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Research Report

The experiences of those who take parental leave within the public sector and the policies that support them

Analytical Paper, No. 18/01

Provided in Cooperation with:

The Treasury, New Zealand Government

Suggested Citation: Morrissey, Suzy; Williamson, Maria (2018) : The experiences of those who take parental leave within the public sector and the policies that support them, Analytical Paper, No. 18/01, ISBN 978-1-988556-01-7, New Zealand Government, The Treasury, Wellington

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/205387>

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The experiences of those who take parental leave within the public sector and the policies that support them

Suzy Morrissey and Maria Williamson

Analytical Paper 18/01

April 2018

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ANALYTICAL PAPER 18/01

The experiences of those who take parental leave within the public sector and the policies that support them

MONTH/YEAR

April 2018

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ISBN (ONLINE)

978-1-98-855601-7

URL

Treasury website at April 2018:
<https://treasury.govt.nz/publications/ap/ap-18-01>
Persistent URL: <http://purl.oclc.org/nzt/p-2032>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the people who participated in this research project and the Government Women's Network for helping us send out the request for participants.
We would like to acknowledge the external researcher, Alison Gray, of Gray Matter Research.

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Abstract

This research highlights some recent experiences of public sector employees returning to work from parental leave and summarises the parental leave policies in place across the public sector. The employees were either on leave or had returned in the past 12 months and were employed by public service and non-public service departments in the state sector. Forty-nine employees participated in focus groups in Wellington and Auckland or in phone interviews across the country. This qualitative research method was combined with a quantitative survey that was sent to human resources (HR) teams in public service departments and non-public service departments. Twenty-six out of 28 departments contacted participated in the survey.

Participants' parental leave experiences were generally positive, but participants were still able to provide practical suggestions for improving the experience of taking parental leave. Before going on leave, employees found information hard to come by, and noted that managers and HR had varying levels of knowledge and policies and processes. Reflecting on the experiences they had while on leave, participants noted the level of communication between employer and employee, as well as access to performance and remuneration reviews, as areas of concern. They also noted a lack of information regarding agency-specific entitlements on return to work and expressed concerns over the options for flexible working. Participants observed a high degree of managerial autonomy in making decisions about flexible working, and noted that this could result in variation of opportunities for employees, even within agencies.

HR policies were found to be varied across the sector. The result is that employees in different agencies may have different opportunities and financial outcomes even though they are all employed in the public sector. Consideration could be given to whether greater alignment of parental leave policies would be more equitable for public sector staff. Opportunities for future research include extending the same enquiries to private sector employers.

JEL CLASSIFICATION

I38: Government Policy • Provision and Effects of Welfare Programs
J08: Labor Economics Policies
J38: Public Policy (Wages, Compensation, and Labor Costs)
J58: Public Policy (Labor-Management Relations)

KEYWORDS

parental leave; policy; flexible work; public sector

Executive summary

This research project was undertaken to address the lack of contemporary knowledge of the issues faced by those taking parental leave. An international literature review undertaken by the Ministry for Women in 2016 noted that there had been no New Zealand-based research on parental leave since 2007. The aim of the research was to capture a small snapshot of current experiences of returning to work in the public sector after parental leave, with a secondary aim of understanding how the public sector supports parents through its policies. The research project was designed in two parts. A qualitative piece of research was undertaken with employees from the public service who were either on parental leave or had returned in the past 12 months. This research was small in scale with 49 participants who self-selected to participate. This means they are not a representative group. The second part of the research was a quantitative survey that was sent to human resources (HR) teams in public service departments and non-public service departments.

The finding from the qualitative research was that participants' experiences were generally positive, but participants were still able to provide practical suggestions for improving the experience of taking parental leave. The research identified that before going on leave, employees found information hard to come by. Participants also noted that managers and HR had varying levels of knowledge of policies and processes. Reflecting on the experiences they had while on parental leave, participants identified the level of communication between employer and employee, as well as access to performance and remuneration reviews, as areas of concern. Parents also noted a lack of information regarding agency-specific entitlements on return to work and expressed concerns over the options for flexible working. Participants observed a high degree of managerial autonomy in making decisions about flexible working, and noted that this could result in a variation of opportunities for employees, even within agencies.

The findings from the quantitative research showed HR policies to be varied across the sector. The result is that employees in different agencies may have different opportunities and financial outcomes even though they are all employed in the public sector. Consideration could be given to whether greater alignment of parental leave policies would be more equitable for public sector staff.

When analysing the findings of both parts of the research two key areas of disconnect were observed. The first was the reliance agencies place on their intranet sites and employment agreements as information sources, which was not matched by the necessary maintenance to ensure the information remained relevant. The experience of participants was that sites held old and out-of-date information. The second area of disconnect was that participants identified flexible work arrangements as important for a successful return to work, yet only 30% of agencies indicated this may be possible. Public sector departments could consider these points in any future review of their parental leave and work place policies.

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The experiences of those who take parental leave within the public sector and the policies that support them

1 Introduction

In 2017, the Ministry for Women and the Treasury undertook research to identify the experiences of public sector women and men who are returning to work from parental leave and to identify the policies and procedures in place across the public sector that support them.

The research arose from an international literature review completed by the Ministry for Women in 2016 on women returning to work from paid parental leave (PPL) or parental leave (unpaid) (PL). The review noted that there had not been any research undertaken in New Zealand since 2007 on women's experiences in returning to work from PPL or PL (and the 2007 report only focused on international research and information, see Department of Labour, 2007:2). Subsequently a report was released by the PSA (PSA, 2017), which looked at partners' experiences of parental leave.

Any issues and challenges for New Zealand parents are therefore not well known or understood. This research seeks to address that gap. The precise aim of the research was to capture a small snapshot of current experiences of returning to work in the public sector after parental leave.

The research project was designed in two parts. The first part was a qualitative study that consisted of focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews both in person and via Skype. An external consultant was hired to facilitate these sessions. The second part was a survey sent to the human resource (HR) managers of the public service departments and non-public service departments in the state sector. They were contacted by way of an email from the Ministry for Women and asked to complete an online questionnaire that asked a series of questions about their parental leave policies.

The qualitative research revealed a number of common themes in parents' experiences. Before going on leave, people found information hard to come by, and it was noted that managers and HR had varying levels of knowledge regarding policies and processes. Whilst on leave, participants were generally keen to receive a regular newsletter, but noted that a greater level contact should be only if mutually agreed. Limited access to performance and remuneration reviews while on leave were identified as concerns. Parents also noted a lack of information on return to work, entitlements (ex gratia payments, childcare assistance), and options for flexible working. Participants observed a high degree of autonomy for managers in making decisions about flexible working, and

noted that this could result in variation of opportunities for employees, even within agencies.

The participants suggested that clear and timely information, and opportunities for flexible working, would be of most benefit to those taking and returning from parental leave.

The HR summary responses indicated a variety of policies across the public sector, which could result in different opportunities and financial implications for employees, depending on their agency. For example, 15 out of 26 agencies use the legislative minimum payment method¹ for calculating the annual leave payment rate of those who have returned from annual leave, and only ten agencies indicated the availability of flexible work arrangements.

2 Methodology

The research project is in two parts, and each will be outlined in turn, but first a note on terminology.

The term 'public sector' is used in this paper to represent two different groups. The first group is the interview participants, who were drawn from public service and non-public service departments in the state sector. The second group is the HR teams in public service and non-public service departments that completed the survey. The participating agencies are referred to as public sector agencies and the participating individuals are referred to as public sector employees.

The methods chosen reflect both the constraints of a small project and the desire to hear about people's lived experiences. As it was to be a small project, the numbers of participants were limited, as was the ability to engage with HR teams in numerous departments. Accordingly, a survey was chosen as a way to easily reach all departments, and to produce data that could be easily analysed. In order to hear about people's experiences, focus groups were chosen, so that people could come together and share their stories. For those who were outside Wellington and Auckland, interviews were conducted, which still enabled the sharing of their experiences.

2.1 Qualitative study

The qualitative study consisted of focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews both in person and via Skype. Twenty-nine people participated in six focus groups, five of which were in Wellington, and two in Auckland. Twenty people participated in one-to-one interviews in person and by telephone or via Skype. Participant responses were anonymised. Focus groups were facilitated by an independent consultant and the researchers attended the Wellington sessions. Interviews were conducted by the independent consultant.

Eligibility for the qualitative research study was restricted to employees of public service departments and non-public service departments in the state sector who had returned from parental leave in the previous 12 months. There were 28 public service departments at the time of the research (although the number has now increased to 31)². The non-

¹ Section 42(2) of the Parental Leave and Employment Act 1987.

² For a complete list see - http://www.ssc.govt.nz/state_sector_organisations.

public service departments in the state sector are New Zealand Defence Force, New Zealand Police, and the Parliamentary Counsel Office. Eligibility for participation was restricted to people from these entities but not all entities were represented in the research.

People were invited to participate by way of an email that was distributed by representatives of the Government Women's Network (GWN) in various agencies. Not all agencies had GWN representatives. Participants were accepted on a 'first-come, first-served' basis and the call for participants was closed after a week due to a very high response (130 responses). The focus groups and interviews covered the following areas: aspects of parental leave that worked well; aspects of parental leave that were less satisfactory; getting information about policies and procedures relating to parental leave; aspects of returning to work that worked well; aspects of returning to work that were less satisfactory; and suggestions for improvement.

The findings section of this paper is set out in line with these question areas.

2.2 Human resource policies

The HR managers of the public service departments and non-public service departments were contacted by way of an email from the Ministry for Women. The email contained a link to an online questionnaire that the managers were asked to complete. The survey was completed by 26 of the 28 organisations contacted and details are provided in Appendix One.

The questionnaire asked a series of questions regarding the current parental leave policies in place in that organisation. While some questions had a simple yes/no response, a number provided free text fields for a more detailed response. A list of the questions in the survey is included as Appendix Two and a summary of the responses is included as Appendix 3.

2.3 Analysis and reporting

The independent consultant prepared a draft report, which was discussed and reviewed by the researchers before being finalised. The report will be issued by the Ministry for Women in due course and is titled 'Parental leave in the public sector: exploring parents' experiences and HR policies and practice'.

The findings of the HR survey were presented to the State Services Commission (SSC) in March 2017. A workshop to discuss the findings with the HR teams of the public service departments and non-public service departments was run in May 2017. The full research findings were presented at the Women in Public Sector Summit on 12 April 2017.³

2.4 Scope

The policy design of paid parental leave (PPL) policy is outside the scope of this research. For completeness, we acknowledge there is a rich literature on the design of PPL policies.

³ Presentation slides are available here - http://women.govt.nz/sites/public_files/View%20presentation_1.pdf

3 Parental leave in New Zealand

3.1 Statutory provisions

Statutory leave from employment for childbirth was first provided under the Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act 1980 and it provided for 26 weeks' leave and protection from dismissal by reason of pregnancy or maternity leave.⁴ In 1987, the provisions were changed with the new Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987, which introduced maternity leave of 14 weeks, paternity leave of two weeks, and up to a total of 52 weeks' (unpaid) extended leave.

In 2002, PPL was introduced, providing 12 weeks' paid⁵ leave to female employees who had been with the same employer for at least 12 months. The duration of PPL was extended to 14 weeks from 2005,⁶ and then to 16 and 18 weeks, in 2015 and 2016.⁷ Eligibility for PPL was granted to self-employed women in 2006 and the work-related criteria were amended to reflect the work herstory⁸ of women in non-standard employment in 2016.⁹ Women received the right to an (unpaid) break from employment duties and an appropriate facility in which to breastfeed or express in 2009.¹⁰

The current statutory entitlement¹¹ of primary carer leave (previously called paid parental leave) is 18 weeks, and up to a total of 52 weeks' parental leave is available (parental leave is adjusted for any primary carer leave taken) if eligibility criteria are met. Recent amendments will provide 22 weeks from 1 July 2018 and 26 weeks from 1 July 2020 (MBIE, 2018).

Since its introduction, PPL/primary carer leave has been transferrable from the mother to a spouse or partner, including same-sex partners.

3.2 Recent developments

A new provision, 'keeping in touch hours' (KIT), was introduced on 1 April 2016. KIT enables an employee to be paid for up to 40 hours work during the 18 weeks paid parental leave period, so that employees can work limited hours during that time, if they choose. KIT hours may be taken once the baby is at least four weeks old¹² and enable the employee to keep up with skills development, undertake training or complete a work handover, and can help ease a parent back to work.¹³

⁴ Sections 8 and 27 Maternity Leave and Employment Protection Act 1980 refer.

⁵ Payment is at wage replacement subject to a maximum 'cap' of \$538.55 per week (Employment New Zealand, 2018b).

⁶ Parental Leave and Employment Protection Amendment Act 2004.

⁷ Parental Leave and Employment Protection Amendment Act 2014.

⁸ 'Herstory' is history presented from a feminist perspective or with a focus on the experiences of women.

⁹ Parental Leave and Employment Protection Amendment Act 2016.

¹⁰ Employment Relations (Breaks, Infant Feeding, and Other Matters) Amendment Act 2008.

¹¹ Sections 9 and 26 of the Parental Leave and Employment Act 1987 refer.

¹² Section 71CE Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987.

¹³ <http://www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/employment-skills/legislation-reviews/employment-standards-legislation-bill/modernising-parental-leave#keeping>

Another provision that came into force at the same time as KIT enables workers to take their unpaid parental leave flexibly. In the past all parental leave had to be taken on a full-time basis and in one continuous block. If the employee returned to work at any stage during the 52 weeks any remaining parental leave entitlement was lost. The new provision allows employees to take their unpaid leave flexibly with the mutual agreement of the employer. Employees can return to work for a period of time and then take any remaining portion of their unpaid leave.¹⁴

3.3 Public sector provisions

Prior to the introduction of statutory paid parental leave, it had been the practice of public sector employers to offer some kind of parental leave, usually paid on return to work.

In 1948, a Public Service Regulation was introduced to grant married women working in the public sector “maternity leave without pay”. However, the Regulations also stated that “an employee resuming duty after a period of maternity leave of not more than six months may be granted retrospective pay in respect of any such period of absence.....upon the employee furnishinga Certificate signed by a registered medical practitioner in support of the reason for such a leave of absence”. These regulations were subsequently amended to include the right to re-employment and to cover unmarried women (Ministry of Women’s Affairs, June 1995). According to the Evening Post of 1 November 1947 (O’Sullivan, 1985:9 quoted in Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 1995), this provision was aimed at encouraging married women to continue to teach in native schools, which were mainly staffed by husband and wife teams, and usually with the provision of accommodation. If the wife stopped teaching accommodation problems arose if another teacher needed to be employed.

In 1978, maternity leave for public sector employees was extended from six to 12 months. To provide stronger job protection, a payment equal to 30 working days’ pay was available to employees after returning to work for six months’ service (State Services Commission, 1978:4). The aim of this change was intended to “eliminate discrimination against women and to promote equal opportunity for men and women in the State Services” (O’Sullivan, 1985:10).

4 Findings

The findings are presented in two parts, reflecting the two different research areas (the qualitative focus groups and interviews with parents, and the surveys sent to HR teams).

4.1 Individual participants

As context for the discussion that follows, it should be noted that this research is small in scale. Forty-nine people were interviewed and they do not represent a proportional cross-section of employees in the public sector. Instead, they participated on a self-determined basis, choosing to respond to an email from their women’s group representatives. These findings reflect the responses of those people.

¹⁴ For those employees whose entitlement is 52 weeks’ unpaid leave, this is until the child’s first birthday (or one year after becoming the primary carer of the child) and for those entitled to 26 weeks’ unpaid leave, when the child turns six months old.

4.1.1 Aspects of parental leave that worked well

Parents were generally positive about the opportunity to take parental leave in the knowledge that they had the security of a job to return to afterwards. Most people enjoyed receiving the organisation newsletter by email while on leave and being invited to attend events.

4.1.2 Aspects of parental leave that were less satisfactory

Participants noted a lack of comprehensive or easily available information and commented that colleagues who had previously been on parental leave were often good sources of information. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment website was also recommended. There was a variety of knowledge amongst managers and HR teams, with some having good information and others unable to provide the assistance desired. Overall, this lack of knowledge was noted as making the process confusing, and sometimes resulted in delays in processing the relevant documentation. Some participants noted a difficulty in obtaining information, and managers or colleagues who had been on parental leave were generally considered more helpful than those who hadn't.

Participants frequently raised the question of when annual leave had to be taken (i.e. before or after the 18 weeks' paid parental leave period) as unclear.¹⁵ Although some agencies offer ex gratia payments and childcare assistance, participants noted a lack of clarity about these benefits, and suggested they would have found it easier financially if some of the ex gratia payment could have been received earlier. Participants also noted the level of statutory payment for the 18 weeks paid parental leave period created financial pressure.

The issue of performance and remuneration reviews while on leave was also raised. Some participants missed out on a review due to the timing of their leave and it was noted that this could occur for a number of years, depending on the timing of returning to work and if a second or subsequent period of leave was also taken.

4.1.3 Aspects of returning to work that worked well

Many participants noted the importance of a flexible work culture for a successful transition back to work. They commented that senior leaders needed to promote a flexible culture, and that line managers' support was important and was exhibited more frequently by those who had experienced parental leave or flexible work themselves.

4.1.4 Aspects of returning to work that were less satisfactory

Some participants noted a reluctance on the part of their managers to consider flexible work or an expectation of working more than their contracted hours. Some of those who had been able to negotiate working from home or additional payments felt they were perceived by colleagues as receiving unfair or unequal treatment. In terms of the work allocated to those returning from leave, a tension was acknowledged between finding suitable work for a part-timer and the opportunity to work on 'interesting' projects, as such projects often have demanding timeframes.

¹⁵ The legislation was changed from 1 June 2017 to allow all leave entitlements to be taken prior to the start of paid parental leave. The paid parental leave period (18 weeks) is no longer linked to the date of the birth of the child.

The use of the legislative minimum payment option¹⁶ to calculate annual leave caused frustration and confusion. This provision applies only to those who have returned to work after taking parental leave. It gives employers the option to pay the annual leave that employees take at an employee's average rate of earnings over the previous 12 months, which can be zero initially, depending on the length of leave they took. It can take months for annual leave payments to be at the employee's usual pay rate.

A final area of concern was the lack of clarity and transparency about benefits provided by agencies, with some people missing out through a lack of timely information.

4.1.5 Suggestions for improvement

The participants were asked if they had any suggestions for improvement. Overall they sought clarity and flexibility. They also felt a transition plan for returning to work would be useful, including timely confirmation of hours, in order to make childcare arrangements and to feel wanted by the organisation. It was felt that obtaining agreement for flexible work arrangements was more challenging for fathers than mothers.

4.2 HR responses

The questions in the survey are presented in Appendix 2 and a summary of the results is presented in tables in Appendix 3. A brief discussion of those findings is provided here.

All but one of the 26 departments that responded to the survey had a parental leave policy and 21 used the intranet and employment agreements to make this available to staff. Five departments provided formal training for managers on the parental leave policy but others noted that their HR teams were available to assist managers as required. Only a third of organisations had a distribution list to maintain contact with staff on parental leave.

As noted at 3.2 of this paper, although KIT hours were introduced as a statutory entitlement on 1 April 2016, six of the 26 respondents (23%) did not know about KIT hours and 13 organisations (50%) stated they did not offer KIT hours to staff on parental leave.

Organisations almost always (92%) allocated a manager to each person on parental leave and they generally contacted them about a month before the staff member was due to return. One organisation indicated that an induction may be arranged and 30% reported that staff on leave were offered training refreshers on changes to strategy, policy, or projects.

Fifteen organisations (57%) use the legislative¹⁷ minimum payment option to calculate annual leave for those who have returned from parental leave. This option allows employers to pay annual leave at the average rate of earnings over the previous 12 months, which can be zero initially, depending on the length of leave taken.

Flexible work arrangements were available on a case-by-case basis at ten agencies (38%).

Consideration could be given to whether greater alignment of parental leave policies would be more equitable for public sector staff.

¹⁶ Section 42(2) Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987.

¹⁷ Section 42(2) Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987.

5 Conclusion and future research questions

The participants were generally positive about their parental leave experiences and identified flexible work arrangements and understanding managers and colleagues as important factors in a successful return to work after parental leave. Participants expressed a desire for clarity of information, and expressed concerns over how annual leave payments were calculated, and over a lack of information regarding obtaining agency-specific benefits.

HR teams indicated that information about parental leave policies is available to employees, generally via an intranet or employment agreement, and that managers generally do not receive training on these policies. Keeping in touch days are not well understood or used and flexible working is not broadly available.

It was not the purpose of the research to contrast the experiences of the participants against the policies identified by the HR departments. However, a couple of areas merit attention. Firstly, agencies place reliance on intranet sites and employment agreements as information sources, but these must be maintained if they are to remain relevant. However, this was not always the experience of participants who, in some instances, found information to be old and out-of-date. Secondly, participants identified flexible work arrangements as important for a successful return to work, yet only 30% of agencies indicated this may be possible.

As a response to the research findings, and recommendations from participants, the Ministry for Women has developed a guide for public sector managers. The guide provides managers with basic information and practical steps to take to ensure that staff are supported prior to going on parental leave and while on leave. It also provides information about the steps managers need to take to assist staff to return to work after the parental leave period has finished and to support them to work flexibility so they can ease back into work while meeting their family obligations. It is intended that the parental leave guide will be provided to all the public sector departments to pass onto all team managers.

Opportunities for future research include extending the same enquiries to private sector employers. The experiences of parents in private professional organisations could be explored, with a view to supporting policy and processes that are easy to understand, and to encourage retention of experienced and skilled women. Many professional organisations have noted that often women don't return to the role that they held prior to having children and this has resulted in a noticeable loss of skilled professionals.

With an increase to paid parental leave, an evaluation of how parents in New Zealand are sharing the caregiving role, and how employers are using flexible work to retain their skilled workers could also be considered.

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Appendix 1 – Participating HR Teams

1. Department of Corrections
2. Crown Law Office
3. Department of Internal Affairs
4. Department of Conservation
5. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
6. Education Review Office
7. Inland Revenue Department
8. Land Information New Zealand
9. Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment
10. Ministry for Culture and Heritage
11. Ministry of Defence
12. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
13. Ministry of Health
14. Ministry of Justice
15. Ministry for Primary Industries
16. Ministry of Social Development
17. Ministry of Transport
18. Ministry for Women
19. New Zealand Customs Service
20. New Zealand Defence Force
21. New Zealand Security Intelligence Service
22. New Zealand Police
23. Serious Fraud Office
24. State Services Commission
25. Te Puni Kōkiri
26. The Treasury

Appendix 2 – HR Survey Questions

1. What is your role?
2. Which public sector agency do you work for?
3. Does your agency have a parental leave policy? If yes, how is this promoted or shared with staff?
4. Do managers receive training on the parental leave policy? If yes, what does the training include?
5. Do you know about 'keeping in touch' hours?
6. Do managers get training on 'keeping in touch' hours? If yes, what is included in that training?
7. Does your agency offer 'keeping in touch' hours to staff on parental leave? If yes, please share how this happens.
8. Do you have a distribution list to keep in touch with staff on parental leave?
9. If yes, what information do you share?
10. Do staff on parental leave know to which team they will return? If yes, what information are they given about their return?
11. Do staff on parental leave have a manager allocated to them while they are on leave?
12. Are staff on leave offered training refreshers on changes to strategy, policy, or projects, before they return to work?
13. Does your agency use section 42(2) of the Parental Leave and Employment Act 1987 to calculate annual leave for those who have returned from parental leave?
14. Does your agency have any other support not already mentioned for staff on leave to assist them on their return to work?

Appendix 3 – Summary of HR Survey Results

This Appendix provides a summary of the responses to questions that could be answered with a yes/no reply. Other questions were included in the survey but the open-ended responses are not included here. All responses were shared with the HR departments in order to assist with their understanding of policies across the public sector.

Information correct 'as submitted' as at January 2017.

Table 1 – Policy questions

Question number	Question	Yes	No	Unclear
3	Does your agency have a parental leave policy?	25	1	0
4	Do managers receive training on the parental leave policy?	5	21	0

Table 2 – Contact questions

Question number	Question	Yes	No	Unclear
5	Do you know about 'keeping in touch' hours?	20	6	0
6	Do managers get training on 'keeping in touch' hours? Note: most positive answers included a caveat 'as required' or 'HR assist managers' and these have been included here as 'yes' responses	17	9	0
7	Does your agency offer 'keeping in touch' hours to staff on parental leave?	13	13	0
8	Do you have a distribution list to keep in touch with staff on parental leave?	9	17	0

Table 3 – Team questions

Question number	Question	Yes	No	Unclear
10	Do staff on parental leave know to which team they will return?	23	1	2 (depends on role)
11	Do staff on parental leave have a manager allocated to them while they are on leave?	24	1	1

Table 4 – Benefits questions

Question number	Question	Yes	No	Unclear
13	Does your agency use section 42(2) of the Parental Leave and Employment Act 1987 to calculate annual leave for those who have returned from parental leave?	15	9	2
14	Does your agency have any other support not already mentioned for staff on leave to assist them on their return to work? Note: a lack of response to this question has been included here as 'unclear'.	18	1	7