCPD”, which must always be that of the mother-teacher, *not* the employer, other external individual or organisation or wider society.

In contrast to the previous participants, Verity used her maternity leave to retrain as a teacher and enter the profession:

“I wasn’t in teaching when I went on maternity leave with my eldest, but I retrained as a teacher during my maternity leave. I was a lawyer before. I had my final exam for my Maths degree when she was six weeks old and then, during the rest of my maternity leave I completed half of my PGCE and then handed in my notice. So it’s not really a maternity leave from teaching, but it was my maternity leave that enabled me to get into teaching, really.” – *Verity*

Verity’s experience demonstrates that, where training courses are inclusive and adaptable of new mothers, maternity leave can be a good moment to change careers and step into teaching, which potentially promises a family-friendly future in comparison to other professions.

The fact that experiences of “maternityCPD” have been described in overwhelmingly positive terms suggests that it can have systemic benefits for women in the education sector. It is for precisely this reason that ensuring access to training, development and progression opportunities is included under the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity. Mothers who are empowered by an understanding of their legal entitlements are able to reduce instances of discrimination, as we see in Honor’s, ‘well, why not?’ Where these mother-teachers are supported by CPD providers and networks, we are more likely to see the creation of family-friendly cultures that retain and support the progression of women – as we see from Heather and Bernadette’s experiences. In addition, the confident, visible and welcomed presence of mothers at CPD events role models to younger colleagues that they

will continue to hold value, and have a voice in professional spaces if they choose to become mothers.

Attitudes towards returning

Nine participants mentioned their feelings towards the end of their maternity leave, about returning to work. For seven participants, this return was welcome and perceived as a positive thing:

“I’m really looking forward to going back.” – Lauren

“It doesn’t make me upset to think that I’d have to go back to work afterwards” – Helen

“I look back on it fondly, but I was also quite happy to get back to work when it happened.” – Kirsten

In these three comments, we see an acceptance of the passing of time, and the return to work considered as simply the next positive stage in participants’ lives – ‘I’m really looking forward to going back’, ‘It doesn’t make me upset’, ‘I was also quite happy to get back to work’. Importantly, as we see in Kirsten’s comments, the fact that she is ‘happy to get back to work’ does not negate her positive experience of maternity leave – ‘I look back on it fondly’.

In Flora, Aisha, Lydia, Juliette and Heather’s comments, however, there is the sense that returning to work will fulfil a part of themselves that has been missing, or enable them to take up opportunities that could not be enjoyed whilst on maternity leave:

“I didn’t feel like I needed a year. I wanted to get back to normal, really.” – Flora

“I missed the buzz of the classroom. I missed that adrenalin when you are busy and you’ve got loads to do and you are pro-active. The variety in the classroom... Because there was always so many people all day long... I think at school it’s just always... I like the routine and I like being busy.” – Flora

“As it came towards the end, I was looking forward to doing something else in my day. And I don’t think I would be a particularly healthy individual if I had stayed home all day with a one year old. And not really interact with other adults or young people.” – Aisha

“I looked forward to returning to work so that I could socialise more and get more out of the house and it made me feel better.” – Lydia

“I feel that going back to work has probably done me more good than being on maternity leave.” – Juliette

“Having taken my maternity leave, I also feel I have a sense of giving back to my school. I want to go back and use maybe the time that I have had out and the time to reflect and think about being developed then actually go back and be a bit reinvigorated with what I can do with my school.” – *Heather*

Flora, Aisha and Lydia speak clearly about what being at work offers them, that maternity leave does not – ‘the buzz of the classroom’, ‘adrenalin’, ‘routine’, ‘being busy’, ‘doing something else in my day’, ‘socialise more’, ‘get more out of the house’. Rather than a sense of lack, for Heather, returning to work offered her the opportunity to ‘giv[e] back’ and take concrete action in her school in a ‘reinvigorated’ way, using the reflections and development that maternity leave has afforded her. For Juliette and Lydia, there is a suggestion that returning to work will be positive for their mental health – ‘it made me feel better’, ‘going back to work has probably done me more good than being on maternity leave’.

It’s evident here that a large part of these participants’ sense of identity and purpose comes from being a teacher. Indeed, Flora considers a life that includes work as ‘normal’; Aisha considers a life *without* work, and only with her baby as not ‘particularly healthy’, and Juliette considers herself better off at work than on maternity leave. There is the implication – unlike some of the comments shared in **09. Take Good Care of My Baby** where full-time parenting was perceived as desirable – that the stay-at-home-mother role is not suitable for these participants.

Two participants stated that they were *not* looking forward to returning to work after their maternity leave:

“It doesn’t make me upset to think that I’d have to go back to work afterwards, which sort of ruined my maternity before because I was constantly fighting to try and get back and they just wouldn’t allow it, and I lost four months of sitting in meetings with unions and phone calls and emails and it was just constant.” – *Helen*

“There was the niggling feeling of coming back to work in the back of my mind the entire time.” – *Leanne*

Both Helen and Leanne talk about the thought of returning invading their enjoyment of maternity leave – ‘ruined my maternity’, ‘lost four months’, ‘niggling feeling... in the back of my mind the entire time’. Leanne does not offer any further explanation as to why her return to work preyed on her mind during her leave, but she does explain that she suffered from ‘quite terrible postnatal depression’, so it is possible that apprehensions around her impending return were exacerbated by this. For Helen, however, it was the rejection and subsequent challenges around her flexible working request that ‘ruined’ her maternity leave. Rather than return to this environment though, Helen secured a new role in a school she describes as a ‘wonderful place’ with a ‘family-friendly, really lovely, kind atmosphere’.

Suggestions for Schools and Individuals

Maternity leave is a particularly vulnerable time for teacher attrition, but comments from participants included in this report have demonstrated that it is also a time of rich personal and professional learning for teachers. However mother-teachers choose to spend this time, it should be considered part and parcel of their journey, not a pause, a step back, or an absence that is detrimental to their working lives.

In general terms, the responses from the 38 participants in this report have indicated that schools can take the following actions to support mother-teachers aged 30-39 during their maternity leaves:

- Agree on means and frequency of communication during a third trimester meeting and check in with the colleague on leave at an agreed point. Write this into policy documents and train line managers and HR to help them get the communication balance 'just right'.
- Understand and adhere to the laws surrounding the protected characteristic of pregnancy and maternity to avoid discrimination
- Follow employees' lead when it comes to discussing family plans and pregnancy announcements
- Use upcoming periods of maternity leave as an opportunity for succession planning and development of all colleagues involved
- Prepare contingency plans for maternity leaves that start earlier than anticipated – pregnancy and babies' arrivals can be unpredictable!

- Make sure that HR and line managers know about the three instances where they are legally required to contact colleagues on maternity leave – in the case of a restructure or redundancy that impacts their role, or when a vacancy becomes available with information on how and when to apply.
- Offer a clear point of contact for communication during maternity leave.
- Value colleagues' expertise if they want to be involved and contribute to school life whilst on maternity leave.

- Share information regarding shared parental leave and how it can be used to increase maternity pay.
- Offer improved parental leave pay packages to make teaching competitive with comparable industries.
- Increase parental leave and pay entitlements for fathers and non-birthing partners.

- Invite colleagues to complete KIT days, and make sure it is clear when they are completing a KIT day vs unpaid forms of communication or keeping in touch.

- Mutually agree on, and take a creative approach to KIT day tasks – offer both remote and on site opportunities, and welcome baby or other carers onto site.
- Invite colleagues on maternity leave to take part in professional development opportunities without implying a pressure to take part.
- Ensure that school-run CPD events and INSETs are accessible to colleagues on maternity leave.
- Use KIT days to ensure that colleagues on maternity leave are paid for any “maternityCPD” they complete.
- Ensure that CPD opportunities can be adapted to the needs of colleagues on maternity leave.
- Assume that colleagues will take the full 52 weeks maternity leave allowance and staff accordingly, but keep dialogue open and consider alternative plans if they decide to lengthen / shorten their maternity leave.
- Use the absence created by a period of maternity leave to develop staff covering responsibilities.
- Create a staffing strategy that anticipates periods of maternity leave in the same way you would anticipate resignations or plan for a leadership pipeline – and budget for these staffing needs!
- Ensure that line managers, HR or the point of contact for colleagues on maternity leave has a basic understanding of peri- and post-natal depression and associated mental health needs.
- Be mindful of change that impacts those on maternity leave and put systems in place to reassure them during their leave and support them as they prepare to return.
- Grant flexible working requests and make the process smooth and easy.
- Advertise all roles with the phrase, “flexible working considered for the right candidate”.

For individuals who have read this report feeling that they are in the same or a similar position to our 38 contributing participants, there are a number of ways that you can gain autonomy over your maternity leave experience:

- Understand your entitlements as a pregnant employee and claim these as rights, not favours
- Reveal your pregnancy when you are ready to, within the legal timeframe of 15 weeks before your due date
- Put your health first and speak to your healthcare providers about your needs, and how to broach these at work
- Devise an effective cover plan for your absence with relevant colleagues, including a handover of at least one half term.
- Unless you are a head teacher, it is not your responsibility to staff your absence, but if you can see a potential staffing solution, suggest this to your leadership team,

especially if this allows you to develop your own coaching, or mentoring skills during your handover.

- Take as long as you want or need for your maternity leave, and remember that you can change your mind regarding the length of your leave, as long as you provide your employer with 8 weeks' notice of any changes.
- Access information regarding shared parental leave and how it can be used to increase maternity pay via your policy documents or Shared Parental Leave for Teachers
- Return on the first day of a holiday period if you so wish.

- Feel empowered to say 'yes' or 'no' to professional development opportunities as suits you, your family, and your desired maternity leave experience.
- Feel empowered to apply for promotions or roles in other schools during your leave, if this is the right thing for you.
- Connect with inclusive and family-friendly networks during your leave, if you so wish – The MTPT Project, WomenEd, Aspiring Heads, ResearchEd, LitDrive

- Remember that the teacher and mother identity can co-exist – they are simply different aspects of *you!*
- Seek out role models where both the mother and teacher identities are being fulfilled

- Do your homework so you are informed about the legalities of making a flexible working request – connect with the DfE's Flexible Working Ambassador Schools and MATs, Flexible Teacher Talent and The MTPT Project.

Want to find out more?

If you have any further questions about this report or our findings about teachers' experiences of maternity leave, and how these contribute to their decision to remain in the profession, 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 training workshops and consultancy for school leaders, line managers, and HR leads can be found at www.mtpt.org.uk/cpd-workshops

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)