

Parental Leave Benchmark 2026



See the full picture
of parental leave.



**Bright
Horizons**
Work + Family
Solutions

Parental leave policy is only part of the picture.

The ecosystem around it is what truly determines whether parents return, stay, and thrive.





The parental leave conversation has moved on.

Policies are becoming more competitive, employee expectations are rising, and legislation continues to evolve. But many organisations are still looking at parental leave through too narrow a lens: what the policy offers, how much it pays and how it compares on paper.

That is only part of the picture.

A generous policy does not guarantee that people access it. Access does not automatically mean a smoother return-to-work experience. And without consistent measurement, organisations often struggle to see what's working, what's missing, and where support breaks down.

The reality is that parental leave outcomes are shaped by the ecosystem around the policy: the systems, support, culture and experiences employees encounter before, during and after leave.

The **2026 Parental Leave Benchmark** helps you see the full picture. Drawing on insights from employers and nursery parents, it reveals how parental leave is accessed, experienced and measured in practice. It helps you identify gaps, breaking points, and opportunities in your parental leave ecosystem, with practical actions to improve outcomes for both employees and your organisation.

The real test of
parental leave isn't
what you *offer*.

It's what parents experience.



3 Key Findings

1 Enhanced parental leave is becoming the **norm**.

85% now offer at least 12 weeks' full maternity pay.

2 The return-to-work experience remains **broken**.

50% of parents find returning to work easy.

3 Almost half of organisations aren't measuring **outcomes**.

49% track no parental leave outcomes at all.



Policy Design

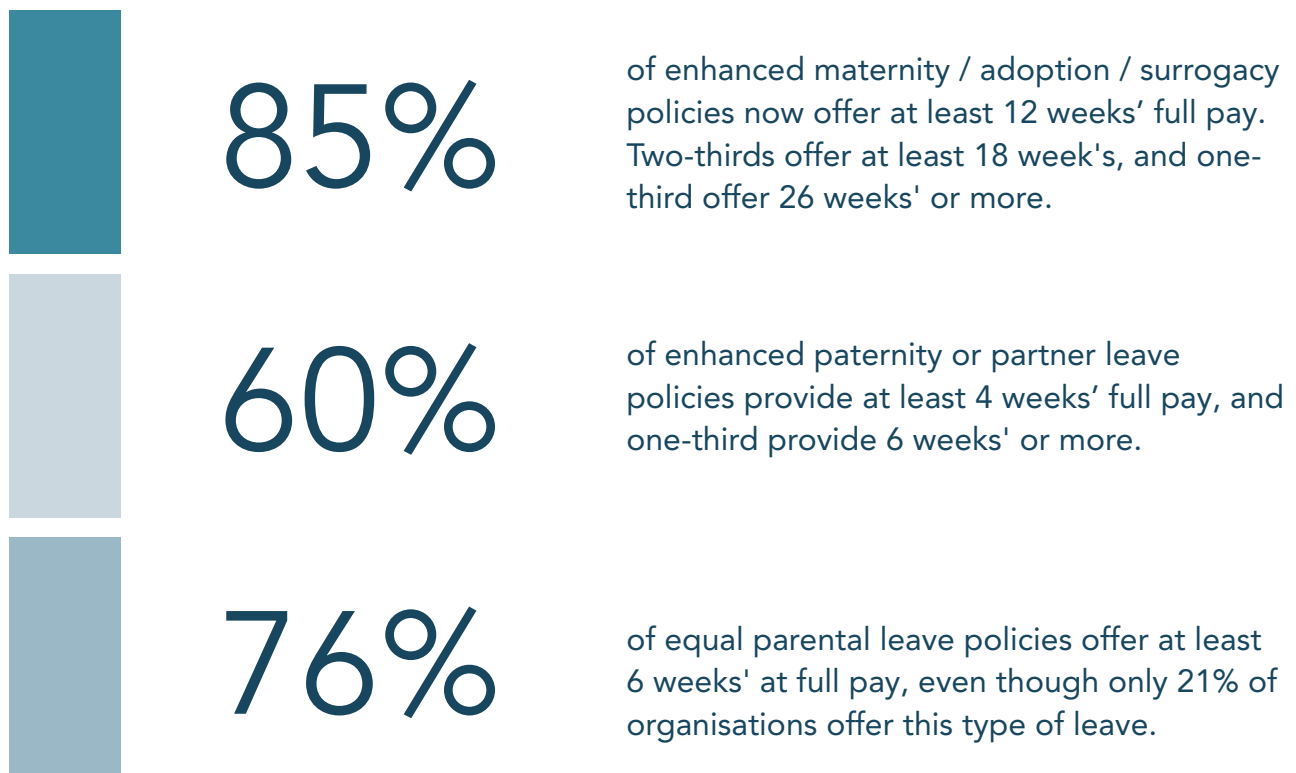
Is it time to switch
focus from policy?

85%

of enhanced maternity policies now
offer at least 12 weeks' full pay.
Standing still means falling behind.

Parental leave pay is still an important part of the story. It helps employers compete for talent and signals how seriously the organisation takes working parents.

However, as enhanced provision becomes more common, organisations face a new challenge: when everyone improves policy, policy alone becomes harder to differentiate on.



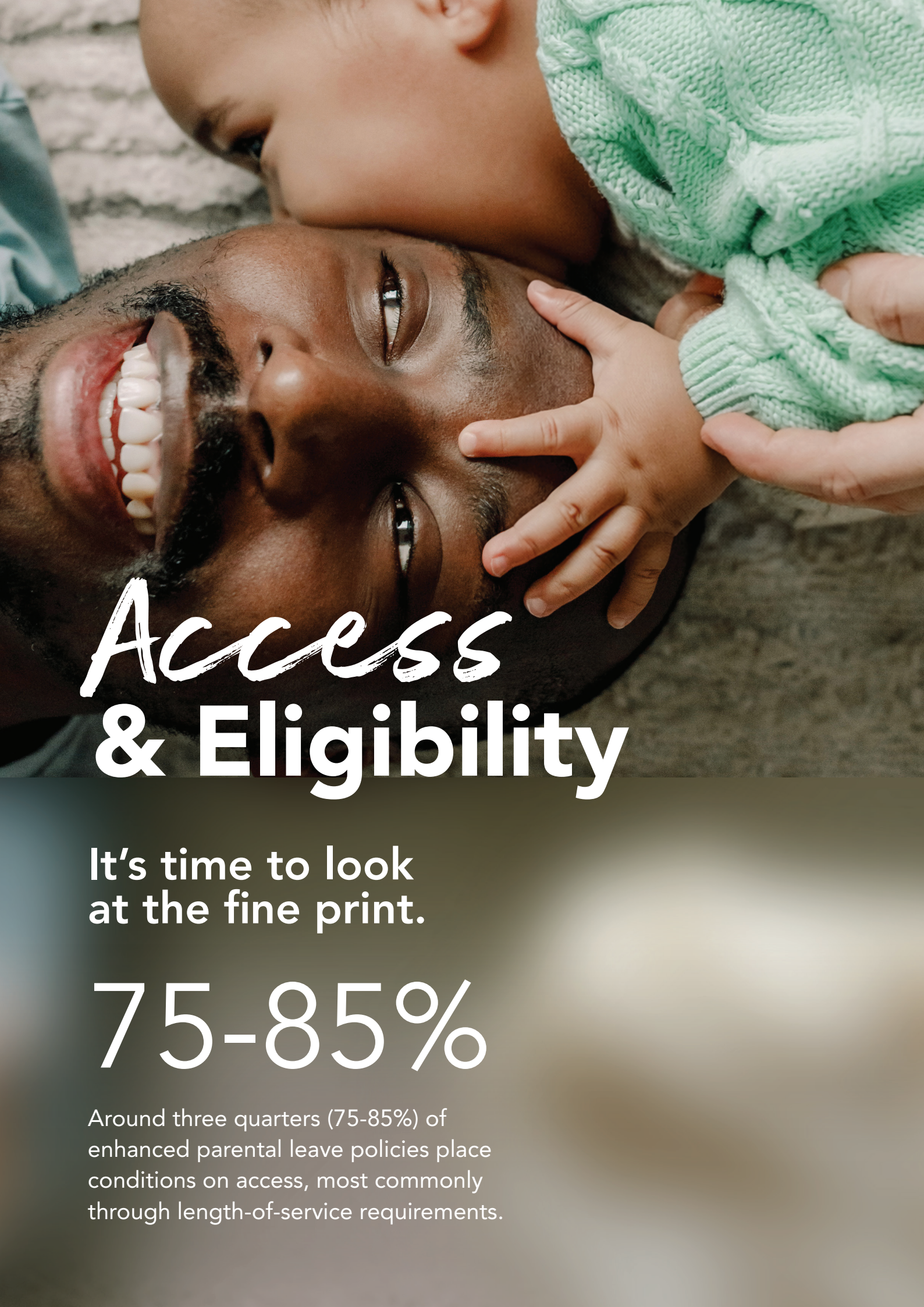
Why it matters

The parental leave race is no longer being won on policy alone.

As enhanced leave becomes more common, competitive advantage is shifting to the wider ecosystem that can make that policy work in practice: access, manager support, communication, flexibility, and the return-to-work journey.

Ask yourself

Is our policy still competitive, or are we benchmarking against an outdated idea of good?

A close-up photograph of a Black man lying down, smiling broadly with his teeth showing. A baby is lying on his chest, with one hand resting on his forehead. The baby is wearing a light green, textured knit sweater. The background is a neutral, textured surface.

Access & Eligibility

It's time to look
at the fine print.

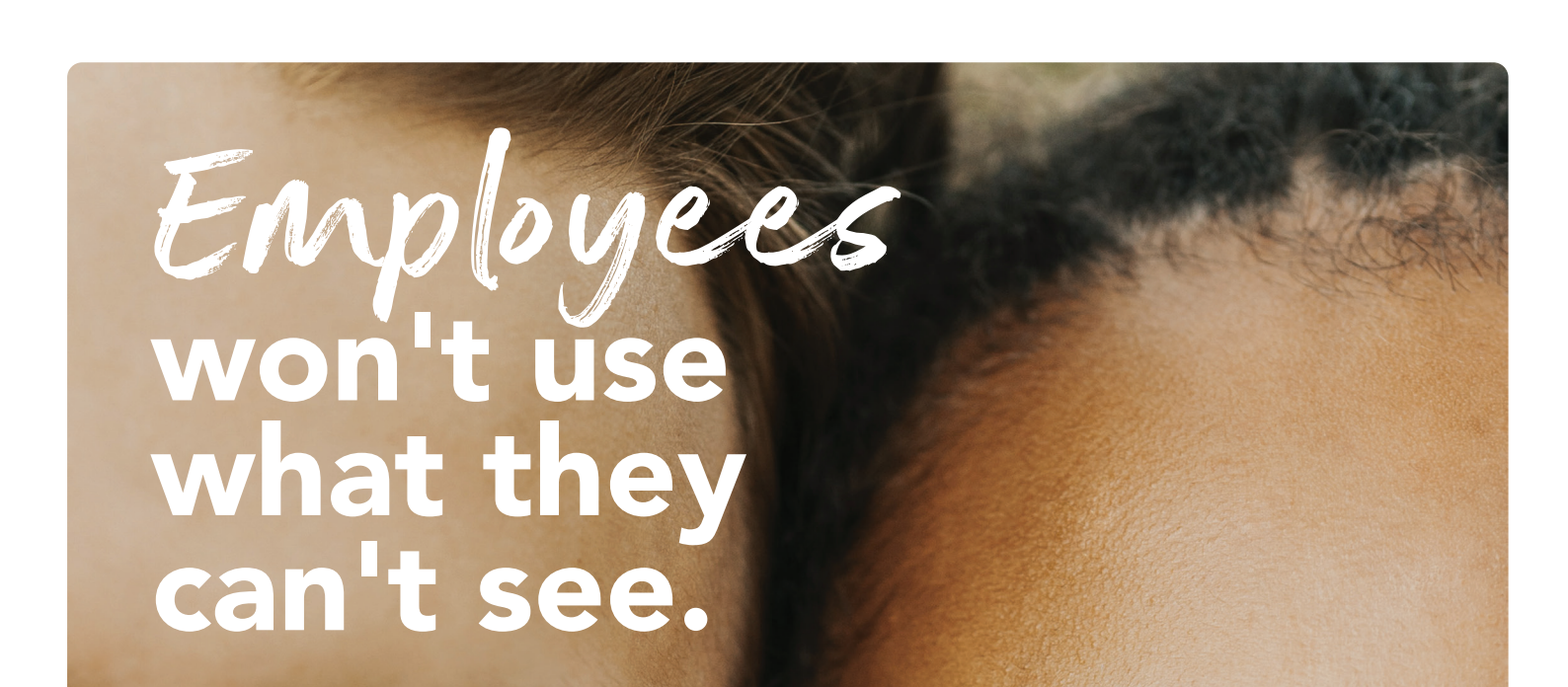
75-85%

Around three quarters (75-85%) of
enhanced parental leave policies place
conditions on access, most commonly
through length-of-service requirements.

By comparison, only around 20-30% of gender-equal parental leave policies apply similar restrictions.

Employers choosing to create gender-equal parental leave are often rethinking the entire approach, moving away from traditional statutory structures and towards simpler, more inclusive access.

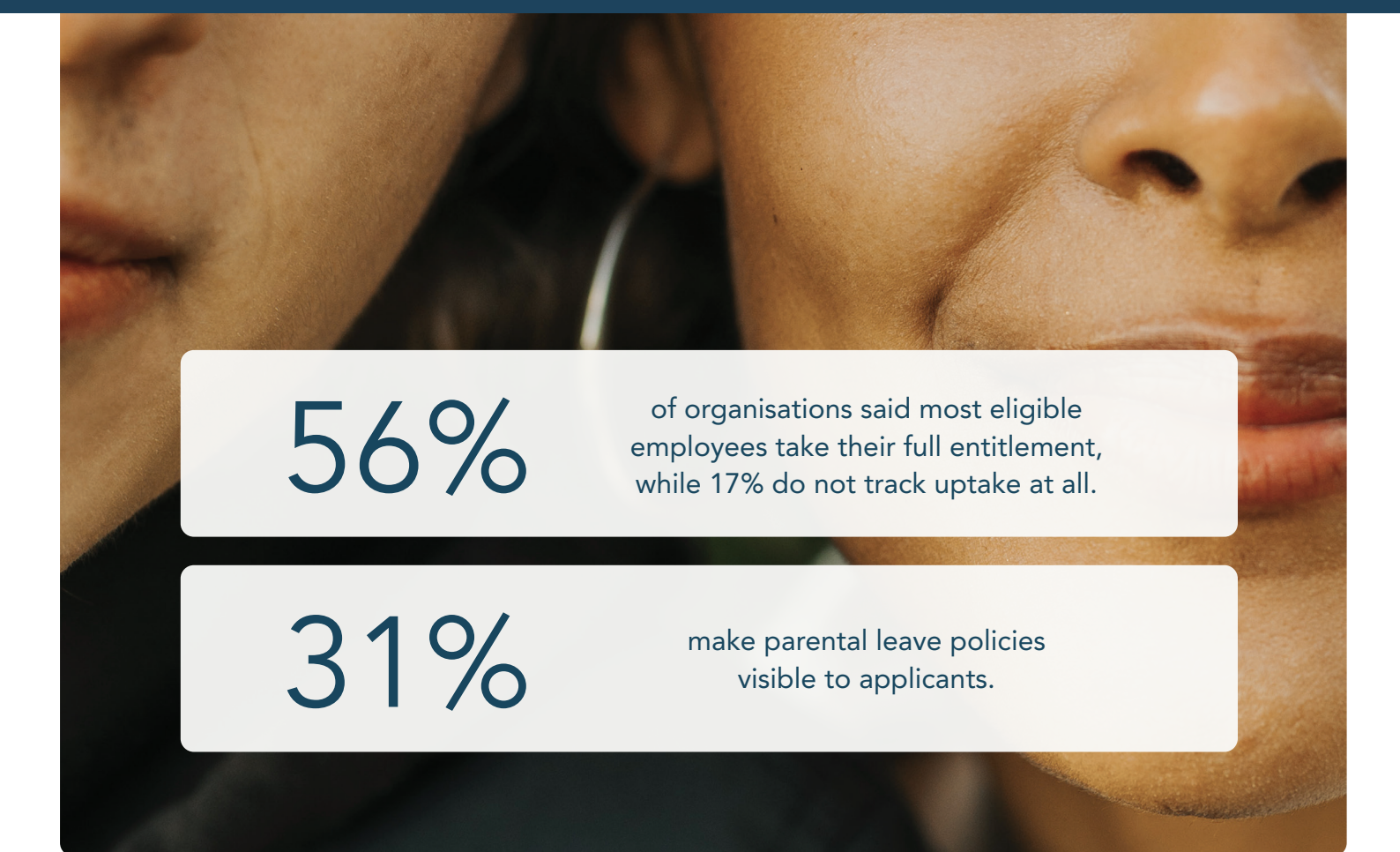
	Maternity / Adoption / Surrogacy	Paternity / Partner	Shared Parental	Equal Parental
Prevalence	75%	80%	85%	20-30%
Requirement	Length of service	Length of service	Length of service	Active employment
Threshold	26w - 1y	26w - 1y	26w - 1y	Usually day 1 - 1y
Statutory Rules	Common	Very common	Very common	Uncommon
Return-to-work Requirement	Minority	Minority	Minority	Very rare
Day 1 Access	✗	✗	✗	✓
Complexity	Medium	Medium	High	Low

A close-up, high-angle shot of a person's face, focusing on the forehead and hair. The skin is a warm, brown tone. The text is overlaid in the upper left corner.

Employees won't use what they can't see.

Eligibility is only the first hurdle.

Employees are more likely to take parental leave when they understand how it works, trust they will be supported, and feel confident doing so.

A close-up, low-angle shot of two people's faces. The focus is on the right side of the image, showing a person's nose and mouth. The skin is a warm, brown tone. The text is overlaid in two white boxes at the bottom.

56%

of organisations said most eligible employees take their full entitlement, while 17% do not track uptake at all.

31%

make parental leave policies visible to applicants.

Legislation can only improve access on paper.

Many organisations responded quickly to legislative change, but fewer invested in the communication and support needed to bring those changes to life.

63%

updated policy or eligibility rules in response to the April 2026 day-one rights changes.

However, only:

26%

introduced new internal guidance.

32%

anticipate increased usage, with greater awareness driving employee demand.

Why it matters

The true measure of a parental leave policy isn't what it offers. It's who can benefit from it.

As parental leave provision becomes more generous, accessibility is becoming just as important as entitlement. If employees are unsure whether they qualify, or face barriers hidden in the small print, the policy may never deliver the attraction, retention or culture benefits it was designed to create.

Ask yourself

Can employees see the full picture of the support available to them, or only the fragments they know to ask for?

A close-up photograph of a man with short brown hair holding a baby. The man is seen from the back, wearing a dark blue ribbed shirt. The baby, with light brown hair and blue eyes, is looking directly at the camera and has its hands near its mouth. The background is a softly blurred indoor setting with warm lighting.

Employee Experience

The view
from the
other side
of parental
leave.

66%

of parents felt supported on leave.

50%

Only half found returning to work easy.

For employers

Parental leave can look like competitive pay, a theoretically sound process, and proof of usage.

But for parents

It is a major life transition: taking leave from work, starting or growing a family, and returning with new practical pressures, a new identity and a different relationship with work.

A policy may promise support, but parents judge that promise through the contact, care and consistency they receive before, during, and after leave.

Nearly **7 in 10** parents said balancing work and family responsibilities was their biggest challenge, while half said they felt out of touch after time away.

What parents struggled with most...

69% Concerns about balancing work and family responsibilities.



50% Feeling out of touch or needing to catch up after time away.



34% Lack of a clear plan or structure for returning to work.



Managers are the biggest blind spot.

Many of the challenges parents face on return are not caused by policy, but by inconsistent implementation.

52%

of employers believe managers are confident in supporting parental leave.

27%

of parents say their manager was very well informed.

This mismatch is not a surprise: in the employer survey, just 25% of organisations said they provide manager guidance or training on supporting parental leave.

The return-to-work journey is still too often improvised:

38%

of employers say parental leave support is delivered consistently through a defined approach.

32%

said they had a clear return-to-work plan.

67%

said securing flexible working depended on the role or manager.

24%

said flexible working was 'usually straightforward and agreed'.



This suggests that, for two-thirds, there was no plan.



No contact, despite manager saying they would occasionally share key updates. Change of manager with no introduction. No check-in or any human touch."

Why it matters

Employees may be covered by the same parental leave policy, but their experience can vary dramatically depending on the quality of support, guidance and communication they receive.

When asked where employers could make the biggest impact, parents pointed to the human side of the experience:

- 51% said managers need better training and support
- 36% called for a smoother, more confident return to work
- 29% highlighted the need for a more consistent experience

Without equipped managers and a structured return-to-work journey, even the most generous parental leave offering can fall short of its promise.

Ask yourself

Does your parental leave experience rely on exceptional managers, or is support built into the system?

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a brown coat and carrying a black bag, stands in profile looking out a window. The background is a blurred city street with trees and buildings.

The challenges don't stop at the return date

What parents struggled with most:

- Child illness and shortage of sick days
- Adjusting to new identity as a working parent
- Childcare logistics and commuting
- Ongoing sleep deprivation



"The hardest part is that the baby catches all the viruses and there's not enough sick leave, so I am using basically all my annual leave to cover my absences."

Childcare: the difference between returning and thriving.

While childcare is one of the biggest factors influencing a successful return to work, relatively few employers offer meaningful support. As a result, one of the strongest drivers of retention, wellbeing and employee experience remains largely untapped.

79%

For those who use a nursery, the impact is significant. 79% said the nursery settling-in experience made their return-to-work easier.

12%

However, only a minority of nursery parents' employers provided this much-needed support. 12% of employers provided employer-supported ad hoc childcare and just 4% provide employer-supported regular childcare.

Why it matters

Many employers are focused on helping parents take leave. Fewer are focused on what helps parents return, stay, and thrive afterwards.

Childcare support sits at the intersection of parental leave, wellbeing, retention, and employee experience. This is where parental leave moves beyond HR policy and becomes a wider work-life strategy, and one of the greatest opportunities for employers to differentiate.

Ask yourself

Does your support end when leave ends?





Tracking & Measurements

Don't make decisions
in the dark.

Most organisations can tell you what their parental leave policy says. Far fewer can tell you:

- whether employees take their full entitlement
- whether parents return successfully
- whether careers stall after leave
- whether support is improving retention
- whether managers are helping or hindering outcomes

Are you relying on assumptions or evidence?

49%

of employers do not track any parental leave outcomes.

4%

routinely use parental leave data to evaluate and improve their approach.

40%

of organisations do not use parental leave data at all in business decisions.

Why it matters

The biggest risk in parental leave may not be a poor policy. It may be not knowing where the experience breaks down. Without data, employers may over-invest in areas that do not improve outcomes, under-invest in support that parents actually need, or struggle to prove the value of parental leave to senior stakeholders.

Measurement is what turns parental leave from a benefit into a business strategy.

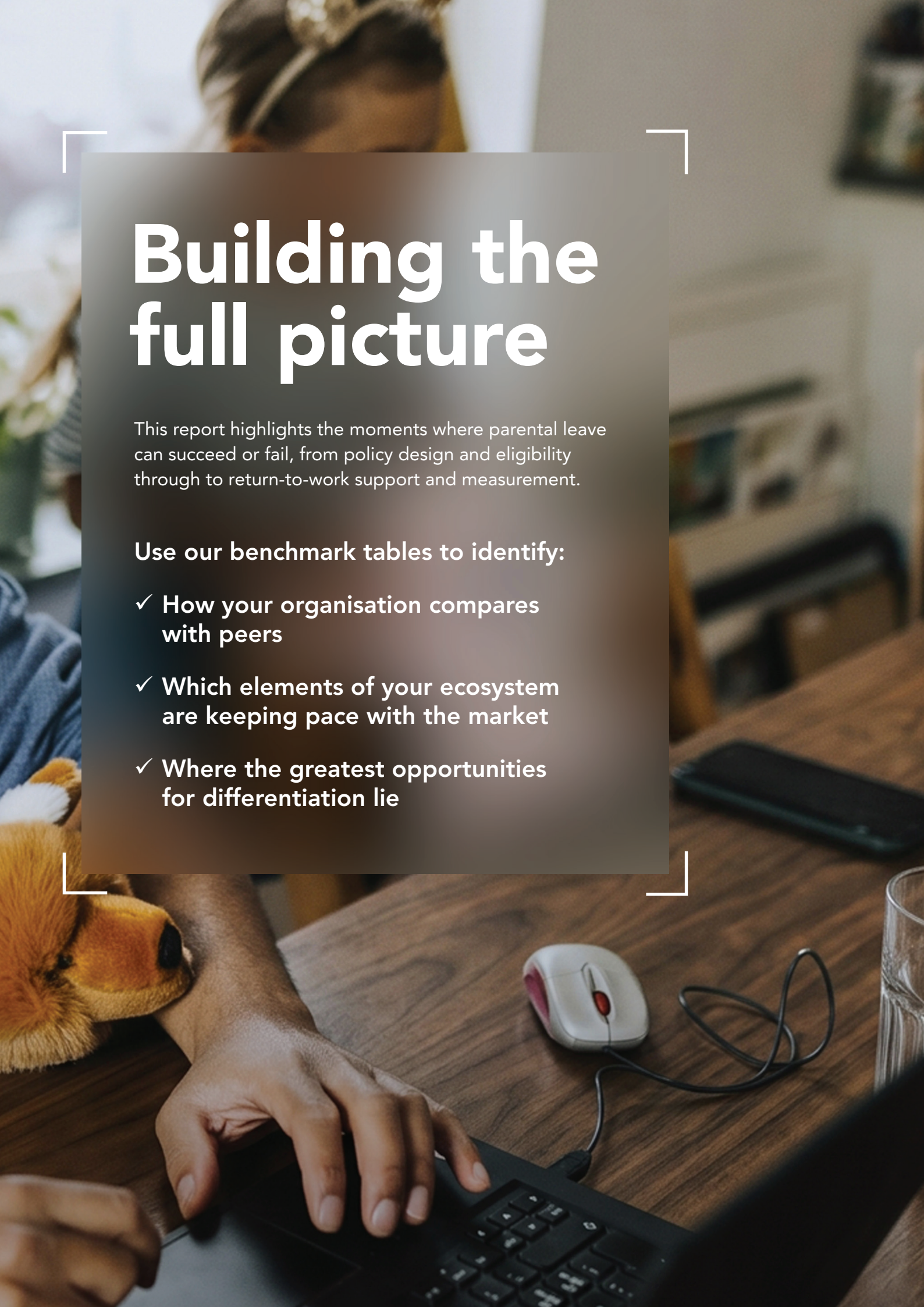
Ask yourself

Could we prove that our parental leave approach improves retention, progression or employee trust?



Benchmarking & Action *planning*

The next step is understanding
how your organisation **compares**.

A person is working at a wooden desk. Their hands are on a laptop keyboard. A white computer mouse is on the desk. A black smartphone is lying on the desk. A stuffed animal is on the left side of the desk. A glass of water is on the right side of the desk. The background is a blurred office or home workspace.

Building the full picture

This report highlights the moments where parental leave can succeed or fail, from policy design and eligibility through to return-to-work support and measurement.

Use our benchmark tables to identify:

- ✓ How your organisation compares with peers
- ✓ Which elements of your ecosystem are keeping pace with the market
- ✓ Where the greatest opportunities for differentiation lie

Are you keeping pace with parental leave policy, or leading the way?

This benchmark table shows where organisations typically focus their parental leave efforts today, from Fundamental practices adopted by most employers, through to Competitive Edge approaches adopted by a small minority.

Competitive Edge <15%	Leading 15% - 30%	Core 30% - 60%	Fundamental >60%
Employer supported ad-hoc childcare (e.g. Back-Up Care, holiday clubs) 12%	Manager guidance or training on supporting parental leave 25%	Managers are very, or generally, confident in managing leave and return 52%	Approach to parental leave is 'generally consistent, with some variation' 75%
Managers are 'very confident' in managing leave and return 6%	Flexible working is usually straightforward and agreed 24%	Formal return-to-work plans or phased return approaches 40%	At least half of eligible employees take the full entitlement to enhanced leave 71%
Employer supported regular childcare (e.g. nursery) 4%	Peer networks or parent support groups 22%	Regular check-ins or communication during leave 36%	Updated policy or eligibility rules with April 2026 roll out of day-one rights 63%
	Coaching or mentoring before, during or after leave 21%	Structured approach to Keeping in Touch (KIT) days 31%	
	Practical support (e.g. childcare advice, family services, employee benefits) 19%	Policies visible to applicants 31%	
	Defined milestones for planning leave, keeping in touch, and return 19%		

Go deeper:

**Benchmark your
parental leave
offering against
your sector.**

Use our interactive calculator to see how your parental leave offering compares with employers in your sector or size group, identify opportunities for improvement, and download a personalised benchmark report.

Calculate My Position



What's next

From seeing the gaps to
strengthening the ecosystem.



Element of the ecosystem	Where it breaks down	What does good look like?	Your solution
Policy Design	Policies become compliance exercises or a race to match competitors, without a clear strategy for outcomes.	A competitive policy that is aligned to talent goals and supported by a clear implementation plan.	Benchmark your approach against market leaders using the benchmarking tables, and identify where your policy is keeping pace, leading or lagging?
Access & Eligibility	Generous policies are undermined by complexity, eligibility barriers or poor visibility.	A parental leave journey that is simple, accessible and easy to navigate, giving employees confidence to engage with the support available.	• Adopt the refreshing accessibility shown by many equal parental leave policies. • Design more accessible parental leave journeys, supported by tools such as the Parental Leave Toolkit.
Employee Experience	The quality of support depends too heavily on individual managers. Parents value the leave itself but feel unsupported or uncertain about the return.	• Just-in-time support, guidance and training for busy managers. • Practical work-life support for parents.	• Standardise the experience with the Parental Leave Toolkit, manager resources and coaching. • Support return-to-work with childcare solutions, Back-Up Care and family advisory services.
Outcomes & Measurements	Lack of data and weak feedback loop.	• Track return rates and ongoing career progression. • Actively use data in business strategy.	Establish baseline measures, identify meaningful success metrics, and build feedback loops that help turn parental leave from a benefit into a measurable business strategy.

About

Bright Horizons

What we do.

For more than 35 years, Bright Horizons has been supporting the evolving needs of working families and their employers. We create, develop, and deliver solutions that remove barriers to performance, talent and diversity in our clients' organisations and help them succeed in their goals.

We address the wide range of challenges facing parents and carers in the workplace today, enhancing our clients' ability to attract and retain key talent, giving their teams the peace of mind and confidence to do their best work.

How we do it.

Bright Horizons' services include workplace and partnership nurseries, coaching and development provision, digital resources, and manager guidance, plus Back-Up Care for adults, children of all ages – and even pets.

We provide our clients with access to live usage and engagement analytics on their programmes, and also keep them updated with ongoing research findings and benchmarking data.

Who we are.

We have operations in the UK, US, India, Australia, and the Netherlands. 1,300 clients globally, over 400 in the UK.

We have been recognised as a UK Best Workplace by the Great Place to Work Institute for 20 years, and are actively committed to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging, and to Mindful Business practices.

We strive to minimise negative environmental impact guided by our Future Earth green agenda and, through our registered charity the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children, to make a positive difference in the lives of children and families in crisis.

Our family of services includes:

Parental Leave Toolkit

Our innovative Parental Leave Toolkit is a digitised coaching solution delivering timely checklists and advice to the individual and their manager at every point in the journey, making a significant difference to return rates. Beyond the parent transition, we've developed tailored coaching programmes for our clients on many major life events.

Virtual Tutoring

One-to-One Virtual Tutoring for GCSE and A Level in a wide range of subjects for children (4-18 years) and also school entrance exam preparation. Tailored tutoring helps confidence and achievement, while easing parents' concerns about their child's education and mental health.

Workplace Nurseries

Workplace Nurseries and Nursery Partnerships provide parents with reassuringly high-quality and convenient care at, or near, their workplace. The ultimate "sticky benefit" and a real game-changer for retention.

Work+Family Space

Work+Family Space, an easily searchable and personalised hub for all matters work and family, and a vital resource for busy workers. Filled with a world of information, tips, webinars and expert advice, there's something for everyone - whatever their life stage or personal situation.

Planned & Emergency Care

Reliable, flexible Back-Up Care options for children of all ages, adults and elders – and even pets – when usual arrangements break down or schedules change. Back-Up Care is a trusted Plan B that protects productivity and supports wellbeing.

The shared experience of:

250

employers across all
UK regions

620

recently returned
parents