

Maternity Attrition

and its impact on the teacher workforce

Between 2016 and 2019, an average of 9,903 teachers took a period of maternity leave each academic year.

Data acquired from the DfE through a 2025 freedom of information request shows that an average of 3,835 teachers leave the profession within the first four years of returning from maternity leave – a cumulative attrition rate of 38.6%.

Year in which they returned from maternity leave	Starting headcount	One year after returning	Two years after returning	Three years after returning	Four years after returning	Four-year cumulative loss
2016/17	9,780	7,846	6,884	6,204	5,902	3,878
2017/18	9,974	8,272	7,282	6,672	6,158	3,816
2018/19	9,954	8,268	7,544	6,866	6,142	3,812
Three-year average	9,903	8,129				3,835

Table 1: maternity returners in the teaching profession, 2016/17 – 2018/19

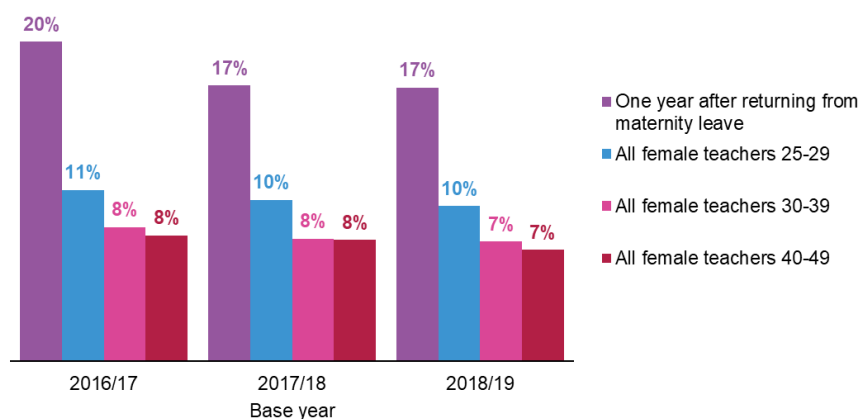
The first year following the return represents the greatest risk of attrition, with an average of 1,774 teachers leaving the profession during this 12-month period – between 17-20%.

Year in which they returned from maternity leave	Starting headcount	Loss after one year	Loss after two years	Loss after three years	Four-year cumulative loss
2016/17	9,780	1,934	2,896	3,576	3,878
2017/18	9,974	1,702	2,692	3,302	3,816
2018/19	9,954	1,686	2,410	3,088	3,812
Three-year average	9,903	1,774	2,666	3,322	3,835

Table 2: maternity attrition in the teaching profession, 2016/17 – 2018/19

This is more than double the normal rate of leaving seen amongst all female teachers in comparative age brackets.

Rate of leaving the state-funded sector in the following year



Graph 1: rate of leaving the state funded sector in the following year (c/o Jack Worth, NFER)

This is also higher than the attrition rate seen in other public sector industries:

	Teaching	Armed Forces
Attrition rate – one year after returning from maternity leave	18% ¹	13.5%
	Teaching	NHS
Attrition rate – two years after returning from maternity leave	27%	10%

Table 3: one- and two-year maternity attrition in comparative public sector industries

¹ Three-year average

Women aged 30-39 are the largest group of teachers to leave the profession every year, and workload remains the principal reason that they leave. For those who are mothers, the impact of the motherhood penalty is clear: 65% citing “Family commitments” as a reason for leaving teaching, and 56% citing “Lack of flexible / part-time working arrangements in teaching”.

Figure 5: Principal reasons for leaving UK state school teaching according to responses from mother teachers

What were your principal reasons for leaving UK state school teaching? (Please tick all that apply)	2024
Workload	76%
Family commitments	65%
Lack of flexible/ part time working arrangements in teaching	56%

Table 4: from the Missing Mothers report, 2024 (The New Britain Project / MTPT Project)

Most maternity returners are unsatisfied with the support they receive from their school over their return period, and this pushes many of them to leave.

Figure 10: Proportion of teachers satisfied or very satisfied with maternity leave and transition support provided by their school according to our survey

	Leavers	Stayers
Satisfied with the maternity leave and transition support provided by your school	27%	38%

Table 5: from the Missing Mothers report, 2024 (The New Britain Project / MTPT Project)

Thousands of experienced teachers could be retained in the profession every year with better maternity transition support. This includes:

- Increasing a culture of flexible working in the education sector
- Improving support from school leaders
- Providing an entitlement to coaching over this period

Retaining maternity returners will reduce national recruitment targets, increase the number of subject-specialist teachers in all subjects, improve mentoring for trainees, and stabilise the quality of teaching and learning that students receive.

Our maternity returners are essential to the health of our workforce and more must be done to support them to remain in the profession.

Recommendations

At school, multi-academy trust, local authority, and DfE level, we suggest that:

- Maternity retention is tracked, published and reviewed on an annual basis
- Parental leave and pay is improved and equalised for all school staff in line with other public sector industries
- The current [Cradle to Classroom](#) coaching model is promoted and expanded both at school level, and nationally

Freedom of Information Request, DfE, 2025) Available at: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/maternity_attrition_teachers_2?nocache=incoming-3215778#incoming-3215778

Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (2022.b) Maternity and labour supply: NHS doctors and nurses. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/maternityand-labour-supply-nhs-doctors-and-nurses>

Ministry of Defence (2022) UK armed forces biannual diversity statistics: 1 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ukarmed-forces-biannual-diversity-statistics-october-2022/uk-armed-forcesbiannual-diversity-statistics-1-october-2022>

The New Britain Project in collaboration with The MTPT Project (2024) Missing Mothers: breaking the cycle of teacher attrition. Available at: <https://www.newbritain.org.uk/missing-mothers>