



# Parental Leave Policies for Councillors

Research Report

February 2024



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# Summary

## Background

In February 2024, the Local Government Association sent an online survey to heads of democratic services in all councils in England. The purpose of the survey was to understand the extent to which parental leave policies or arrangements had been introduced for councillors across England, and the content and uptake of these policies where they had been introduced. Of the 317 councils in England, a total of 102 councils responded, representing a response rate of 32 per cent.

## Key findings

- **Forty-eight per cent** of respondent councils had at least one parental leave policy in place for councillors, whilst **fifty-two per cent** of respondent councils did not have any.
- In the **vast majority of cases**, these were formal policies rather than informal arrangements.
- **Over half of respondents** who did not have maternity, paternity, adoption, or general parental leave policies in place did not have any plans in place to introduce them.
- **Almost all** of those with policies (98 per cent) reported that the policy included the continued payment of allowances.
- **Seventy-one per cent** of those with policies in place reported that these explicitly addressed exemptions from the six-month attendance rule, whilst **69 per cent** reported that the policy allowed for the councillor to return to any special roles or responsibilities after their leave.
- Given the opportunity to provide further comments, around a third of these comments noted that although they did not have a policy or arrangement in place, a councillor could arrange their own leave with group members, or requests would be reviewed case-by-case.

## Introduction

In February 2024, the Local Government Association sent an online survey to heads of democratic services in all councils in England. The purpose of the survey was to understand the extent to which parental leave policies or arrangements had been introduced for councillors across England, and the content of these policies. Of the 317 councils in England, a total of 102 councils responded, representing a response rate of 32 per cent.

## Methodology

Each authority in England was sent one unique link to participate in the online survey. The survey was circulated to heads of democratic services between 5 and 26 February 2024, and was managed by the LGA's Research and Information team.

Of the 317 councils in England, 102 councils responded to the survey, equivalent to a response rate of 32 per cent. This level of response rate means that these respondents should not necessarily be taken to be widely representative of the views of all heads of democratic services. Rather, they are a snapshot of the views of this particular group of respondents. Furthermore, where questions in this report are broken down by council type, caution should be taken when interpreting these findings due to the low base sizes.

Table 1 shows the response rate by council type, demonstrating that county councils had the highest response rate, at 48 per cent, whilst metropolitan district councils had the lowest response rate, at 25 per cent.

**Table 1: Response rate by type of council**

Type of council	Number of questionnaires	Number of responses	Response rate
District	164	50	30%
County	21	10	48%
London borough	33	14	42%
Metropolitan district	36	9	25%
Unitary	63	19	30%

Table 2 shows the response rate by region, demonstrating that councils in London had the highest response rate, at 42 per cent, closely followed by the South West, at 41 per cent, whilst the North East had the lowest response rate, at 17 per cent.

**Table 2: Response rate by region**

Region	Number of questionnaires	Number of responses	Response rate
East of England	50	11	22%
East Midlands	39	8	21%
London	33	14	42%
North East	12	2	17%
North West	36	13	36%
South East	70	27	39%
South West	29	12	41%
West Midlands	33	10	30%
Yorkshire and Humber	15	5	33%

To make the results of this survey more representative of all councils in England, responses have been weighted by region and council type

In addition, the following should be considered when interpreting the findings of this survey:

- Where tables and figures report the base, the description refers to the group of people who were asked the question. The number provided refers to the unweighted number of respondents who answered each question. Please note that bases can vary throughout the survey.
- Numbers and percentages are provided for any questions where the base was less than 50.
- Throughout the report, percentages may not appear to add up to exactly 100 per cent due to rounding.

## Parental leave policies for councillors

This section contains analysis of the full results from the survey.

### Policies and arrangements in place currently

#### **Percentage of councils with policies or arrangements in place currently**

Respondents were first asked which, if any, parental leave policies they currently had in place for councillors in their authority. Respondents were able to select as many policies as applicable. Table 3 shows the results of this question, demonstrating that just over half (52 per cent) of all respondent authorities reported that they did not have any parental leave policies or arrangements in place. Conversely, 48 per cent reported that they had at least one policy in place; of these policies, respondent authorities were most likely to have a general parental leave policy in place, as reported by 35 per cent of all respondents. General parental leave was defined as a policy or arrangement around the birth or placement of a child that applies equally to either parent, as opposed to a specific maternity or paternity arrangement. Considering specific policies, just over a quarter of all respondents reported having maternity leave (27 per cent), paternity leave (27 per cent), and adoption leave (27 per cent) policies or arrangements in place. One per cent of respondents were unsure which, if any, policies or arrangements their authority had in place.

**Table 3: The percentage of councils with parental leave policies or arrangements in place**

	Per cent
<b>At least one policy in place</b>	<b>48%</b>
No policies or arrangements in place	52%
General parental leave	35%
Maternity leave	27%
Paternity leave	27%
Adoption leave	27%
Don't know	1%

Base: all respondents (102). Note: respondents were able to select more than one policy.

Table 4 shows the results for this question broken down by council type. The table shows that county councils and London boroughs were most likely to have at least one policy or arrangement in place, as reported by around four-fifths of respondents from county councils (81 per cent) and London boroughs (79 per cent), compared to 35 per cent of unitary authority respondents, 42 per cent of shire district respondents, and 46 per cent of metropolitan district respondents. London borough and unitary authorities were both more likely to have separate policies or arrangements in place (maternity, paternity, or adoption) as opposed to a general parental leave policy.

**Table 4: The percentage of councils with parental leave policies or arrangements in place, by council type**

	County	District	London borough	Metro-politan	Unitary
<b>At least one policy in place</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>35%</b>
No policies or arrangements in place	19%	56%	21%	54%	65%
General parental leave	66%	36%	36%	46%	17%
Maternity leave	66%	14%	71%	19%	31%
Paternity leave	66%	12%	71%	19%	31%
Adoption leave	66%	14%	71%	19%	31%
Don't know	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%

Base: all respondents – county (10); district (50); London borough (14); metropolitan (9); unitary (19).

### **Whether these are formal policies or informal arrangements**

For each option that a respondent indicated was in place in their authority, the respondent was asked whether this was a formal policy or an informal arrangement. Table 5 shows the results for this question, demonstrating that for almost all respondent councils, these were formal policies rather than informal arrangements. Three per cent of respondent councils reported that their maternity, paternity, and adoption guidance was an informal arrangement, whilst 4 per cent reported that their general parental leave guidance was an informal arrangement. For all four options, no respondents were unsure whether or not this was a formal policy or an informal arrangement.

**Table 5: Whether formal policies or informal arrangements are in place**

	Formal	Informal	Don't know
Maternity leave	97%	3%	0%
Paternity leave	97%	3%	0%
Adoption leave	97%	3%	0%
General parental leave	96%	4%	0%

Base: all respondents with each policy in place – maternity (32); paternity (31); adoption (32); general (36).

### Plans to introduce policies or arrangements

Those without each policy in place were asked whether or not their council had plans to introduce a policy or arrangement for their councillors. Table 6 shows the results of this question, demonstrating that the majority of respondent councils without each policy in place did not have any plans to do so; this was highest for maternity leave, as 63 per cent of those without maternity leave policies did not plan to introduce them, compared to 54 per cent of those without general parental leave policies. Seven per cent of those without maternity leave, paternity leave, or adoption leave reported that they planned to introduce a policy or arrangement for each area in the next six months, while around 10 per cent reported that they planned to introduce one at some point in the future. One in five respondents (21 per cent) without maternity leave, paternity leave, or adoption leave were unsure whether or not they would introduce a policy or arrangement, whilst almost a third (31 per cent) were unsure whether or not they would introduce general parental leave.

**Table 6: Whether or not councils without these policies were planning to introduce a policy or arrangement**

	Yes, in the next 6 months	Yes, at some point in the future	No, and no plans to do so	Don't know
Maternity leave	7%	9%	63%	21%
Paternity leave	7%	10%	62%	21%
Adoption leave	7%	10%	62%	21%
General parental leave	0%	14%	54%	31%

Base: all respondents who did not have each policy in place – maternity (67); paternity (68); adoption (67); general (65).

### Features of the policies or arrangements

Respondents with at least one policy or arrangement in place were then asked a series of questions about the features of their policies or arrangements.

#### Allowances

Respondents were asked whether their council's policies or arrangements currently included the continued payment of allowances and special responsibility allowances (SRAs) whilst councillors were on parental leave. Table 7 shows the results for this question, demonstrating that almost all respondents (98 per cent) with a parental leave policy or arrangement in place reported that this did include the continued payment of allowances and SRAs whilst the councillor was on parental leave. Two per cent of respondents with a policy or arrangement in place were unsure whether or not it included this.

**Table 7: Whether or not the continued payment of allowances and SRAs is included in the policies or arrangements**

	Per cent
Yes	98%
No	0%
Don't know	2%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place (51).

### **Six-month attendance rule**

Respondents were asked whether or not their council's policies or arrangements explicitly addressed the issue of exemptions from the six-month attendance rule. This rule originates from Section 85 of the 1972 Local Government Act and stipulates that if a councillor fails to attend a meeting within six months of their last attendance, they cease to be a member of the council, unless an exemption is granted by the council. Table 8 shows the results of this question, demonstrating that seven in 10 respondent councils (71 per cent) with policies or arrangements in place reported that these explicitly addressed exemptions from the six-month attendance rule. Twenty-seven per cent reported that their policies or arrangements did not explicitly address this, whilst 2 per cent of respondents were unsure whether or not exemptions from the rule were addressed.

**Table 8: Whether or not the policies or arrangements explicitly address the issue of exemptions from the six-month attendance rule**

	Per cent
Yes	71%
No	27%
Don't know	2%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place (51).

Table 9 shows the results broken down by council type. The results show that respondents from metropolitan district councils were most likely to report that their policies explicitly addressed the issue of exemptions from the six-month attendance rule, as reported by 100 per cent of respondents, compared to 55 per cent of respondents from London borough. These results are, however, a snapshot of the views of these respondents, due to the low base size.

**Table 9: Whether or not the policies or arrangements explicitly address the issue of exemptions from the six-month attendance rule, by council type**

	County	District	London Borough	Metro-politan	Unitary
Yes	82%	62%	55%	100%	87%
No	18%	38%	36%	0%	13%
Don't know	0%	0%	9%	0%	0%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place – county (8); district (21); London borough (11); metropolitan (4); unitary (7).

### **Ability to return to position held prior to period of leave**

Respondents were asked whether or not their council's policies or arrangements included an expectation that a councillor taking parental leave would be able to return to the specific responsibilities or roles (e.g., cabinet, portfolio, or chair positions) at the end of their period of leave. Table 10 shows the results of this question, demonstrating that just over two-thirds (69 per cent) of respondents with at least one policy or arrangement in place reported that these included the expectation that councillors taking leave would resume any specific positions upon their return. A fifth (21 per cent) reported that their policies or arrangements did not include this expectation, whilst 10 per cent were unsure whether or not this expectation was included.

**Table 10: Whether or not the policies or arrangements include an expectation that a councillor taking leave will be able to resume their specific roles or responsibilities held prior to the period of parental leave**

	Per cent
Yes	69%
No	21%
Don't know	10%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place (51).

Table 11 shows the results broken down by council type. The results show that respondents from metropolitan district councils were most likely to report that their policies included the expectation that a councillor would be able to resume their specific roles or responsibilities after their return from leave, as reported by 100 per cent of respondents, compared to 52 per cent of county council respondents.

**Table 11: Whether or not the policies or arrangements include an expectation that a councillor taking leave will be able to resume their specific roles or responsibilities held prior to the period of parental leave, by council type**

	County	District	London Borough	Metro-politan	Unitary
Yes	52%	59%	82%	100%	74%
No	21%	30%	18%	0%	13%
Don't know	27%	11%	0%	0%	13%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place – county (8); district (21); London borough (11); metropolitan (4); unitary (7).

## Take-up of parental leave offer

Respondents with at least one policy or arrangement in place were asked whether or not, as at February 2024, councillors within their authority who were eligible for parental leave had taken it. Table 12 shows the results of this question, demonstrating that around the same proportion of respondent councils reported that no councillors who were eligible had taken parental leave (30 per cent) as those who reported that all who were eligible had taken it (29 per cent). Twenty-two per cent reported that some who were eligible had taken it, whilst 19 per cent were unsure whether or not those eligible had taken the leave.

**Table 12: Proportion of councillors eligible for parental leave that had taken it**

	Per cent
<b>Yes – all or some</b>	<b>51%</b>
Yes - all who are eligible have taken it	29%
Some who are eligible have taken it	22%
No - those who are eligible have not taken it	30%
Don't know	19%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place (51).

Table 13 shows the results for this question broken down by council type. The results show that respondents from London boroughs were most likely to have had take-up of their parental leave policies, as 64 per cent reported that all or some of their eligible councillors had taken parental leave. This was lowest among county council and unitary council respondents, as 35 per cent of county council respondents and 36 per cent of unitary council respondents reported that some or all of their eligible councillors had taken their parental leave.

**Table 13: Proportion of councillors eligible for parental leave that had taken it, by council type**

	County	District	London Borough	Metro-politan	Unitary
<b>Yes – all or some</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>36%</b>
Yes - all who are eligible have taken it	8%	31%	36%	41%	25%
Some who are eligible have taken it	26%	22%	27%	19%	12%
No - those who are eligible have not taken it	39%	36%	18%	40%	13%
Don't know	26%	11%	18%	0%	51%

Base: all respondents with at least one policy in place – county (8); district (21); London borough (11); metropolitan (4); unitary (7).

## Feedback

Respondents who reported that some or all of those councillors eligible for parental leave had taken it were asked whether or not they had asked for feedback on the conditions of the leave. Table 14 shows the results of this question, and demonstrates that the majority (70 per cent) of respondents from councils where some or all eligible councillors had taken leave had not asked for feedback on the conditions. Twenty per cent had asked for feedback, whilst 9 per cent were unsure whether or not feedback had been sought.

**Table 14: Whether or not councils had sought feedback from those who had taken leave on the conditions of their policies or arrangements**

	Number	Per cent
Yes	5	20%
No	20	70%
Don't know	2	9%

Base: all respondents from councils where some or all eligible councillors had taken leave (27).

Respondents who had sought feedback from eligible councillors were asked to describe the feedback that had been received. Table 15 shows the results for this question, however as only five respondents answered this question, these results must strictly be taken as a snapshot view of this particular group of respondents. The table shows that four of the five respondents who had sought feedback deemed this feedback very or fairly positive, including three respondents who described it as very positive. One respondent reported that they were unsure, explaining in the follow-up open text box that the feedback had not yet been received.

**Table 15: Whether or not councillors eligible for parental leave had taken it**

	Number	Per cent
<b>Very or fairly positive</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>81%</b>
Very positive	3	66%
Fairly positive	1	15%
Neither positive nor negative	0	0%
Fairly negative	0	0%
Very negative	0	0%
Don't know	1	19%

Base: all respondents who had sought feedback on the conditions of their parental leave (5).

Respondents had the opportunity to describe the feedback in greater detail. All five respondents provided additional comments to develop their scaled rating. Furthermore, a follow-up discussion with one of these five authorities after the survey enabled the sharing of more in-depth feedback from three councillors in their authority, and one councillor from another authority (this authority had also completed the survey).<sup>1</sup> The following analysis has therefore considered the comments of six authorities, which have been grouped into common themes.

Respondents reported that their councillors' feedback emphasised the value of having the support of other group members to cover casework, surgeries, and meetings. Among this group of respondents, it appears that it was the responsibility of the person taking leave to arrange their own cover. For one councillor, however,

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<sup>1</sup> All four councillors gave their express permission for their comments to be shared with the LGA, to be used in this report anonymously.

this generated a sense of guilt, as those covering were undertaking more work without extra pay. Another raised the question of what would happen if there wasn't someone available to cover their work (although this was not an issue for them).

Some of the comments from councillors explored the gendered dynamic of parental leave. One councillor who had taken maternity leave expressed that the larger allocation of maternity leave compared to paternity leave may frame women as a "liability" due to "the possibility of them taking leave," and suggested increasing the allocation for paternity leave to alleviate this dynamic. This sentiment was echoed by comments from two councillors who had taken paternity leave, who expressed that the allocation of two weeks is inadequate, particularly if the birth is complicated, or if they are a single parent. Furthermore, one councillor who had taken paternity leave called for greater clarity around exemptions from the six-month attendance rule, reporting that this rule is less likely to pose a problem for someone on paternity leave but someone on maternity leave, who may feel "forced" to attend when not yet ready.

Two councillors who had taken paternity leave reported confusion around the policies. One of these did not formally take paternity leave as they did not know that the policy existed, whilst the other felt the process was overly formal and therefore open to misinterpretation and would have instead preferred a more informal conversation. Furthermore, this councillor reported confusion around whether or not they had to resign from their committee roles. Although after seeking clarification, he was reassured that resignation was not required, the councillor feared that their lack of voting may appear "lazy" to ward residents.

Other comments included:

- Praise for the clarity of the policy.
- The value of ongoing communication during the period of leave, to ensure that potential issues were addressed.
- The value of discussions to support the return to work, including consideration of access to facilities in the building.

- In one case, there were challenges with the maximum number of cabinet appointments.
- In one case, the policy did not address the issue of the six-month attendance rule, however, an exception was made by the council to support the councillor in question.
- The majority of those who had taken the leave were not in receipt of an SRA, therefore had not tested this aspect of the policy.
- One respondent explained that they were currently awaiting feedback.

### Further comments

Respondents had the opportunity to provide any further comments about their authority's position on parental leave. Forty-five authorities provided additional comments, which have been grouped into common themes, the following themes emerged most frequently from the comments, organised in descending order from the most common theme downwards.

Around a third of these respondents detailed the informal arrangements in place within their authority. Many of these respondents reported that although they did not have a formal policy, parental leave had been allowed when a case had been presented, or that councillors were able to agree their own arrangements with their political group to cover a period of absence. For some authorities, this form of arrangement would also be in place in cases of long-term sick leave. Some respondents explained that the issue of leave would only surface if a councillor was to fall foul of the six-month attendance rule, at which point attendance would be required or an exemption would need to be agreed.

Some respondents addressed the legal employment status of councillors, as unlike officers, councillors are not employees of the authority. In some cases, respondents expressed that because councillors are not employees, there is not the same obligation to provide employment benefits, but rather they are free to take leave

provided they fulfil their duties (i.e., complying with the six-month attendance rule). As one county council explained,

“This issue raises a question many of us are wrestling with about the employment status of councillors and our obligations as a council to them (...). It’s essential that councillors are properly supported, but their legal status leaves them (and us) in a kind of limbo.”

On the other hand, some respondents believed that the policy for councillors should be aligned to the policy for employed officers.

Some respondents reported that their council was currently in the process of, or beginning to consider, bringing in a parental leave policy.

Around a tenth of respondents reported that they had a dependent carer’s allowance in place for councillors. Where detail was provided, this constituted the reimbursement of costs incurred for arranging care for dependent children, elderly relatives, or disabled relatives whilst undertaking official duties.

A few respondents reported that they had a broad leave policy in place, covering all forms of parental leave, and in one case also including bereavement and compassionate leave, and long-term sick leave.

A few respondents explained that they did not have a policy in place as there had not been a desire to introduce one. One metropolitan council reported that this had “never been raised as an issue”, whilst two further councils reported that they had sought to introduce a policy, but it had been defeated due to a lack of support.

Smaller themes mentioned by a handful of respondents each included:

- Difficulty or reluctance to introduce a policy due to grey areas or uncertainty around specific points (allowances, six-month attendance rule, positions).
- A policy or arrangement was in place but had not yet been used.

- No plans to bring in a policy or arrangement.
- Policy or arrangement not required due to the current demography of the councillor body; there may be a need in future, if a more diverse range of councillors were to be elected.

## Annex A: Questionnaire

1. Please confirm the contact details that we hold for you:

- Name:
- Authority:
- Role:
- Email address:

2. Which, if any, of the following leave policies or arrangements does your council currently have in place for councillors? Please select all that apply.

- Maternity leave
- Paternity leave
- Adoption leave
- General parental leave – i.e. a policy or arrangement around the birth or placement of a child that applies equally to either parent, as opposed to a specific maternity or paternity arrangement
- No policies or arrangements in place
- Don't know

3. Is this a formal policy or informal arrangement?

Rows:

- Maternity leave
- Paternity leave
- Adoption leave
- General parental leave

Columns:

- Formal

- Informal
- Don't know

4. Is your council planning to introduce any of the following leave policies or arrangements for councillors?

Rows:

- Maternity leave
- Paternity leave
- Adoption leave
- General parental leave

Columns:

- Yes, in the next 6 months
- Yes, at some point in the future
- No, and no plans to do so
- Don't know

For the rest of the survey, the term 'parental leave' is used as an umbrella term for the type(s) of leave that your council has in place around the birth or adoption of a child (i.e., maternity, paternity, adoption, or general parental leave).

5. Do your council's policies or arrangements currently include the continued payment of allowances and SRAs whilst councillors are on parental leave?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

6. Do your council's policies or arrangements explicitly address the issue of exemptions from the six-month attendance rule (Section 85 of the 1972 Local Government Act)?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

7. Do your council's policies or arrangements include an expectation that any councillor with specific responsibilities or roles (e.g., cabinet, portfolio, chair) will be able to return to these at the end of their period of parental leave?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

8. As of February 2024, as far as you are aware, have councillors who are eligible for parental leave taken it?

- Yes – all who are eligible have taken it
- Some who are eligible have taken it
- No – those who are eligible have not taken it
- Don't know

9. Has your council asked those councillors who have taken up parental leave for feedback on the terms and conditions of the parental leave available to them?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

10. How would you describe the feedback to date on the parental leave policy

for those councillors that have experienced it?

- Very positive
- Fairly positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Fairly negative
- Very negative
- Don't know

11. We are interested in capturing the content of policies that your council has in place. Would you be happy to share, in confidence, your council's parental leave policies for councillors with LGA?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

12. Please provide either a link to your council's policy, or alternatively upload a document below:

13. If there is anything else you would like to tell us about your council's approach to parental leave for councillors, please use the space below.



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