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Article

Back to Industry—Evaluating Women’s Return to Chartered Accreditation Post-Maternity in the Built Environment Sector Professions

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Abstract: Efforts have been made to improve gender diversity in the built environment professions. This sector continues to experience growth restrictions due to skill shortages. Some progress has been made at the entry level; however, the retention of women in professional roles within this sector continues to present a challenge. Support for women during maternity, upon return to work and while working with family has been identified as a barrier to women’s progression in this sector. Professional bodies are uniquely placed to support their female members. Therefore, this study had two aims: to examine current professional body support for members during and after maternity leave and to examine the experiences of female professionals, who have taken maternity leave whilst holding membership in a built environment professional body. This study adopted an embedded, mixed-method design, using a secondary, qualitative data set to augment the primary, quantitative data set, within one phase. Surveys were distributed directly to professional bodies and to professionals via social media (LinkedIn). The survey of the professional bodies identified a varied approach to maternity support. The professional member survey identified a lack of awareness of available support, and generally the need for more support during maternity and on return to work. In summary, professional bodies in the built environment could improve maternity support for members by improving communication and achieving parity in support across the various disciplines.



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Keywords: gender equality; women in construction; maternity; employment; construction skills; skills shortage

1. Introduction

Gender diversity within the built environment sector is a persistent issue (Warren and Wilkinson 2008). This sector also faces skills shortages and an ageing workforce (Oates et al. 2014; Construction Skills Network 2023). Addressing barriers to women’s retention and progression within this sector could therefore present a solution to the skill shortages. The cultural characteristics of this sector have been identified by early-career females as significant barriers to entry due to their incompatibility with family and child-rearing (Construction Industry Training Board 2017; Lan Oo et al. 2019). Professional body membership is often a prerequisite for individuals working in professional roles within the built environment sector (Morrell 2020). Professional bodies are uniquely placed to support their members and drive cultural change within their industry; however, inadequate professional body support during maternity leave can have a permanent, negative impact on the careers of its female members (Construction Industry Council 2023; Royal Institute of British Architects 2022). Despite this, the support offered by the built environment sector professional membership organisations varies greatly, and little research into how such bodies can support and facilitate re-entry, during and after maternity leave, exists (Morrell 2020). The objective of this paper is therefore to conduct initial exploration in this area. The aims are to investigate current maternity support offered by the UK built

environment sector professional bodies, to explore member experiences of maternity leave whilst holding membership of a UK built environment sector professional body, and to provide recommendations for future professional body maternity policy.

2. Literature Review

The built environment sector is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses the design, construction, and management of buildings, economic infrastructure, urban space, and landscape (Bolton et al. 2018). Within this sector, those in professional, white-collar roles may, by assessment, become members of a professional membership organisation (Green 2015). The roles of built environment sector professional bodies within both the built environment sector and society are well documented (Green 2015). The primary function of professional bodies is to provide trust in professions for members of the public, by ensuring that members maintain technical and ethical competence and complete regular training (Green 2015). The main differentiating factor between those in the industry with professional designations and those without is the obligation of professional members to serve the public interest (Warren and Wilkinson 2008). Secondary functions of professional bodies include maintaining professional behaviour through codes of conduct, representing members' views on relevant government policies, setting and assessing professional examinations, promoting fairer access to the profession, providing networks for professionals, publishing professional journals and magazines, providing career support for professionals at all stages of their career, and aspiring to serve the public interest (Green 2015; Morrell 2020; Watts et al. 2021; Warren and Wilkinson 2008). Many of the built environment sector professional bodies are seeking to become global organisations while retaining their local significance; to carry this out successfully, they must maintain a significant and diverse membership base. The retention of current members and the recruitment of new members is therefore a priority focus for many of these bodies (Warren and Wilkinson 2008). On an individual level, professional body membership is a prerequisite for many professional roles in the built environment sector (Morrell 2020).

2.1. The Value of Gender Diversity

The commercial benefits of gender diversity within organisations have been well documented; organisations in the top quartile for gender diversity are 21% more likely to experience financial returns above the national industry median (McKinsey & Company 2020), and more diverse workforces have been demonstrated to achieve 20% higher innovation and 30% higher risk impact reduction (Bourke 2018). Only 15.6% of the UK construction workforce is female (Office for National Statistics 2024); this is in stark contrast with the gender ratio of the UK working-age population, which is 47.5% female (Leaker 2024). Although women account for 55% of university graduates in Europe (McKinsey & Company 2007) and 43.5% of graduates employed by top-tier construction contractors in the UK (Chartered Institute of Building 2022), this is not reflected within industry employment across all levels of seniority (Chartered Institute of Building 2022). In fact, women are particularly under-represented in management and decision-making roles, an issue which will remain despite natural growth in the number of female graduates due to working expectations and promotional practices (McKinsey & Company 2007). In contrast to orthodox theory, which predicts that market differences among groups such as gender will disappear over time as employers focus on individual characteristics and competition (Reich et al. 1973), the disparity in gender split between the general population and the built environment sector is persistent (Office for National Statistics 2024). This is significant for the built environment sector, which is facing skills shortages and an ageing workforce (Oates et al. 2014; Construction Skills Network 2023).

2.2. Gender Differences in Attainment and Earnings

Gender differences in occupational attainment and pay can be explained by the theories of labour market segmentation and the dual labour market (Marini et al. 1996). These

theories identify two distinct sectors within the labour market, the primary sector and the secondary sector, which are characterised by distinct features. The primary sector is characterised by linear career pathways with very little flexibility or allowance for career breaks, and roles which require unfailing availability and geographical mobility from employees. However, the rewards of employment in this sector are better job stability, higher wages, and better working conditions. Conversely, the secondary sector is characterised by greater levels of flexibility and autonomy within the career pathway, with lower levels of training required to attain roles. However, wages, job stability, and working conditions in this sector are generally much lower when compared with the primary sector (Marini et al. 1996; Meyer and Mukerjee 2007; Reich et al. 1973). For many women, the demands of careers in the primary sector are incompatible with their more extensive involvement in domestic work outside of the labour market. Known as the double burden, women in Europe contribute twice as much time daily to domestic tasks than their male counterparts, regardless of employment status (McKinsey & Company 2007; Meyer and Mukerjee 2007). Despite modern societal trends towards more women in employment, women are still inherent in modern society as the centre of family life. The associated career constraints of maternity, child-rearing, domestic work, and caring responsibility for relatives are barriers to career progression in the primary sector (McKinsey & Company 2007).

As a result of the double burden, maternity leave and child-rearing are often perceived by women to be incompatible with career development. Having children has been shown to have a substantial negative impact on lifetime earnings and career prospects (Adda et al. 2017). This has a significant impact on the decisions of young women looking to enter the sector. The primary sector characteristics of a stressful and competitive working culture and long, inflexible working hours have been identified by female graduates as significant barriers to entering the construction industry workforce (Lan Oo et al. 2019). A study by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) revealed that male finishers of construction courses were more than twice as likely to be employed in a construction sector role within six months of course completion (Construction Industry Training Board 2017).

Conversely, others have proposed that the double burden is experienced by workers of both genders, and that the advancement of women is instead limited by general cultural attitudes, which reward overworking and do not support maternal employment. Women's job commitment has been found to equal men's and to increase due to the same factors. However, women's progression is negatively impacted by statistical discrimination: a cultural assumption that women are less productive or more costly to employ, due to motherhood and family obligations (Reskin and Padavic 2002). Budig, Misra, and Böckmann found that the "motherhood penalty", or the economic impact of motherhood on women, is smaller in countries where there is stronger cultural support for maternal employment (Budig et al. 2010). Further studies have supported this work. Padavic and Ely studied a global consulting firm, which experienced under-representation of women in senior roles, over eighteen months. They found that women's career advancement was significantly impacted when they were encouraged to make accommodations for their families, such as part-time working and internally facing roles. They proposed that this stalling in career progression was not a result of issues balancing work and family commitments, as male employees also experienced this issue, but instead, that the causation was workplace culture, where those who work part-time or flexibly are not allowed to progress (Padavic and Ely 2020). Work-family policies and work-facilitating policies, such as childcare, have been demonstrated to create positive outcomes for women who are mothers. Parental leave, a work-reducing policy, has been shown to be positive but then becomes detrimental if the allowance is too lengthy (Misra et al. 2011). These studies demonstrate that cultural change through leadership, rather than education for women, is necessary to support women's careers after motherhood (Reskin and Hartmann 1986).

2.3. Diversity in the Built Environment Sector

The built environment sector professional bodies experience gender diversity issues similar to the experiences of employer organisations in the industry (Warren and Wilkinson 2008). The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) reports that 29% of registered architects are female, with females accounting for 19% of leadership positions within the membership (Royal Institute of British Architects 2023). The Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) reports only 7% female membership, of which a “large proportion” are in student grades (Barnes 2019). The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) reports 15.1% female membership (Stanley 2021). The Landscape Institute (LI) does not publish statistical data, reporting that gender balance is equal at entry level, but that female membership dwindles with seniority (Rawlings 2018). The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) reports 39% female membership (Bicquelet-Lock et al. 2020). The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) reports 18% female membership, with females accounting for only 4% of senior membership grades (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2022). The RICS undertook a more detailed study of women in surveying in 2019, which revealed that their average membership length for female members is just 16 years, compared with 28 years for male members, and that their average age of leaving membership for women is 47, compared with a leaving age of 61 for male members (Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2019). This is not a new phenomenon; previous work by Greed highlighted a mass exodus of women from the surveying profession in their twenties and thirties, partly due to disillusionment with unequal treatment, and partly due to having children (Greed 1991).

In an attempt to conquer these issues on an industry scale, these six industry governing bodies (RIBA, CIOB, ICE, LI, RICS, and RTPI) have formed a working group and produced a collaborative three-year action plan. The intentions of this plan are to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion through standardised data collection, to increase support for transitions from education into employment, and to collaborate on equality, diversity, and inclusion standards (Royal Institute of British Architects 2022). However, the success of such plans is dependent on action. Studies have shown that, while organisations make statements about improving diversity, their governance structures and policies do not reflect those intentions (Warren and Antoniadou 2016). Other researchers have identified increasing interest in attracting more women and minorities into the sector but highlighted that holding such sentiment is very different from actively changing the ethos and organisation of the sector to better accommodate women (Greed 2002).

2.4. Maternity Policy in the Built Environment Professional Membership Organisations

Two international instruments recognise paid maternity leave as a vital work-related entitlement enabling women in the workplace: the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the ILO Maternity Protection Convention (ILO 183) (International Labour Organisation 2000; United Nations General Assembly 1979). For employers, research exists to substantiate maternity policy guidance for employees (Rossin-Slater 2017), and minimum standards for maternity policy are mandated by UK legislation (HM Government 1986; HM Government 1996; HM Government 1999). In the UK, women are currently entitled to 52 weeks of statutory maternity leave, during which time, their entitlement to pay, holidays, and the right to return to work are protected by law (HM Government 2024). During this leave, women in the UK are entitled to 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay: 6 weeks at 90% of their average weekly earnings before tax (AWEs), and 33 weeks at GBP 184.03 per week or 90% of AWEs, whichever is the lower one (HM Government 2024). Maternity leave of less than one year has been shown to result in improved job continuity and employment rates for several years after childbirth for women (Rossin-Slater 2017). A well-considered statute around maternity policy requirements legitimises the additional requirements necessary for women to assume an equal role in the workplace and provides a minimum standard on which individual organisations can improve (Little 1985). In the UK, almost two-thirds of organisations offer

enhanced maternity pay for employees ([Pregnant Then Screwed 2022](#)). Enhanced maternity policies often include offers of increased pay entitlement, extended duration of maternity pay, and less onerous qualifying conditions for maternity pay ([DavidsonMorris Ltd. 2022](#)). Adopting an enhanced maternity pay policy has been shown to improve retention and aid recruitment for organisations, demonstrably aiding the retention of women in the workforce ([Charlesworth and Probert 2005](#)). More generous maternity leave policy has even been shown to improve mental health for women aged 50 years and above ([Avendano et al. 2015](#)). Access to maternity and childcare benefits has been identified as a significant barrier for women entering the construction industry ([Gurjao 2017](#)).

Professional organisation membership is prevalent in the built environment sector professional roles; there are approximately 67,500 RICS-chartered surveyors working in the UK, although no definitive statistic exists to identify what percentage of professionals belong to such an organisation ([Statista 2024](#)). For members of professional bodies, there is little guidance around maternity policy and support. Although the membership relationship is different to that of an employee, professional bodies are still well placed to support their members while they take leave from their careers. Historically, women have been poorly accommodated in the sector and concentrated in the lower membership grades, despite internal projects on career breaks, return to work, and the possibility of job sharing ([Greed 1991](#)). The majority of professional bodies require members to pay annual fees and to complete an annual hourly quota of continued professional development (CPD) training to retain their membership ([Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2023a](#)). Professional bodies are uniquely placed to lead in improving gender diversity in the industry, particularly by introducing exemplary policies for their members ([Barnes 2019](#); [Construction Industry Council 2023](#); [Morrell 2020](#); [Royal Institute of British Architects 2022](#)). Professional bodies' publicly available information demonstrates varying levels of support for members on parental or family-raising leave. The following information has been drawn from the publicly available sections on each professional body's website: The RIBA does not offer a parental concession; however, relief is available for any members earning under GBP 20,000 per year after tax ([Royal Institute of British Architects 2024](#)). The ICE is similar to RIBA, offering no parental concession but relief for members earning less than GBP 13,832 per year ([Institution of Civil Engineers n.d.a](#)). The CIOB does not appear to offer a parental concession ([Chartered Institute of Building n.d.](#)). The LI offers a 75% discount on fees for members on parental leave ([Landscape Institute n.d.](#)). The RICS offers a 100% discount on fees for one year for those on parental leave, then a 90% discount on fees for those remaining on childcare leave ([Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2023a](#)). The RTPI offers members on parental leave the ability to apply for an undefined membership fee concession ([Royal Town Planning Institute 2024](#)). Another method available to professional bodies to support members on parental leave is reductions in annual CPD requirements. The RIBA and the LI do not offer CPD requirement reductions for those on maternity leave. The CIOB and the RICS allow members on parental leave to apply for "reasonable adjustments" to their CPD requirements, although no more detailed explanations are available within their CPD policies ([Chartered Institute of Building 2023](#); [Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2023b](#)). The ICE considers members on parental leave to be exempt from CPD requirements ([Institution of Civil Engineers 2023](#)). The RTPI also considers members on parental leave to be exempt from CPD requirements but limits this to six months ([Royal Town Planning Institute 2023](#)). Finally, professional bodies can support members taking parental leave by enabling their re-admission to full membership. Re-admission may involve significant costs and, for some professional bodies, the undertaking of the membership assessment, a significant financial and time commitment that may stand as a barrier to re-entry for many women ([Institution of Civil Engineers n.d.b](#)). Unfortunately, information on re-admission policy is not readily available, and, for most governing bodies, members are referred to discussion with membership staff for advice ([Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2023a](#)). In summary, the support offered by professional bodies for members on parental leave varies greatly and access to information could be difficult for members.

A lack of support from a professional body during maternity leave can have a lasting impact on the careers of its female members ([Construction Industry Council 2023](#); [Royal Institute of British Architects 2022](#)). Very little research exists into how professional bodies are supporting members on maternity leave and facilitating their re-entry into the profession ([Morrell 2020](#)). Therefore, a gap exists in the literature, the results of which could support policy-making decisions for governing bodies and facilitate the retention of women within construction careers. This study aims to investigate current maternity policies in the UK built environment sector professional bodies, to explore member experiences of maternity leave whilst holding membership of a built environment sector professional body, and to provide recommendations for future professional body maternity policy.

3. Materials and Methods

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current scenario in a time-efficient manner, this study adopted an embedded, mixed-method design, using a secondary, qualitative data set to augment and explain the primary, quantitative data set within one phase ([Creswell 2013](#); [Creswell and Plano Clark 2011](#)). Limited evaluative research on professional body maternity policy for members in the UK built environment sector exists; therefore, the embedded design presented a robust methodological approach to undertake initial exploration in this area ([Creswell and Plano Clark 2011](#)). Two independent data sets were collected and analysed using an online questionnaire to maintain consistency with previous studies within this research area.

3.1. Survey of the Professional Membership Organisations

The first data set comprised responses from representatives of each professional body regarding their support for members during and after maternity leave. Data for the professional body data set were collected through purposive response sampling using an online questionnaire hosted on the website “Google Forms” ([Creswell and Plano Clark 2011](#)). The target population was professional bodies identified as relating to the “built environment sector” by HM Revenue and Customs ([HMRC 2024](#)). The questionnaire featured a combination of open- and closed-ended questions, including dichotomous, nominal scales and interval scales ([Creswell 2013](#)). The questionnaire was made available for eight weeks and was distributed directly to the professional body representatives via an emailed link. A total of 29 professional bodies were contacted, of which 17 responded. Quantitative data concerning membership fee discount during member maternity leave, continued professional development (CPD) training requirement reduction during member maternity leave, policy on returning to full membership, policy during subsequent periods of maternity leave, member statistics on returning to full membership after maternity, and design of the member maternity policy were collected. Binary questions were used to collect nominal data, and subsequent ratio scales with ten levels were used to collect continuous data. The ratio scale-type questions were used subsequently to the binary questions to provide a more detailed insight into respondent policy ([Arrow et al. 2012](#)). Complementary, qualitative data regarding re-entry assessment for return to full membership, subsequent periods of maternity leave, and the method of policy design were collected using open-ended questions. These questions asked respondents to expand on their answers to the ratio scale questions and were embedded within the quantitative questionnaire, providing greater insight and understanding of how professional bodies currently support their members during and after maternity leave ([Almalki 2016](#); [Creswell and Plano Clark 2011](#); [Driscoll et al. 2007](#)).

3.2. Survey of Individual Professionals

The second set comprised responses from individual professionals regarding their experience of maternity leave as a member of an identified professional body. Data for the individual professional data set were collected through voluntary response sampling using an online questionnaire hosted on the website “Google Forms” ([Creswell and Plano Clark](#)

2011). The target population was females who had experienced maternity leave with their primary employer while holding membership in one of the above-identified professional bodies. The questionnaire featured an initial section of qualification questions to determine whether the target respondent characteristics had been met. The questionnaire then featured a combination of open- and closed-ended questions, including dichotomous, nominal scales and interval scales (Creswell 2013). The questionnaire was made available to voluntary participants for eight weeks and was shared via some professional bodies to their members, and otherwise via the researcher's personal and professional contacts on LinkedIn. A total of 135 responses were received during the sample period. Quantitative data concerning the date of first maternity leave as a professional member, the duration of first maternity leave as a professional member, the fee discount offered by the professional body, CPD training reduction offered by the professional body, return to full membership and related assessments required by the professional body, experience during subsequent maternity leave periods (if any), and the location of information on professional body maternity policy were collected. Binary questions were used to collect nominal data, and subsequent ratio scales with ten levels were used to collect continuous data. The ratio scale-type questions were used subsequently to the binary questions to provide a more detailed insight into a respondent's experience (Arrow et al. 2012). While binary questions may result in greater reliability, scales such as ratios provide improved construct validity and are a better representation of behaviours and attitudes (Boateng et al. 2018). Ratio scale-type questions also reduce potential bias by removing individual interpretation, social desirability bias, and acquiescent responding, issues that are more prevalent with other question types such as Likert scales (Lee 1996; Olson 2006). Closed questions can also restrict respondent choice; however, the effects of this were minimised by utilising ratio questions that encompassed the range of possible numerical responses, with a "not applicable" option (Breakwell et al. 2020). Complementary, qualitative data regarding return to full membership, subsequent periods of maternity leave, and suggested improvements for member maternity policy were collected using open-ended questions. These questions asked respondents to expand on their answers to the ratio scale questions and were embedded within the quantitative questionnaire to provide greater insight and understanding of how professional bodies can support their members during and after maternity leave (Almalki 2016; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011; Driscoll et al. 2007). Qualitative questions are subject to non-response bias due to respondent burden, which can limit the generalisability of the data (Berg 2005). Despite this limitation, such questions were included to improve the content validity of the study (Abowitz and Toole 2010).

4. Results

4.1. Participant Information

4.1.1. Professional Body Survey

Table 1 provides the respondent participant information. The target population of professional bodies identified as relating to the "built environment sector" by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC 2024). To ensure participants met the criteria, the survey was issued directly to representatives of the 29 identified professional bodies. Responses were received from 18 of those identified.

4.1.2. Individual Professional Survey

Table 2 provides the background participant information from respondents. The target population was females who were current or previous members of the identified, built environment sector professional bodies, and who had experienced maternity leave whilst holding membership of one of the identified, built environment sector professional bodies (HMRC 2024). To ensure participants met the necessary criteria, the survey included qualification questions about their gender identity and professional body membership. Responses from participants who did not meet the qualifying criteria were removed from the results. A total of 125 responses were received, and all responses met the qualifying criteria.

Table 1. Professional body survey respondents.

Responded	Declined to Respond	Failed to Respond
Architects Registration Board	Chartered Institute for Archaeologists	Association for Project Management
Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists	Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation	Chartered Association of Building Engineers
Chartered Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors	Institution of Engineering Designers	Chartered Institute of Arbitrators
Chartered Institute of Ecology & Environmental Management	Institute of Residential Property Management	Chartered Institution of Building Service Engineers
Chartered Institute of Marketing Construction Industry Group		Chartered Institute of Housing
Chartered Institute of Building		Chartered Quality Institute
Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply		Institution of Structural Engineers
Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management		
Chartered Society of Designers		
Institution of Civil Engineers		
Institute of Clerks of Works and Construction Inspectorate		
Institution of Engineering and Technology		
Institution of Mechanical Engineers		
Institution of Occupational Safety and Health		
Landscape Institute		
Royal Institute of British Architects		
Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors		
Royal Town Planning Institute		

Table 2. Participant information.

Information	No.	Percentage
Professional Body Membership		
Association for Project Management	1	0.79
Architects Registration Board	10	7.87
Chartered Association of Building Engineers	1	0.79
Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists	6	4.72
Chartered Institution of Building Service Engineers	3	2.36
Chartered Institution of Civil Engineering Surveyors	2	1.57
Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation	3	2.36
Chartered Institute of Building	2	1.57
Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management	1	0.79
Institution of Civil Engineers	5	3.94
Institution of Engineering and Technology	1	0.79
Royal Institute of British Architects	6	4.72
Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors	70	55.12
Royal Town Planning Institute	16	12.60
Total	127	100%
Year of First Maternity Leave		
1990–1994	1	0.79
1994–1999	4	3.15
2000–2004	6	4.72
2005–2009	15	11.81
2010–2014	17	13.39
2015–2019	38	29.92
2020–2024	45	35.43
Prefer not to answer	1	0.79
Total	127	100%
Length of First Maternity Leave		
0–9 weeks	3	2.36
10–19 weeks	5	3.94
20–29 weeks	20	15.75
30–39 weeks	30	23.62
40–49 weeks	22	17.32
50–59 weeks	43	33.86
60–69 weeks	3	2.36
Made redundant after 6 weeks	1	0.79
Total	127	100.00

4.2. Reliability of Quantitative Data

4.2.1. Professional Body Survey

The survey for professional bodies was tested with three colleagues to ensure that the questions were clear and unambiguous and would achieve the survey objectives (Brown 2001). Purposive sampling is limited by external validity; the more purposive a sample, the less generalisable the data set is outside of the population defined by the sample (Andrade 2021). However, for the purposes of this study, external validity is of limited relevance.

4.2.2. Individual Professional Survey

Survey questions are susceptible to ambiguity if not adequately tested, and responses are subject to interpretation by the respondent. Administering questionnaires in person is one method of addressing this limitation; however, this was not a practical option for this study (Brown 2001; Coughlin et al. 2009; Gillham 2008). Instead of administering questionnaires in person, the researcher conducted a survey trial with three female professionals to ensure that the questions were clear and would achieve the survey objectives (Brown 2001). Unintentional research bias is also a potential limitation of voluntary sampling; voluntary surveys are more likely to attract responses from certain individuals than others. Furthermore, the researcher's personal network is limited to predominantly surveying professionals. To address this limitation, the researcher distributed the survey to a wide range of organisations and via a wide range of social networks, in an effort to capture an accurate representation of the target population (Coughlin et al. 2009; Faber and Fonseca 2014).

4.3. Quantitative Data and Results

Quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel (Version 2407) and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows, Version 29), chosen for convenience reasons due to availability through the academic institution. Data are presented as mean, standard deviation including confidence intervals (mean \pm SD), and mode, unless otherwise stated.

4.3.1. Professional Body Survey

Professional body representatives were asked whether they provide membership fee and continued professional development (CPD) relief for members during maternity leave (dichotomous, yes/no), and what percentage discount was offered for each (ratio scales). In total, 72.2% of the 18 respondents offered some level of fee discount for members during maternity leave. The mean fee discount was 6.82 ± 2.36 (51–60%), 95% CI [5.43, 8.21]. The mode fee discount was 71–80%. Figure 1 provides the level of fee discount offered by those professional bodies who do offer a discount; those answering “other” offered a reduced, flat rate membership fee, rather than a percentage discount.

A total of 72.2% of respondents offered some level of mandatory CPD discount for members during maternity leave. The mean CPD discount was 6.78 ± 4.38 (51–60%), 95% CI [3.92, 9.64]. The mode CPD discount was 91–100%. Figure 2 provides the level of CPD discount offered by those professional bodies who do offer a discount; those answering “other” had suggested, rather than mandatory, CPD policies for members.

A total of 38.9% of respondents required some form of re-entry assessment for members returning from maternity leave. Only 11.1% of all respondents reported collecting data on return to membership after maternity leave, and only 1 respondent was able to provide a percentage return rate (81–90%). Maternity policy for 88.9% of respondents was unchanged for subsequent periods of member maternity leave. Respondents were asked about the design method of their maternity policy (multiple choice); 72.2% of respondents provided information, and Table 3 provides these responses.

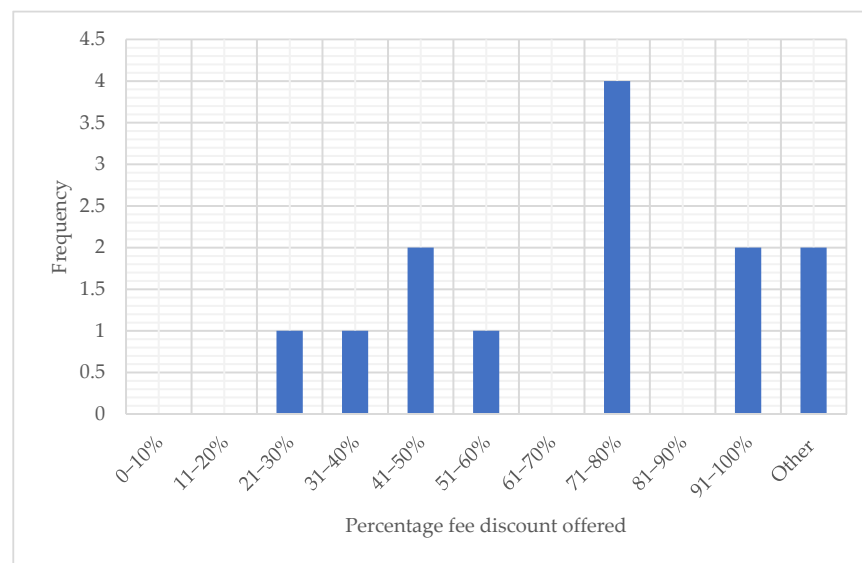


Figure 1. Percentage fee discount offered to members during maternity leave.



Figure 2. Percentage CPD discount offered to members during maternity leave.

Table 3. Method of maternity policy design.

Length of CPD Discount	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Internally led (designed by staff)	9	50.0%
Internal research-led (information collected by your professional body)	4	30.8%
Member-led (survey, feedback, etc.)	4	30.8%
External research-led (information collected by others)	2	11.1%
N/A	3	16.7%

4.3.2. Individual Professional Survey

Respondents were asked whether they received membership fee and continued professional development (CPD) relief from their professional body during their first period of maternity leave (dichotomous, yes/no), and what percentage discount was offered for each

(ratio scales). In total, 37.8% of respondents received a fee discount, 10.2% of respondents were offered a fee discount which they did not utilise, and 52.0% of respondents did not receive a fee discount from their professional body during their first maternity leave. The mean fee discount received was 7.00 ± 3.176 (61–70%), 95% CI [2.24, 4.10]. The mode fee discount received was 91–100%. Figure 3 provides the level of fee discount received by those professional body members who received a fee discount.

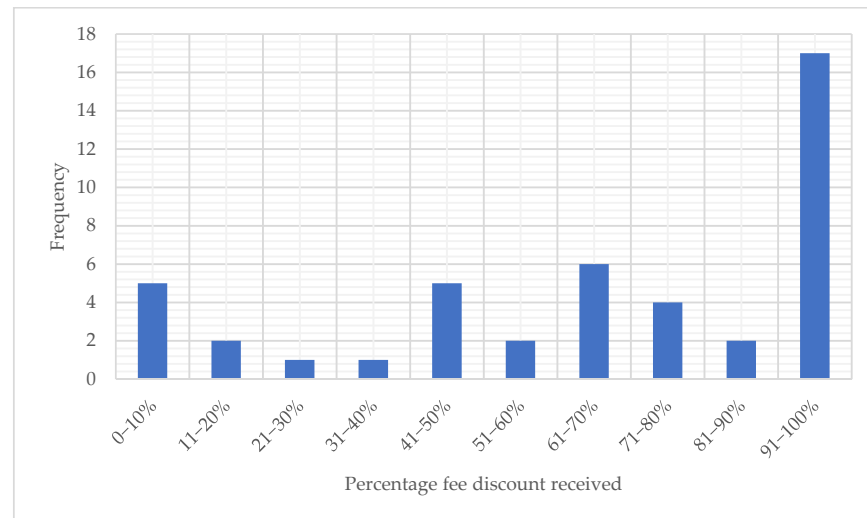


Figure 3. Percentage fee discount received by professional body members during maternity leave.

A total of 65.4% of respondents received some level of mandatory CPD discount, Additionally, 7.9% of respondents were offered a CPD discount which they did not utilise, and 26.8% of respondents did not receive any CPD discount from their professional body during their first maternity leave. The mean CPD discount received was 7.47 ± 3.53 (61–70%), 95% CI [2.34, 4.71]. The mode fee discount received was 91–100%. Figure 4 provides the level of CPD discount received by those professional body members who received a discount.

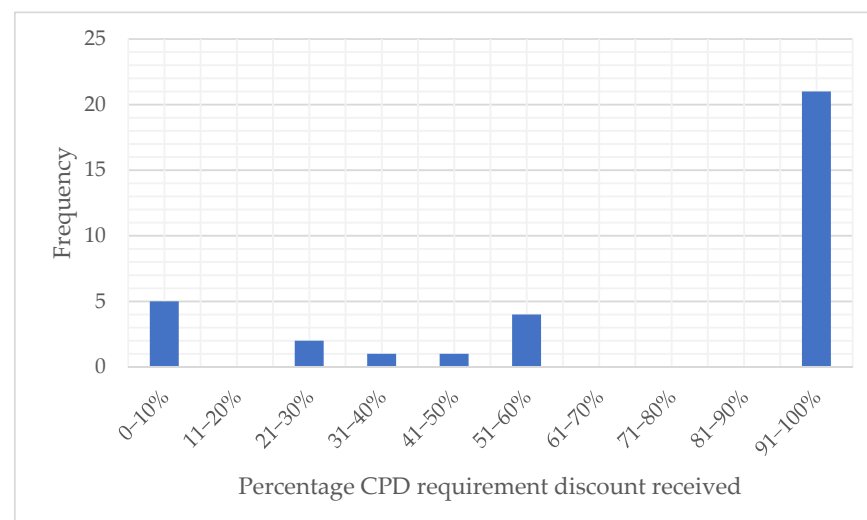


Figure 4. Percentage mandatory CPD discount received by professional body members during maternity leave.

In total, 93.7% of respondents returned to full membership of their professional body after their first period of maternity leave. A total of 5.5% returned, but chose a reduced level of membership, and 0.8% left professional body membership. In addition, 7.9% of

all respondents maintained their full membership as there was no reduced membership level offered by their professional body. No respondents indicated that they were required to undertake any form of re-entry assessment after their maternity leave. In total, 50.4% of respondents experienced a subsequent period of maternity leave; of those respondents, 14.1% found that their subsequent experiences of maternity leave with their professional body were different to the first experience. Additionally, 20.5% of respondents indicated that information on maternity policy from their professional body was easy to locate, 51.2% indicated that information was not easy to find, and 28.3% did not seek information. Figure 5 provides the sources of information for maternity leave policy.

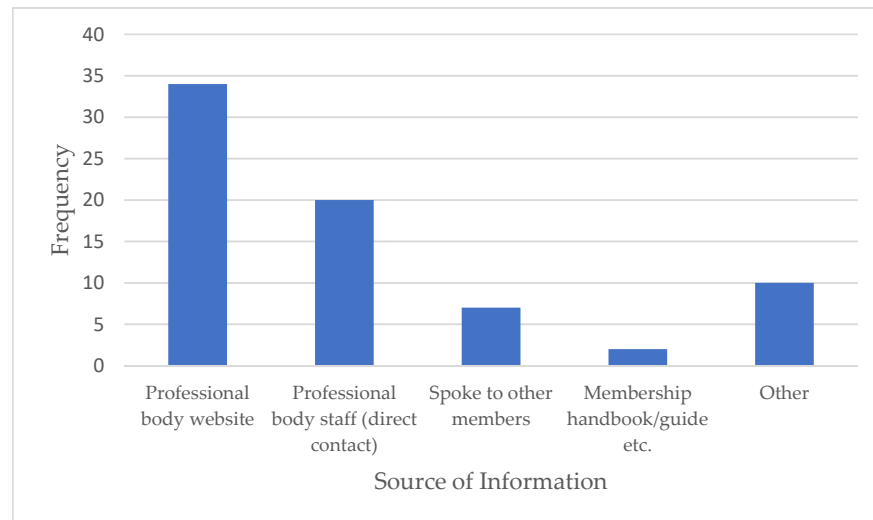


Figure 5. Sources of information used by members to investigate maternity policy.

4.4. Qualitative Data Analysis

4.4.1. Professional Body Survey

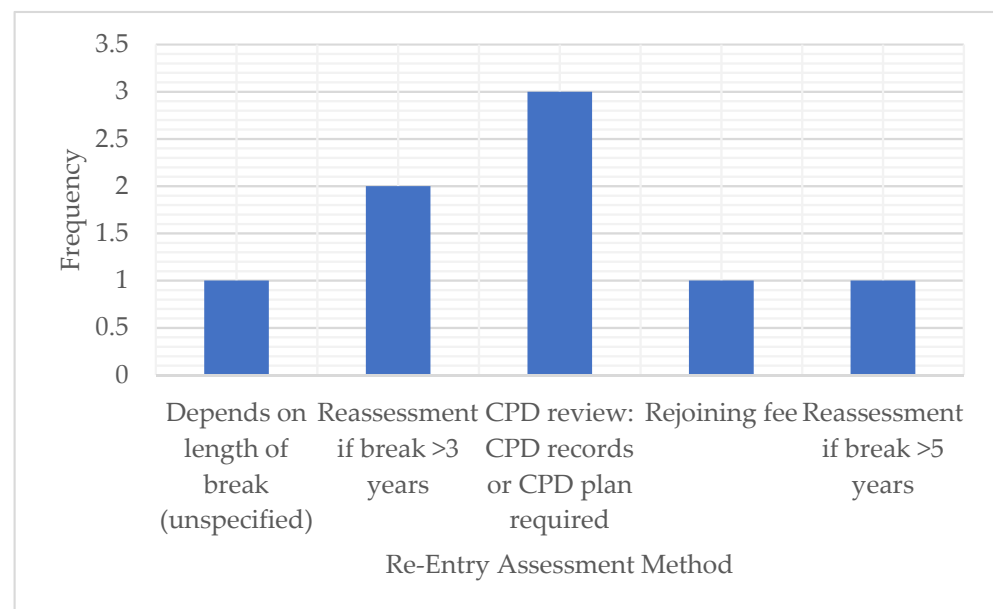
Complementary qualitative data were collected in addition to the quantitative data, using free-text entry questions. These questions gave the respondents an opportunity to expand on the ratio scale answers. Table 4 provides the length of fee discount available for members during maternity leave. Table 5 provides the length of CPD discount available for members during maternity leave. Figure 6 provides the form and incidence of re-entry assessments required.

Table 4. Length of membership fee discount offered to members during maternity leave.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
39 weeks	1	7.7%
1 year for each child	7	53.9%
Maximum 5 years (membership abeyance rather than discount)	1	7.7%
Until child of school age (claimed annually)	1	7.7%
No time limit (claimed annually)	2	15.4%
Based on earnings under annual income threshold (£GBP 21,674), no time limit	1	7.7%
Total	13	100%

Table 5. Length of CPD discount offered to members during maternity leave.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
6 months for each child	1	7.7%
Duration of parental leave (not inc. longer career break)	2	15.4%
1 year for each child	5	38.5%
Maximum 3 years	1	7.7%
Maximum 5 years (membership abeyance rather than discount)	1	7.7%
CPD not compulsory	3	23.1%
Total	13	100%

**Figure 6.** Form and incidence of re-entry assessment required.

4.4.2. Individual Professional Survey

Complementary qualitative data were collected in addition to the quantitative data, using free-text entry questions. These questions gave the respondents an opportunity to expand on the ratio scale answers. Table 6 provides the length of fee discount available for members during maternity leave. Table 7 provides the length of CPD discount available for members during maternity leave.

Respondents were asked to expand on whether they felt supported by their professional body during their maternity leave and how support during maternity leave could be improved using a free-text entry question. Responses underwent thematic analysis by inductive coding to identify key themes using NVivo Pro qualitative data analysis software (version 12). The key themes identified from the qualitative survey data are then summarised in Table 8.

Table 6. Length of membership fee discount received by members during maternity leave.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1 year	30	61.2%
Duration of maternity leave period	7	14.3%
An entire membership renewal period	6	12.2%
At discretion of professional body	2	4.1%
Duration of maternity leave and part-time working	2	4.1%
5 years	2	4.1%
Total	49	100%

Table 7. Length of CPD discount received by members during maternity leave.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1 year	20	57.1%
Duration of maternity leave period	7	20.0%
6 months	4	11.4%
5 years	3	8.6%
Retrospectively reduced CPD requirement after individual received notices of a penalty	1	2.9%
Total	35	100%

Table 8. Member views on improving professional body support for members during maternity leave.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents	Key Examples
Member felt support could be better/did not feel supported by their professional membership organisation	53	59.6%	"There was no support (of which I am aware)"
			"I don't feel there was any support"
			"There was zero professional body support that I was aware of"
			"What support?! Neither (<i>professional body</i>) offered any kind of support at the time"
Member did not realise any support was available	20	22.5%	"I was not aware of any maternity support, so communication on anything available would have been good"
			"... I didn't know about membership discounts until 5 years later."
			"I have no idea of what was provided; I didn't proactively search for it; but neither was it promoted to me in a clear and direct manner..."
Suggestion—information should be more easily accessible	19	21.3%	"I couldn't find any information in support of a reduced rate to cover my maternity leave"
			"...finding information about fees was difficult and after that they were not interested."
			"...didn't advertise, communicate or notify it's members about it."
			"It wasn't published on the website as an option, I had to contact them and ask if I could have a fee reduction."
Suggestion—would like support on returning to work/working after family	11	12.4%	"...they could do more when returning to work. Make part-time working and flexible good around childcare more accepted..."
			"Support with return to work and perhaps CPD updates on any updated in the industry..."
			"Yes—I experienced issues at work after maternity leave and it would have been good to have been able to turn to professional body for help and support."

Table 8. Cont.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents	Key Examples
Suggestion—would like CPD reduction/struggled to undertake full CPD/CPD while not at work	8	9.0%	“Yes by not expecting new mothers to undertake CPD”
			“Better cpd options—limited time and money!”
			“Yes, the requirement for 35 h of CPD whilst not working and looking after a small baby was very difficult. . . . I think my CPD register was checked. . . .”
Positive—member did feel supported by professional organisation	5	5.6%	“In terms of fees being covered and CPD exemption, I was delighted.”
Suggestion—improve communication	4	4.5%	“Not made aware of time restrictions on maintaining chartered status.”
			“I was lead to believe that I had to comply with all the requirements and I did pay a full fee.”
			“Still sent chasers and emails, despite knowing in mat leave, to meet certain requirements.”
			“I have emailed. . . but still haven’t heard anything back which isn’t helpful”
Member felt that support during maternity was not professional body role	4	4.5%	“It didn’t feel like their role particularly”
			“Their support feels limited in my current role. . . .”
Suggestion—reduce complexity (maintained full membership as it was too complex otherwise/felt pressured to do so)	3	3.4%	“I had to pay the full membership, or I would be deleted from (<i>professional body</i>), and had to follow the process of re-joining again”
Suggestion—enable voluntary roles with professional body to accommodate family commitments and/or costs	3	3.4%	“Forums that respected childcare commitments, etc.”
			“I was an. . . assessor when my baby was just 6 weeks old. I had to pay childcare. I asked (<i>professional body</i>) to refund it and they refused.”
			“rather hurtfully, I used to be an. . . assessor. . . because I was a few hours short on my CPD, they said I could not continue. . . and I would have to complete a year’s worth of CPD before I could assess. . . I have never been an assessor since”
Suggestion—unspecified improvement required	3	3.4%	“. . . there is still considerably more to be done.”
Suggestion—professional bodies should make more effort to not make members feel undervalued/disappointed	3	3.4%	“I don’t understand why they don’t support women more. It makes me so very angry to be undervalued, not just as a woman but professionally.”
			“No discount, no reduced CPD hours, absolutely no help whatsoever. Very disappointing.”
			“I was very disappointed in the callous manner of how I was treated during this period.”
Suggestion—would like fee discount	2	2.2%	“Provide a discount. . . for the time on maternity leave”
Member felt that professional organisations have made improvements since they took leave	2	2.2%	“. . .evolved dramatically since my joining and taking maternity. I think they are far better at considering their female members now. . . .”
Member felt supported although by benevolent fund/linked charity, rather than professional membership organisation	1	1.1%	“. . .Benevolent Fund which is a separate charity. I contacted them and requested help when returning to work from mat leave. They organised and funded a number of phone call sessions with a careers coach who herself was a working mother with 3 children. This was super helpful for me.”

Table 8. Cont.

Theme	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents	Key Examples
Suggestion—do not limit length of career break	1	1.1%	“They limit how long your career break can be”
Suggestion—do not make members feel that membership is under threat	1	1.1%	“Made to feel that my ongoing membership was under threat and subject to approval.”
Suggestion—would like to see regular welfare checks for those on reduced membership	1	1.1%	“Anyone that requests a reduction in membership should have had a follow up. . . I lost a friend in property who was suffering with post natal and juggling work and family. . . could have had more check in points.”
Suggestion—provide support for members undergoing chartered assessment	1	1.1%	“There is very limited support for candidates who go on maternity leave. there is little to none.”
Suggestion—remove requirement to re-sit assessment/re-pay joining fee	1	1.1%	“I was particularly aggrieved that having already achieved (<i>chartership</i>) I was made to complete the entire process again. . . This did make me consider retraining in a different profession.”
Positive—member was able to achieve chartership while on maternity leave	1	1.1%	“When I was on maternity leave I become a member, I studies for it when on maternity leave due to covid.”

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate current maternity policy in the UK built environment sector professional bodies, to explore member experiences of maternity leave whilst holding membership of a built environment sector professional body, and to provide recommendations for future professional body maternity policy. As discussed, minimum standards for employer maternity policy are mandated by legislation ([HM Government 1986, 1996, 1999](#)). However, there has been little evaluation of professional body maternity support, despite their unique position and ability to lead in improving gender diversity in the built environment sector ([Barnes 2019](#); [Construction Industry Council 2023](#); [Morrell 2020](#); [Royal Institute of British Architects 2022](#)). Therefore, a review of current professional body maternity policy and member experience would be beneficial to supporting gender diversity in the sector.

Section 1 will discuss the current, built environment sector and professional body maternity and career break policy. Section 2 will discuss the experiences of individual, built environment sector professionals who have undertaken maternity leave whilst holding professional body membership. The conclusion section will discuss individual professional respondents’ opinions on improvements to the built environment sector professional body member maternity policy and support offered.

5.1. Current Built Environment Sector Support for Members during Maternity Leave

Of the 18 respondents, 72.2% offered some level of fee discount to members during maternity leave from their usual employment. The mode fee discount provided was 71–80% of the full membership fee, although the responses ranged from 21–30% to 91–200% discounts. The mode duration of the fee discount offered was one year, although responses varied from 39 weeks to unrestricted (with annual application). One respondent based their fee discount on an earnings threshold of GBP 21,674; mothers earning more than this amount annually would not receive a discount. Two respondents offered a flat rate, discounted fee, regardless of membership level’s cost. Overall, the responses to this question suggest that the fee discounts offered by professional bodies for members during maternity leave are inconsistent across the sector and that the level of support offered is dependent upon which professional body an individual holds membership with.

Of the 18 respondents, 72.2% provided some level of CPD relief to members during maternity leave from their usual employment. The mode CPD discount provided was 91–100% of the annual CPD requirement, although the responses ranged from 01–10%

to 91–100% discounts. The mode duration of the CPD discount offered was one year, although responses varied from 6 months to 5 years. Three respondents held suggestive CPD policies for members, meaning that relief was not required for members who may struggle to achieve the suggested amount. Again, the level of support offered varied drastically between different professional bodies.

The method of policy design may provide some explanation for the variability of the support offered between various professional bodies; 50% of respondents reported that their policy was internally designed. A total of 30.8% used membership data collected by themselves, and 30.8% collected direct feedback from members who had received concessions during maternity leave. Only 11.1% of respondents reported consulting with any external sources of expertise when designing their maternity or career break policies for members. This is consistent with the findings of the literature review, which identified a research gap around professional body support for members during maternity and facilitation of re-entry into work (Morrell 2020). The relationship between a professional membership body and a member is vastly different from that of an employer and an employee; therefore, the variability in the support offered may be explained by a lack of data or evidence (Barnes 2019; Construction Industry Council 2023; Morrell 2020; Royal Institute of British Architects 2022). Nevertheless, member feedback has been identified as a vital source of information for professional bodies when developing their services and policies, and some respondents did utilise this source of information when designing their policies (Fernandez and Castellanos 2022). Furthermore, one respondent reported consulting an external organisation who was able to provide guidance on maternity policy design. Diversity and human resources specialists are able to provide expert advice and guidance on maternity policy design (Be the Change People 2024; Pitts 2024). Currently, there is no benchmarking available for professional membership organisations when designing member maternity policies. It may be that professional bodies could seek better information sources when designing member maternity policies. Professional bodies are well placed to create cultural change through leadership, a key driver for enabling women's progression identified by Reskin and Hartmann (Reskin and Hartmann 1986). A collaborative approach between organisations or the introduction of benchmarking may be beneficial.

This position is further confounded by only one respondent reporting data collection upon return to full membership post-concessionary membership. Professional bodies may be able to improve their approach to data collection and member feedback, post-concessionary membership.

5.2. Individual Professional Experience

Only 37.8% of the 127 respondents received some level of fee discount from their professional body during their first maternity leave from their normal employment. For those who did receive a discount, the mode fee discount was 91–100%; however, responses ranged from 0–10% to 91–100%. The mode duration of fee discount received was 1 year (61.2%); however, responses varied from the duration of the maternity leave period to 5 years. Two respondents seemed unclear on a specified duration, stating that the duration was at the discretion of the professional body.

Regarding CPD relief, 65.4% of respondents did receive some discount on mandatory CPD requirements, and 7.9% of respondents were offered a discount but did not utilise it. The mode CPD discount was 91–100%; again, the range of responses was wide from 01–10% to 91–100%. The mode duration of the CPD discount was 1 year; however, responses ranged from 6 months to 5 years. One respondent reported not initially receiving any CPD relief, then having their requirement retrospectively reduced after a penalty notice was issued for failure to comply.

The key theme emerging from the individual professional survey was, again, inconsistency across the sector. All questions showed wide variability in responses, both between members of different professional bodies, but also between members of the same professional body. This is consistent with the findings of the literature review, which identified

high variability in the support offered by different professional bodies to members during parental leave ([Chartered Institute of Building 2023](#); [Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2023b](#)). The impact of the lack of support for female members from their professional body can have a significant impact on career progression ([Construction Industry Council 2023](#); [Royal Institute of British Architects 2022](#)). Once again, professional bodies are drivers of cultural change within the built environment sector and could utilise their position to drive improvement for members ([Construction Industry Council 2023](#); [Reskin and Hartmann 1986](#)).

Participants were also asked to give their perspective on whether their professional body could have supported them better during their maternity leave, and what improvements they would suggest. A total of 59.6% of respondents indicated that they felt that their professional body could have supported them better during their maternity leave. Additionally, 22.5% of respondents did not realise that any support was available. A total of 14 suggestions were made as to how professional bodies could better support members during maternity leave; see Table 8. Suggestions included making information more accessible and the process less complex, more support when returning to work, mandatory CPD reduction, fee reduction, improving the accessibility of voluntary roles, and generally more supportive attitudes towards members during and after maternity leave. Conversely, 5.6% of respondents felt adequately supported, and 4.5% of respondents indicated that they felt that support during maternity leave was not the role of a professional body. In addition, 2.2% of respondents did identify that some improvements had been made by their professional body since their maternity leave.

The responses to this question were reflective of the responses given to earlier questions, generally indicating feelings of a lack of support or a lack of awareness of the support that is available. The mode suggestion was that available information on support was difficult to find or inaccessible, a finding that is consistent with the findings of the literature review ([Chartered Institute of Building 2023](#); [Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors 2023b](#)). More support on returning to work was the second most common suggestion; considering that only one of the 18 professional body survey respondents collected data on return to membership, it could be inferred that return to work is an area that lacks consideration by professional bodies. Work–family, facilitation, and reduction policies have been demonstrated to have a tangible impact on women’s progression after motherhood ([Budig et al. 2010](#)); although the relationship between a professional body and its members is different to the employer–employee relationship, a lack of consideration regarding return to work as been shown to have a lasting impact on women’s careers ([Construction Industry Council 2023](#)).

To summarise, the results of this study indicate that the majority of professional bodies offer member fee and CPD discount during maternity leave. The design of professional body membership maternity policy is typically founded on the advice of staff, rather than member data or external sources. The experience of women experiencing maternity leave is highly variable. Variability in experience is not solely dependent upon professional body membership; members of the same professional body report different experiences. Access to information about support during maternity leave is poor, and many women seem unaware of the support offered by their professional body.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate current maternity policy in the UK built environment sector professional bodies, to explore member experiences of maternity leave whilst holding membership of a built environment sector professional body, and to provide recommendations for future professional body maternity policy.

Considering the first current policy, although most professional bodies surveyed did have some form of policy for members undertaking maternity leave, offering fee discounts and CPD relief, there was wide variability between the support offered. Additionally, some professional bodies offered flat rate, reduced fees instead of discounts, disproportionately

supporting those holding higher levels of membership better. Some based support on member earnings dropping below a certain threshold. The requirement for re-assessment on return to full membership after concessions was generally unclear and contingent on factors such as the length of the break and the amount of CPD a member was able to undertake during their leave. Some professional bodies altered the support offered for subsequent periods of maternity leave. The collection of data on return to full membership after concession was very limited. Policy design was most commonly undertaken internally by professional body staff, with limited consultation of member data or feedback. Generally, support was inconsistent between professional bodies, suggesting that best practice sharing is not commonplace in the sector. Knowledge sharing and collaboration to achieve a consistent approach across the sector could be beneficial for member experience. Introducing benchmarking could be an effective method of achieving this.

The general overall membership experience was one of not feeling supported, or not being aware that any support was available. Access to information on member support during maternity leave was poor and often contingent on members seeking out information directly from professional body staff. Better support on return to work was a common request. Some respondents expressed feelings of being undervalued or feeling disappointed in the response of their professional body during maternity leave.

Currently, member experience appears to be dependent upon which professional body they hold membership with, and whether they are able to seek out the information on support. Professional bodies should be aware of support offered by other organisations and aim to achieve parity across the sector, reducing the role-specific nature of current member experience. Access to information and signposting should be improved, as should the collection of feedback from members when considering policy design. Finally, support on return to work and around the challenges of working with a family seems to be an area of concern for working professional women. This is an area in which professional bodies are well placed to provide support to individuals and best practice guidance to registered employer organisations.

6.1. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to the potential limitations below. Responses were limited to female residents of the UK, who had experienced maternity leave whilst holding membership of one of the identified, built environment sector professional membership organisations.

6.1.1. Methodology Limitations

There are few prior research studies in this subject area; therefore, previous examples of appropriate methodologies are scarce. For this study, the researcher selected an online questionnaire as the method for data collection for both data sets, for convenience reasons and to maintain consistency with the limited, previous studies within this research area. Online questionnaires produce data sets with limited generalisability; the population to which the data are distributed is unable to be described, and respondents may introduce bias through self-selection ([Andrade 2020](#)). Respondents who have had negative experiences may be more likely to respond ([Andrade 2020](#)). The researcher attempted to reduce bias by asking the professional membership organisations to distribute the survey to members, therefore allowing the population to be better defined; however, the variations in the efficiency of distribution between the professional bodies resulted in skewed response rates.

6.1.2. Research Process Limitations

This project was unfunded and therefore subject to the researcher's time constraints. Conducting follow-up interviews may have benefited the individual professional data set by providing more detailed insight and higher content validity; however, this additional data collection opportunity was disregarded due to these time constraints ([Sánchez-Guardiola Paredes et al. 2021](#)).

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