



Shared parental leave: the perspective from employers January 2016

Introduction

Shared Parental Leave is a new right for parents with children born or adopted after 5 April 2015. It allows parents to combine work and care in the first year with their child in a different way. Working Families successfully campaigned for the introduction of shared parental leave because we think it gives parents more choice about balancing care and work – and means more fathers will have a realistic opportunity to take a longer period of paid time off to spend with their new child.

To assess how the policy is working, we surveyed employers who represent a wide range of sectors and include small and medium sized enterprises as well as large businesses¹. We found that shared parental leave has a lot of support amongst employers and that many organisations are taking steps towards making it a success. Some of the concerns around the policy, such as staff taking discontinuous periods of leave haven't materialised, but concerns about complexity and cultural barriers remain.

It's still early days for shared parental leave: between 0.5 and 2 per cent of eligible fathers have made use of the new provision so far, but seven out of ten employers (71%) expect take-up to increase in the future.

Key findings

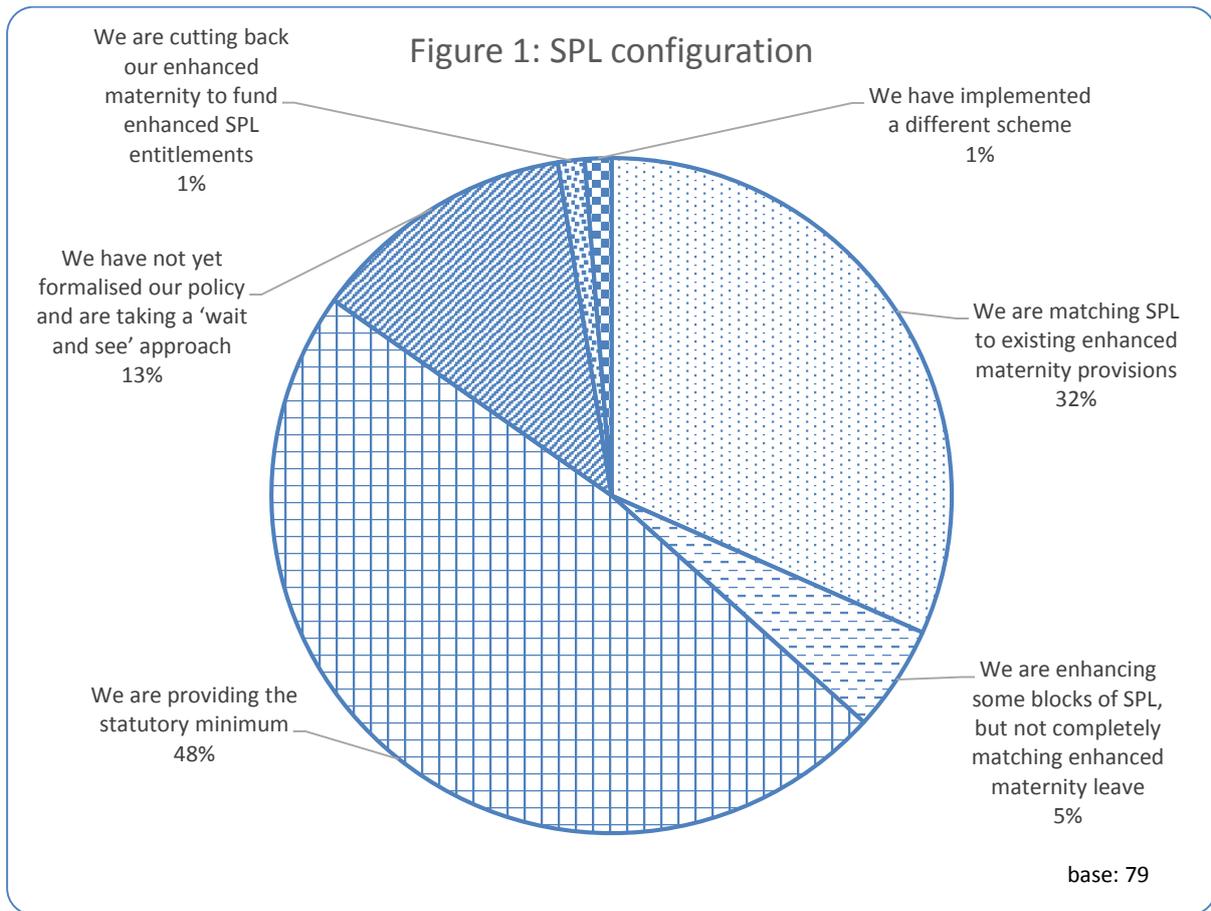
Employers told us they're implementing shared parental leave in different ways. Almost half are choosing to meet statutory minimum requirements while a third are matching shared parental leave to their existing enhanced maternity leave.

Of those that are matching leave to enhanced maternity provision, four in five are offering the same number of weeks of enhanced pay to a father or partner taking shared parental leave as are available to a mother taking maternity leave. 40 per cent of those who are matching shared parental leave to enhanced maternity pay are linking this to the period of higher pay offered to mothers in the weeks following a child's birth or adoption, while the remainder of employers are offering the leave at any time during the first year.

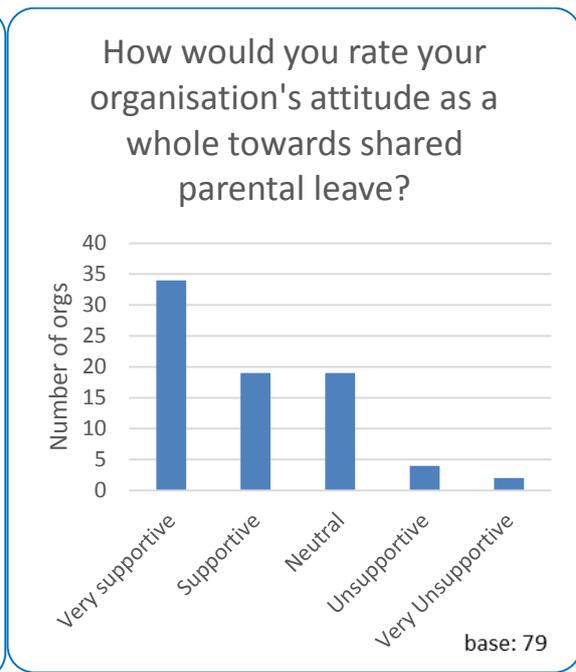
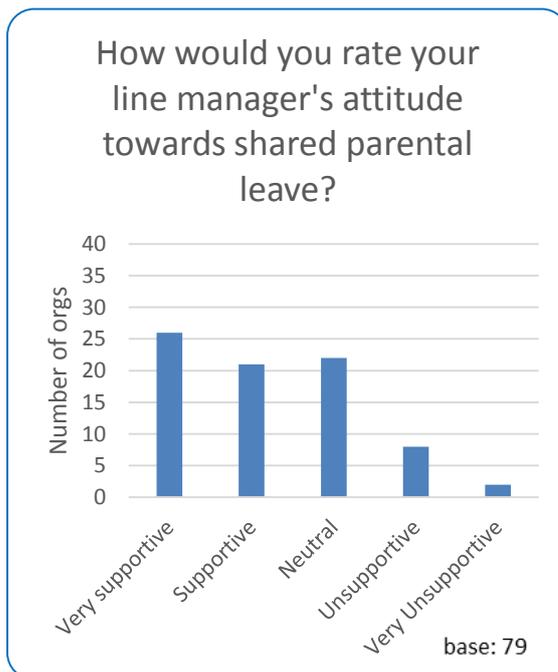
A key concern before the introduction of shared parental leave was that staff would want to take 'discontinuous' periods of time off but, in practice, more than four in five employees (82%) are taking leave in a single block.

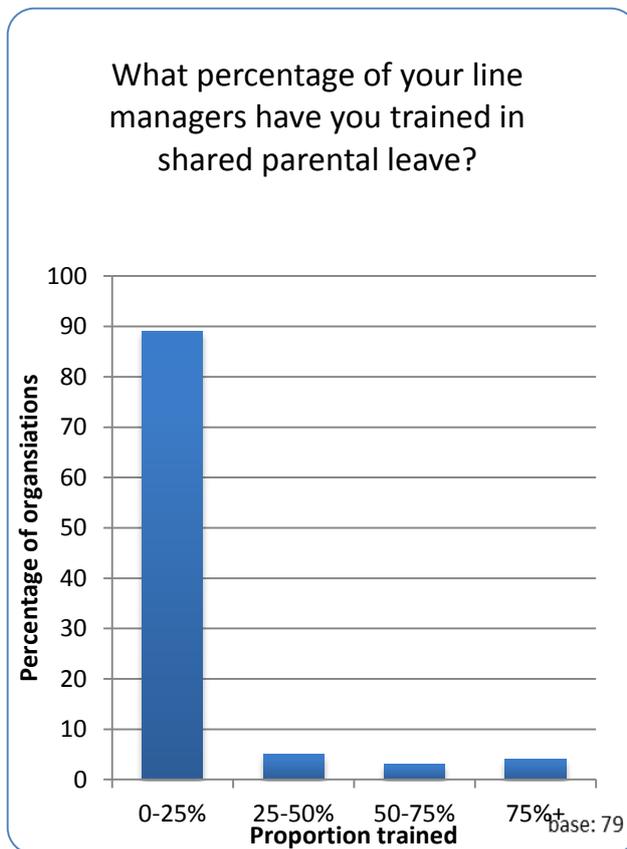
More than one in ten employers (13%) are opting for a 'wait and see' approach but they may not have had any applicants yet. Two thirds of respondents (67%) told us they're planning to review their policy in the next year as shared parental leave becomes more established.

¹ The survey ran through October 2015, approximately six months after shared parental leave became live. There were 79 respondents, with 940,494 employees represented in total. We also held a breakfast briefing with employers that are members of Working Families to explore their experiences in more detail.



Despite being in its infancy, shared parental leave has a lot of support amongst employers with the majority of organisations describing their attitude as supportive or very supportive. Line managers are also supportive of the initiative.





Clear communications and training will be essential to give line managers the tools they need to deal with shared parental leave effectively and to understand the role it plays in the wider flexible culture of the whole organisation. Sixty three per cent of organisations said that line manager knowledge about the new provisions was medium to very low.

At this stage, training for line managers is in its early stages – organisations are focusing on equipping their managers to understand the options, agree leave periods and manage team members taking leave effectively.

Employers described a number of positive impacts of the new policy especially building understanding amongst fathers of the challenges that women face when taking maternity leave. Many organisations were planning for the new policy up to a year before it became law.

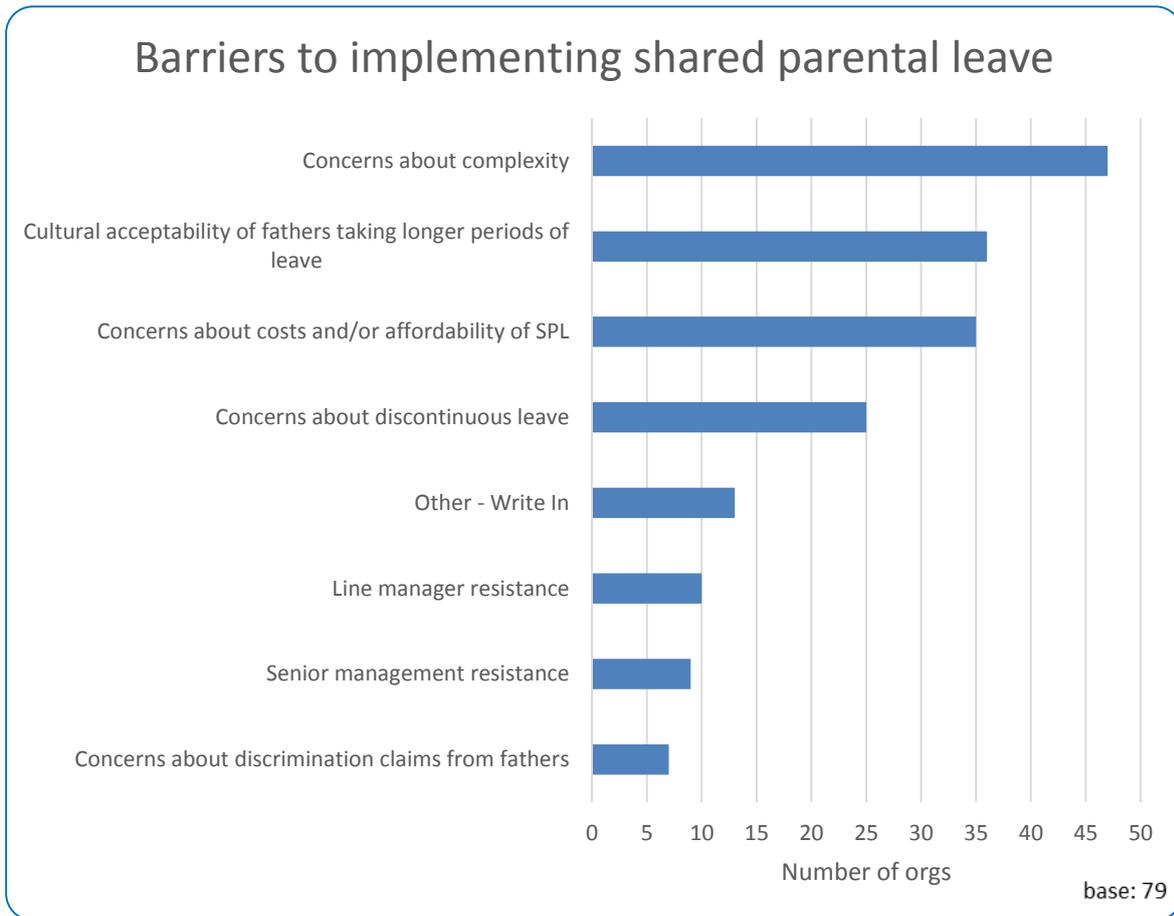
They also identified a number of barriers, in particular the complexity of taking the leave. There was concern that this could become a barrier to take-up if managers were not given adequate training and support.

Cultural issues were also mentioned by a number of employers, with ongoing perceived resistance to fathers taking longer periods of leave. Costs were also raised as a potential barrier – for organisations planning to match shared parental leave to enhanced maternity pay there are some increased costs but these are not as high as might be expected or feared². Employers also commented that some of their female staff did not necessarily want to give up a portion of their maternity leave in exchange for shared parental leave.

“...fathers have voiced that they now understand the emotional journey mothers face when they have to leave the office. Positive feedback has been received on how supportive the firm has been.”

employer

² Working Families has developed a shared parental leave calculator tool to help employers understand what the cost of implementation could be. <http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Working-Families-SPL-calculator.pdf>



Conclusions

Our survey shows that shared parental leave is still in its very early stages. There is clearly a great deal of positive activity around the new policy, and interest amongst employers about how to make this work for their staff. There are a number of building blocks that organisations will need in place to make shared parental leave a success:

- line managers need training and support to manage shared parental leave;
- employers need to consider whether and how they will match shared parental leave to maternity provision: if there is a wide mismatch shared parental leave will remain a 'second class' option; and
- communication with both managers and employees needs to explain not only how shared parental leave works, but also to make clear that this initiative is supported and encouraged.

Employers also told us that mothers are reluctant to 'give up' maternity leave. Of course, this is a matter of parental choice but it also demonstrates the need for shared parental leave to evolve further into a meaningful standalone period of paid leave for fathers. Shared parental leave remains a unique opportunity for employers to take positive action in relation to gender equality in the workplace, choice and control in working life, and staff engagement.

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