

MUMS RETURNING TO WORK

Peer support among families

Families Supporting Families is a project at Outside the Box which is developing peer support and exploring what things help support different kinds of families. We are looking at peer support across a broad range of people and topics. The people include parents who have poor mental wellbeing, parents with teenagers, families with young children, grandparents who are taking in day-to-day parenting support, Rainbow families where a parent or child describes themselves as LGBT+, families who have to come to Scotland from other countries, and families with a child who has disabilities or other different needs. The issues include: mental wellbeing, social inclusion, peer support, access to community led activity and services where needed.

Mums returning to work

We met with groups of women who are returning to work after having children. They described how there were local peer support groups and networks for Mums with babies and young children, which many women find are good for their own wellbeing and for their children. These groups mostly happen during the day and this source of peer support stops for most women once they go back to work.

From speaking to Mums and employers we have developed two resources:

- A guide that describes some of the issues women are facing in their return to work. It gives information about support networks and shares some of their experiences – which we hope will give some emotional and practical reassurance to other women in these circumstances.
- This discussion paper complements the guide. It helps highlight the good practice of employers in Scotland as well as looking for solutions to support Mums to have equal access to work.

We want to thank all the people who helped us with this discussion paper.

What is happening for Mums returning to work?

There are gaps for women around their awareness of maternity rights and in their rights when returning to work. In addition, many women are unaware of the supports available to them. What Mums said was significant for them was what happens for women returning to work after having children and how this impacts on their family lives.

What are women saying?

What was good about going back to work?

‘I was really pleased to get back to work, don’t get me wrong I love being a Mummy but I needed to have adult company and another purpose again.’

‘I work with a supportive team, where things in the work place are not always perfect, there is always scope to discuss this and look to solutions without feeling that you’ll be in trouble for raising them.’

‘At first when I told my employer I was pregnant, he panicked because it’s a small firm and I was the only one doing that job. I felt worried by his reaction but give him his due, he spoke to me about it and we worked out a way around it suitable for the firm meaning I felt very supported when I came back.’

‘I felt like I got my identity back - past being a Mummy, which gave me a bit more confidence.’

‘Good communication and flexibility is key.’

‘Getting to come in for team meetings before my return was helpful so I could get my head back in the zone again.’

‘I had a phased return which was really good for me because I was feeling really emotional about leaving my baby.’

‘Good family back-up and support always helps but not everyone has that option.’

‘Knowing that my work was breast feeding friendly and I’d have a space to express milk for my baby.’

From the point when women informed their employer they were pregnant to the point they were due to return to work many Mums had similar experiences at each end; when employers were supportive of women during maternity, they were generally supportive on their return. When employers were difficult, it tended to be the case that the whole process was stressful and challenging.

Why it matters?

An **estimated 70% of mothers in Scotland** are currently in paid employment. This is three times as many as 60 years ago. The majority of mothers in employment work part-time, six in ten with children who are pre-school or primary school age and half with children at secondary school.

The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self Employed say that **more women are going into freelancing**, even if they had recently had a child. The report 'Exploring the UK Freelance Workforce', found that the number of women going into freelance work has increased drastically. The gender split of freelance workers is now roughly 60% male and 40% female. Around **287,000 are mothers** meaning nearly 38% of self-employed women across the UK are working mums.

Mums who work freelance told us that whilst it is good to have the flexibility freelancing offers, this brought with it a host of different responsibilities to juggle in addition to making their work fit around the family. Their decision to move into freelance work was often in response to a significant lack of support and or flexibility offered in their employed positions. Their choice had been limited, having been unable to reach a reasonable, flexible agreement with their employer.

Maternity discrimination

The Equality and Human Rights Commission research states that more than three quarters of pregnant women and new mothers, **the equivalent of 390,000 women experience negative and potentially discriminatory treatment** at work each year.

ACAS has recently published guidance to help employers create supportive workplaces for women during pregnancy and maternity. ACAS received more than 14,000 calls last year about pregnancy and maternity issues - an increase of almost 10% on the previous year.

What the Law says

Legislative provisions include:

- Equality Act 2010 which outlaws discrimination against employees because of the 'protected characteristic' of pregnancy and maternity during the 'protected period.'
- Employment Rights Act 1996 which sets out rights to health and safety, time off for ante-natal care, maternity leave and unfair dismissal.
- Maternity & Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999 which set out a woman's entitlement to maternity leave and the notification requirements.
- European law including the Pregnant Workers Directive and the recast Equal Treatment Directive which provide pregnant women or women on maternity leave with protected status.

What are women saying?

What were the challenges of going back?

'There probably is a lot of information out there but some employers are genuinely in the dark about how they should approach maternity and women's return to work.'

'I knew as soon as I told my boss I was pregnant, I would be viewed as having very little use and she did not disappoint. I was isolated from the rest of the team and told I was a 'burden.' On my return she made sure I felt unwelcome - I left 4 months later.'

'I was forced to come back on a full-time basis or I was told I could lose my job.'

'I felt so alone and isolated. I didn't know my rights and was being told I didn't have any.'

'My employer sent me 3 separate contracts after I told her I was pregnant, each one contracting me out of my maternity rights, and I was pressured to sign or I'd lose my job.'

'Employers dressing up your rights as favours to you.'

'I'd had a difficult birth and my baby had to have an operation after she was born. A few days later after getting home from the hospital, I received a letter telling me that whilst on maternity I had been put on the re-deployment list and would have to re-interview for my job. My baby was still unwell, I was breast feeding and we were all trying to recover as a family. I still don't know how I got myself to that interview.'

'Honestly you feel so guilty about coming back to work anyway and having to leave your baby with someone else is hard enough. The last thing you need is to be treated like crap on top of it all at work'

'I was asked during my maternity if I'd like to come back on a full-time or part-time basis with the option of changing if I needed to. I chose part-time but then ended up doing in 3 days what I should have been doing in 5.'

'What really upset me was when I came back I'd had important responsibilities taken from me and given to others. This was never discussed nor was I given them back. I felt like I was being punished and no longer valued.'

Whether the testimonies from women are a result of employers being misinformed, misguided or they simply do not understand what constitutes good practice; the impact for women and their families is unacceptable and can be hugely detrimental.

How can we generate discussion?

We want to generate discussion across the third sector to learn from each other about good practice and contemporary thinking by employers on the ways that women can achieve equal access to work. We would like to keep this paper 'live' so we can continue our discussions around what's happening in Scotland. This will also provide a platform for peer support networks amongst employers, allowing us to share our experiences on what's working for Mums in the workplace.

What's the cost for families?

The cost and availability of childcare is a major issue for families, particularly Mums returning to work. Many are unable to afford to return to work on a full-time basis as this would mean paying exorbitant fees for childcare to enable them back to employment.

The average cost of a part-time nursery placement in Scotland for a child under two is estimated at £6000 per year. Only 25% of Councils in Scotland report they have enough childcare for every parent working full-time. That figure is even lower for parents who do not work typical office hours and for parents of disabled children.

Using family to get back to work was an option that worked for some people: their families were able to share the responsibilities, particularly grandparents who were either retired or working part-time taking a major role in helping with childcare. But as times change in relation to different responsibilities and affordability to retire, many Mums were unable to rely on family to give enough of their time to meaningfully subsidise child care.

What employers are doing

We have based our conversations around Mums going back to work with third sector employers so we can reflect the wealth of different approaches happening to support working mothers and their families. These conversations can be added to and we invite employers to add their take on how they support mothers back to work.

Employers shared that having an **inbuilt equalities approach starting from recruitment** meant that all roles can be advertised as gender neutral, flexible, with a family friendly focus- including carers. Supporting the mental health and well-being of employees is seen as crucial in embedding positive working practice. Taking on a sincerely flexible working environment meant treating your employees with trust and allowed the space for them to participate in shaping how flexible working can benefit them and the overall work of the organisations or companies.

'We promote flexible recruitment to employers and an awareness that they are potentially missing out on valuable skill sets if they should ignore this.' Family Friendly Working Scotland

'What works for us is a simple, flexible approach tailored to each individual in the organisation. The organisation does not view mums only in relation to childcare, as this is simply not the case any longer. We operate under a health and wellbeing model which is important for work productivity and give time in team meetings to ensure everyone feels valued. As a result, we have a low staff turnover and effective team.' Inspiring Scotland

Where organisations were smaller with a predominately female workforce, it was necessary to **shape organisational practice and policies according to the employees**. This was of particular importance when the organisation itself is providing a service to mothers and children delivered by women with families. An expectation of flexibility both ways- from employer and employee-provides an effective way of balancing needs at both ends of the scale.

'We have to ensure our working practice supports women and their children at both ends of the scale- as employers and as a service that puts children's welfare first across all spectrums. We are open to mums bringing their children to work, we are set up as an organisation to support this'. With Kids

Arts based organisations rely on a workforce that is mostly freelance. Employers highlighted that the very nature of the performance industry is not well aligned to mums returning to work, taking into consideration production times, long hours and how women were to fit childcare needs around this. This means many women are unable to resume their career in the same capacity if at all after having children. A potential solution was seeking opportunities for access to payroll initiatives but more conversations about sharing practice would be a huge benefit to properly inform how this could be implemented. Building a **performing arts parents strategy that would help shape inclusivity across the sector** as well as having unique approaches to the creation of policies that take into account the experiences of the work force was seen as paramount in shaping equality and diversity.

'For us, we are a really small organisation and there is always a bit of trepidation and anxiety around saying you are a family friendly employer because with the best of intentions it's always possible to overlook something. But that's about ensuring you have the right conversations with people, being honest that you're not always going to get it right but being open enough to shape things differently.' Stellar Quines

What next?

Thank you for taking the time to be part of this discussion paper. Now we would like you to think about what you can do to provide support - here are some questions to get the conversation started.

We have a social responsibility to support the potential of women in the work place after having children- how do we champion this?

Are women's rights in the work place irrevocably linked to productivity and what are the implications?

How do we deal with tensions in the workplace arising from an individualised approach to flexible working so that it's not viewed as 'special treatment'?

How do we ensure we are recognising diversity for Mums and their families?

Find out more

Pregnancy and Maternity: Key points for the workplace is available via www.acas.org.uk

Maternity Action

www.maternityaction.org.uk

Equality and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

The Association of Independent Professionals and the Self Employed

www.ipse.co.uk

Family Friendly Working Scotland

www.familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk

With Kids

www.withkids.org.uk

Stellar Quines Theatre Company

www.stellarquines.com

Inspiring Scotland

www.inspiringscotland.org.uk



Contact us

Outside the Box provides independent support to groups and people across Scotland who want to make a difference in their communities. We work on a broad range of projects offering support, information, training, evaluation and advice.

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There is more about what we do at www.otbds.org