Maternity and Parental Leave Survey 2024/25

A report on maternity/parental leave experiences from NHS Lothian Employees.

WOMEN'S NETWORK
NHS Lothian

"Lost, unsupported, alone, unsure of how I was supposed to juggle nursery runs and working, anxious about the cost of nursery versus reducing my hours and jeopardizing my career prospects."

"There seemed to be little understanding of the challenges of managing your new identity as a working parent."

"Was with another colleague all day so felt supported and welcomed back."

Executive Summary

NHS Lothian Women's Network supports and encourages members and staff to come together to discuss experiences and provides a safe place for issues to be raised.

Following feedback raised by members around improvements that could be made locally and at an organisational level to support people returning from maternity or parental leave, a short life working group was established to explore this in more detail.

The group gathered feedback and experiences via a survey that was circulated directly to NHS Lothian Women's Network and more widely across NHS Lothian.

The survey gathered over 100 responses with feedback focusing on both positive and negative experiences through the three stages of preparing for leave, during leave and returning from leave. The stories of lived experience were powerful and impactful and highlighted the following themes:

- Lack of line manager training and knowledge on policy and procedure for all parts of the process
- Confusion around pay, Keep In Touch (KIT) days, and annual leave
- Return to work planning, particularly around IT issues and flexible working

This report seeks to highlight both the positive experiences of maternity and parental leave that can serve as examples to share, as well as areas for improvement based on negative experiences. It provides recommendations on how the survey feedback can be used to create a more positive and supportive experience for those taking leave, while also equipping managers and teams with the skills and confidence to effectively contribute to this process.

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 The Importance of a supportive leave process

Welcoming a child is a rewarding yet huge life event. Taking a period of maternity or parental leave can often leave people anxious and confused, impacting physical and mental health. Returning to work can be a difficult time in a parent's life, where they must balance their changed role within the workplace, facing new barriers and challenges, and the experience can have a lasting effect on an employee's wellbeing (Franzoi et al, 2024).

A supportive leave process brings benefits for both employees and organisations. For employees this includes:

- Promotes wellbeing, reducing stress and anxiety, allowing parents to focus on their health and new responsibilities without added workplace pressures.
- Helps facilitate a better work-life balance, fostering a sense of balance between personal and work life.
- Encourages retention as more people are likely to return and stay at work if they are supported during their leave process.
- Fosters equity and inclusion, demonstrating that the organisation values all employees regardless of gender or caregiving roles.
- Supports good mental health by helping to mitigate feelings of guilt or isolation while juggling new parental responsibilities.

For organisations:

- Enhances employee retention, with financial savings on turnover, recruitment and training.
- Boost branding as a family friendly and inclusive organisation, helping to foster gender equality.
- Improves team workflow, with clear processes enabling smoother transitions with the team.
- Increases productivity, with returning employees engaged and motivated.

Studies show that support from teams and managers can help reduce stress levels during and after pregnancy. (Jones et al, 2021). Therefore, it is not enough to have a sound policy but an effective process of policy implementation, communication and easy to access support.

This report aims to highlight opportunities to share best practice and build on the localised support for employees and managers.

1.2 NHS Lothian demographics

As an anchor organisation within Scotland's national health sector, 78% of NHS Lothian's workforce are women. An average of 1157 people take maternity or parental leave every year. In 2023/2024 53.7% of those who took maternity leave had absence within the first 6 months of returning from leave, an increase on the previous financial year (51.2%).

Under the Once for Scotland policy approach, NHS Lothian's maternity policy (Scottish Government 2023) is aligned to the NHS Scotland's Maternity leave policy with local processes around risk assessment and sources of support.

2. Methodology

2.1 Short Life Working Group

The question of improving maternity support was received by the NHS Lothian Women's Network. An invitation was circulated to the core group of the NHS Lothian Women's network to join a short life working group to explore the issue in more detail. A short life working group was established in July 2024 with 4 members of NHS Lothian staff, including NHS Lothian Women's network members and the Workforce Equality Project Support Manager.

The group also met and consulted with Medical Education who had carried out a similar piece of work within the Medical Education Directorate to share findings and discuss recommendations.

2.2 Collecting Data

An online survey was split into three sections to capture feedback at different points of the maternity/parental leave process: preparing for leave; during leave; and returning from leave.

The survey contained a mix of closed and open questions, including the use of Likert scale questions and free text boxes for people to leave specific comments and feedback.

The survey was distributed to NHS Lothian Women's Network members via email and the dedicated Teams channel and distributed more widely via the Weekly Brief newsletter that is circulated by email to all staff members across NHS Lothian.

The survey received 109 responses. All responses have been anonymised and consent obtained by respondents for their responses and feedback to help shape and develop an information report and supportive resources for maternity/parental leave.

2.3 Inclusion criteria

- Employee of NHS Lothian or HSCP partnerships in Lothian
- Experienced maternity or parental leave in the last 5 years
- Provided consent to the use of feedback being used to help shape and develop an information report and resources for support.

2.4 Overview of respondents

Overview of Respondents: NHS Lothian Parental Leave
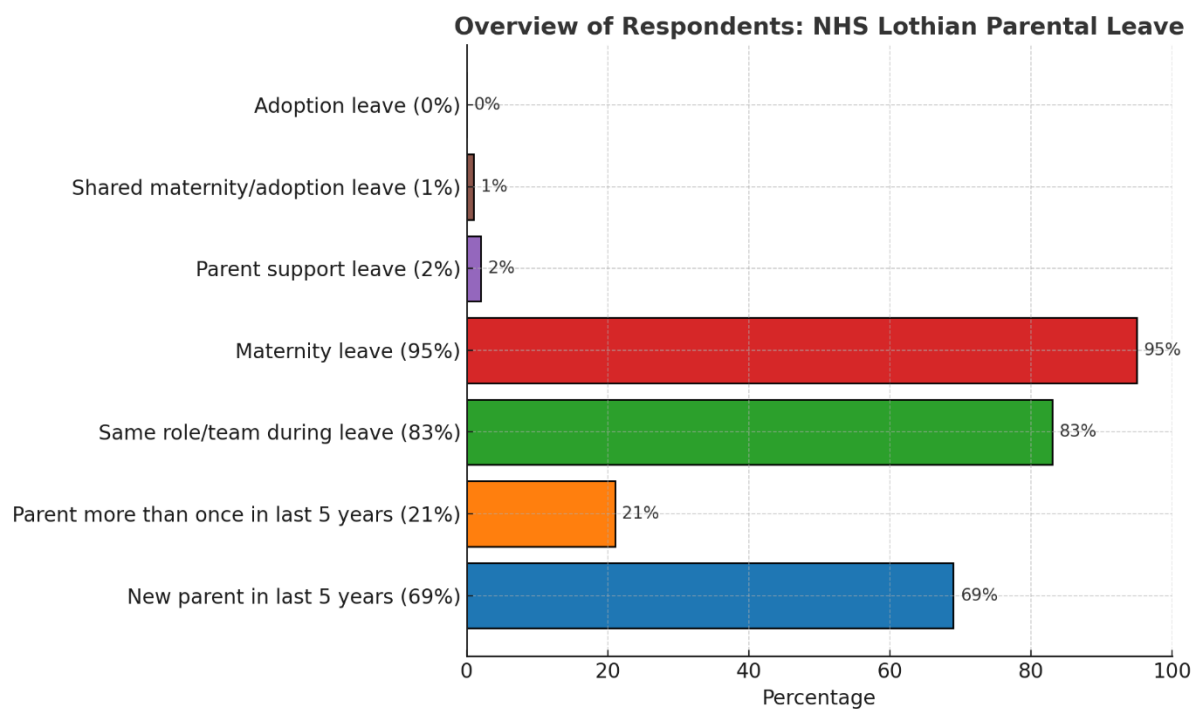
The percentage split of respondents by work area is as follows:
- Clinical Roles and Settings: 58.11%
- Administrative Roles: 17.57%
- Pharmacy and Science: 9.46%
- Public Health and Policy: 5.41%
- Other: 5.41% (RIE, HR, nurse led unit)
- Maternity and Women's Health: 4.05%

3. Preparing for leave

"Wellbeing and working accommodations whilst being pregnant could've been vastly improved, I had little to no support from management."

"I was moved to the hospital where all my appointments took place, this was less stressful and easier for me to make the appointments."

Findings and Key Themes

😵 **91% of people** think an FAQ document outlining national and local support would have been useful prior to leave.

🙄 99% of people were unaware of the Staff counselling service where priority is given to parents with children under 1 year.

● Strongly Agree   ● Agree   ● Neutral   ● Disagree   ● Strongly disagree   ● N/A

Informing my manager of my intention to take leave was a positive experience.

I was aware of and understood the employment policies relevant to me.

My manager and I discussed how we would keep in touch and my communication needs during my leave with me prior to taking...

I was aware of how my maternity/parental leave pay and tax implications would work in advance of leaving.

100%   0%   100%
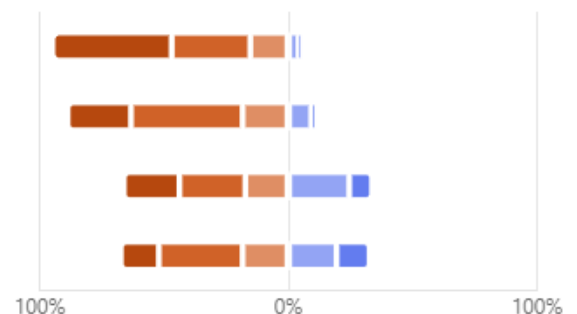
3.1 What worked well prior to taking leave and what could be improved

3.1.1 Managerial Support and Engagement

- ***Information and Training for Managers***

Re: morning sickness classed as sick leave and being told to use annual leave for antenatal appointments: "I … had to advocate for myself with my manager who was unaware, so it seems that perhaps there could be better training for managers surrounding the relevant policies."
"My manager fully expected me to take leave, however she had never managed an employee on maternity leave before so wasn't confident with the policies."
"It would be beneficial for management to take an e-learning course as they did not know any information and I had to find everything on the intranet for myself and for them."
"My second maternity leave my manager was a man - he didn't seem to have the same information for me or same supportive attitude."
"Had to search maternity policies myself. Manager was unable to provide me with relevant info."
"I felt supported but also felt there was a lot of unknowns (despite this being by second mat leave). No one really discussed with me my plans."

- ***Emotional Awareness and Support***

"Wellbeing and working accommodations whilst being pregnant could've been vastly improved, I had little to no support from management."

"Manager's attitude to women taking time off to have children was awful - we need to feel like we are supported and that we aren't nuisances who put extra pressure/strain on the team when we need time off."

"The support prior to maternity could have been better trying to work while heavily pregnant in a busy ward was hard."

"I was moved to the hospital where all my appointments took place, this was less stressful and easier for me to make the appointments."

"More consideration for abilities during pregnancy & checking in on mental health"

"My line manager supported me to attend appointments with consultant, midwife, and mental health services."

3.1.2 Rotational staff

- ***Support and Information for Rotational Staff***

"It would have been good to have a sense of being on the radar even as rotating junior doctor; information on which department I could take KIT days."

"Conflict with deanery around educational needs and pay"

"I had no idea of the financial impact of maternity pay as a term-time worker. It is definitely not calculated correctly despite multiple conversations with Payroll & HR."

"I was a trainee when I had my first maternity leave- it was difficult not knowing which practice I would return to."

"Being a rotational Band 5, would be helpful to know who is my go-to after maternity leave."

3.1.3 Practical Support and Resources

- ***Pay***

"Would have been useful to have been given a) guide to maternity leave pay slips b) option to request annualised maternity pay."

"It also would have been very useful to have a breakdown of maternity leave payments prior to going on leave (I had no idea how much I'd be paid until I was paid)."

"Improvements would have been some idea from payroll of what my take home pay would be each month."

"More transparent info re: the way my pay was worked out would have been really helpful."

"An easier breakdown of pay over the course of mat leave would be helpful."

"A better idea of what your pay will be over maternity leave would be helpful so that it's easier to save/budget, e.g. if payroll could provide an indicative monthly salary over the 9-12m leave."

"I wasn't entitled to mat pay so knowing what other funding was available at the time."

"Did not know much about maternity leave and did not know that I could have spread my pay throughout."

"Clearer process for maternity pay calculation"

- ***Annual Leave and Sick Leave***

"I was experiencing quite significant morning sickness and was advised that this would be classed as sick leave. I was also told that I would need to take AL for my antenatal appointments."

"I felt my annual leave entitlement for the current year and the accrued leave (whilst on maternity leave) was forced on me to take all of it off before I wanted to commence maternity leave and in taking more off before coming back. It did not allow me any flexibility…"

"wasn't informed before mat leave about annual leave while on mat leave"

"Not enough clear information on … how holidays should have been taken or carried over prior to leave"

- ***Phased Return and Flexible Working***

"I wanted to discuss flexible working/reduced working hours on my return to work but this discussion was not positive and did not go very far."

[I got] "flexible working arrangements when I returned."

- ***KIT Days and Return to Work Procedures***

"No discussion about return to work."

"Improved completion of return-to-work documents by managers/senior staff."

"Encourage keeping in touch days"

"I feel it should have been better about getting in touch days; it wasn't explained very well."

"I agreed with my manager I'd do some keep in touch days but then my manager was off while I was on mat leave and no other managers got in touch with me."

"We never discussed keeping in touch and how that would look or how often might feel appropriate or given any guidance on what that would mean for my pay etc."

"I was given no plan on communication throughout my leave, no proper return to work was given by my manager both times."

"Keeping in Touch days and return to work information prior to going off would be helpful."

"No communication re KIT days or what it is for unless I enquire about this"

"Having a discussion about returning to work and how this would be supported."

"I had minimal discussions with my line manager regarding how my return to work would be managed after both leave periods and I feel there should have been more discussions and a structured plan I could follow."

- ***Administrative and Logistical Support***

"Would have been useful to have been made aware that all IT would need reset on return so need to arrange a day prior to restarting to organise this (or arrange for it to happen immediately on day of return so as not to return and have no IT for days)."

"Planning a leaving date and reducing down my caseload gradually."

"Taking on more nonclinical tasks to wind down responsibilities worked."

"Completing the trimester forms was helpful to make sure there was no new health issues which could impact my work."

"Reminders to complete forms prior to important dates would have been useful."

"I processed all of my maternity paperwork myself with little support."

"I had the workplace risk assessment completed once but some of the actions were never completed (a stand for my laptop to address pain in shoulders) so it felt as if this risk assessment was just a paper exercise."

"I felt that there were no discussions about who would take over my normal job duties and it felt stressful having to organise this myself."

3.1.4 Peer Support and Team Dynamics

- ***Supportive Colleagues and Team Environment***

"Full support from my manager helped."

"Supportive department (anaesthetics)"

"Was looked after well at a time of extreme stress"

"My team were very supportive, couldn't have asked for better."

"I felt well supported in my reduction of duties as my maternity leave approached."

"My managers changed during mat leave that was the only slight issue, but I still felt well informed and very welcome."

"The way I was treated could've been improved so as I wasn't made to feel guilty for leaving the team a person short."

- ***Team Communication and Updates***

"Ensure ward areas have a good knowledge base on maternity leave, KIT days, Annual leave entitlements."

"Documentation of changes to clinical practice/department policies over leave period"

3.1.5 Policy and Rights Awareness

- ***Clear Policies and Rights***

"I was experiencing quite significant morning sickness and was advised that this would be classed as sick leave. I was also told that I would need to take AL for my antenatal appointments."

"I worked as normal until Mat leave, with little discussion/risk assessment."

"Made aware of what annual leave I had and plan when to take my maternity."

"It was not clear that I had to take my accrued leave that accrued whilst on leave immediately upon my return."

"The maternity leave letter is great however; I think a bit more information regarding family friendly policy etc prior to return would be good."

"Continuing conversations to ensure I knew what I was entitled to, how maternity leave worked if I went into labour before set leave, taking appointments."

4. During Leave

"I tried to book in KIT days but did not hear back from my manager..."

"I felt supported that my work and family life balance was important to my manager."

Findings and key Themes – During Leave

😐 **67% of people had to** contact their manager for an unplanned reason or information during their leave.

- Strongly Agree ● Agree ● Neutral ● Disagree ● Strongly Disagree ● N/A

Statement	
I was able to maintain contact with my team/colleagues during my leave.	
I was kept up to date with relevant organisational changes/staff changes and training during my leave.	
I was able to access pay information during my leave if needed.	
Communication throughout my leave with my manager was a positive experience.	
I made use of the Keeping in Touch days during my leave.	

4.1 Approaching and preparing to return to work

These themes highlight the complex emotions and logistical challenges faced by individuals returning to work after maternity leave, as well as the importance of support and communication from employers.

- ***Anxiety and Stress***

Many individuals expressed feelings of anxiety and stress about returning to work, often related to changes in the workplace, childcare arrangements, and personal readiness.

"I had so much anxiety coming back to work..."
"Very anxious. I prepared for my return about getting in touch with my manager."
"Extremely stressed and unsure if I would cope."

- ***Childcare and Work-Life Balance Concerns***

Concerns about managing childcare and achieving a work-life balance were prevalent, with many finding the transition challenging.

"Apprehensive about how I was going to afford/make childcare work..."
"Lost, unsupported, alone, unsure of how I was supposed to juggle nursery runs and working..."
"I was looking forward to returning to work but apprehensive about the juggle of childcare and working life..."

- ***Lack of Support and Communication***

Several individuals felt unsupported by their managers or experienced poor communication, which exacerbated their anxiety.

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"I felt I had to make the effort to approach my manager instead of them prompting me..."
"Felt very anxious returning to work as had no contact with management..."
"My manager had advised me prior to me starting leave that I could move bases to closer to my home... Then she tells me I am moving to an office further away..."

- ***Flexible Working Requests and KIT Days***

Issues with flexible working requests and Keeping in Touch (KIT) days were common, with some requests being declined or not actioned in a timely manner.

"My flexible working request got declined due to the hours not suiting the service."
"I tried to book in KIT days but did not hear back from my manager..."
"I felt quite anxious about returning as I know there was staff changes and struggled to get keeping in touch days to suit me."

- ***Emotional Impact of Leaving Children***

The emotional difficulty of leaving children to return to work was a significant theme, with many expressing sadness and guilt.

"Felt sad to be leaving baby and older child."
"Nervous & very sad about leaving my baby."
"It is hard to think that you have to leave your little one somewhere else while you are at work after maternity leave."

- ***Preparation and Coping Strategies***

Some individuals found ways to prepare and cope with the transition, such as using KIT days, organizing their home life, or seeking support from colleagues.

"I prepared by popping into the department to see people and organise my new working pattern."
"The kit days allowed me to ease really slowly back in, I felt in control about the process..."
"I used my kit days to attend courses/showdowns days."

- ***Positive Experiences and Support***

Despite challenges, some individuals reported positive experiences and support from their managers or colleagues, which helped ease their transition.

"My manager helped me with a shift pattern that suits me."
"I felt happy to be returning to work. Supportive admin team to help me calculate AL and hours."
"I was excited, I love my job and was keen to return."

4.2 Other positive or challenging experiences during leave

These themes highlight a mix of negative experiences, particularly around communication, support, and logistical challenges, as well as some positive experiences related to managerial support and work-life balance.

- **_Lack of Communication and Support_**

"The situation was confusing, unfair and there was no communication. I had to call for answers rather than be provided with them."
"I felt that I was not kept up to date with any major changes other than what I heard from close friends at work."
"On return to work I didn't feel there were really any supports in place."

- **_Challenges with IT and Access_**

"By biggest challenge by far was not having TRAK access for over 3 weeks on my return."
"The amount of time spent to regain access is time consuming."

- **_Mental Health and Wellbeing Concerns_**

"I was diagnosed with post-partum anxiety, and this was not taken into account upon my return."
"I had severe postnatal depression/anxiety that really impacted my mental health."

- **_Childcare and Flexible Working Challenges_**

"I found it stressful trying to arrange childcare."
"The process for applying for flexible working changed in terms of the paperwork."

- **_Positive Experiences and Support_**

"My line manager was extremely flexible and understanding."
"I felt supported that my work and family life balance was important to my manager."

- **_Financial and Payroll Issues_**

"I didn't get paid when I first returned this was challenging for me."
"Difficult to understand how much you will get paid when on maternity leave."

- **_Impact of COVID-19_**

"Covid was the main problem Navigating the birth of my second child and caring was my elder child with no childcare or help from family."
"Covid 19 restrictions made contact more difficult."

- **_Organisational Changes and Uncertainty_**

"Whilst on leave, my role name and job location changed although it was the same work."
"I was contacted part way through my leave to ask how much I planned to reduce my contract by on return."

4.3 What worked well returning from leave

4.3.1 Positive Experiences

- ***Phased Return to Work***

Gradual reintroduction of responsibilities and hours, supported by the use of annual leave.

"Phased return to responsibilities as well as hours."
"Came back on a phased return using annual leave which worked well for me."

- ***Keeping in Touch (KIT) Days***

KIT days were frequently highlighted as a valuable tool for transitioning back to work.

"Really benefited from the KIT days, I used 9 of them... it really helped me transition back into work in a gradual way."
"Having used KIT days, I had access to systems I require for my job, and this helped with transition so I could 'hit the ground running.'"

- ***Flexible Working Arrangements***

Access to hybrid or flexible working policies to accommodate new responsibilities.

"My role is hybrid and has allowed me to have a better work-life balance."
"The opportunity to use the Flexible Working Policy to amend my starting and finishing times."

- ***Supportive Team and Manager***

Positive interactions with managers and teams provided essential support.

"Clinical supervisor checked in regularly with how I was managing juggling work and kids."
"2 weeks of no on-calls, supportive department."
"Collaboration around placement location."

- ***Breastfeeding and Expressing Milk***

Provisions for expressing milk were appreciated.

"Support to breastfeed/express milk."
"Been aware of a place to express my milk in privacy."

4.3.2 Negative Experiences

- ***Lack of Support or Guidance***

Challenges were noted when support structures were absent, especially in difficult circumstances.

"Contact with occupational health and phased return in the absence of any guidance for my manager or I on returning to work after neonatal death."

- ***Declined Flexible Working Requests***

A request for reduced hours being denied led to a negative outcome.

"Unfortunately, I wasn't able to return to my role due to my reduction in hours request being declined."

5. Returning from Leave

"I could not do any work as my access was not working correctly."

"It was nice to see people and be updated about any changes."
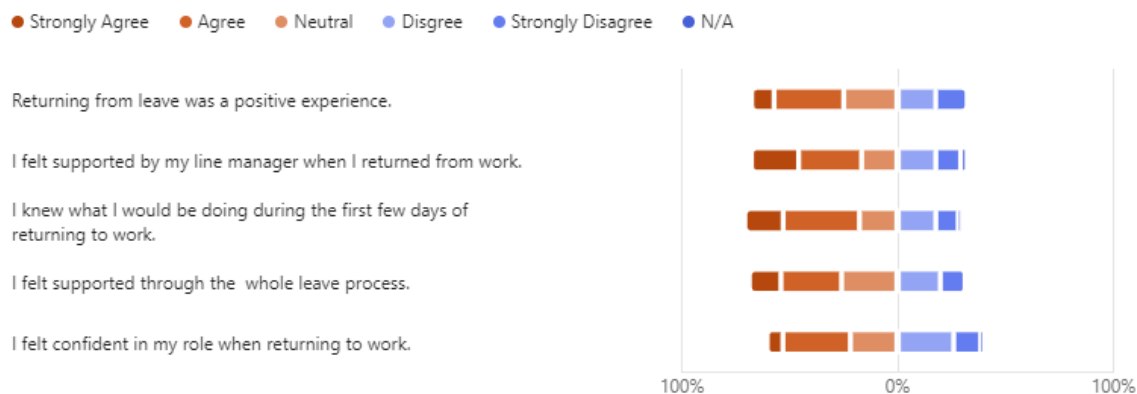
Findings and Key Themes – Returning from Leave

🙂 **32% disagreed that returning from leave was a positive experience.**

😐 **38.5% disagreed that they felt confident in their role returning to work.**

🙂 **29% disagreed they were supported by their line manager returning to work.**

● Strongly Agree　● Agree　● Neutral　● Disgree　● Strongly Disagree　● N/A

Returning from leave was a positive experience.

I felt supported by my line manager when I returned from work.

I knew what I would be doing during the first few days of returning to work.

I felt supported through the whole leave process.

I felt confident in my role when returning to work.

100%　　　　　0%　　　　　100%

5.1 First Day back at work

Themes highlight a range of experiences from feeling unsupported and overwhelmed to having positive social interactions and managing personal challenges.

- *Lack of Support and Communication*

"I was the most senior in years experienced but felt belittled by newly rotated colleagues."
"My manager wasn't very supportive."
"No contact from CD, made up my own schedule, no additional support."
"No plan, little communication and I was left to get on with things on my own."

- *IT and Access Issues*

"I could not do any work as my access was not working correctly."
"No IT. All access cancelled. Not great."
"Had no access to systems and swipe pass had been deactivated, so caused issues."

- *Feeling Overwhelmed and Unprepared*

"Clinically overwhelmed; much reassurance from team that 'I'd soon get the hang of things' rather than actually offering to discuss and go through scenarios."
"Thrown in at the deep end - clinic and visits. No time to find my feet."

"Overwhelmed, just picked up where I left."

- ***Positive Social Interactions and Support***
"Very relaxed and more social. I had time to catch up with my team members."
"Was with another colleague all day so felt supported and welcomed back."
"It was nice to see people and be updated about any changes."

- ***Emotional and Personal Challenges***
"Devastated to discover that my email had been deleted."
"I cannot remember, there is a lot from this time that I cannot recall. I had to tell people who did not know that my baby was dead."
"I was more worried about my child than work."

- ***Adjusting to Changes and New Environments***
"New hospital (moved sites while I was off)."
"It was during the 2nd covid lockdown so there was a lot of change that happened on my return."
"Different. My job had changed which involved meetings with my new line manager."

- ***Autonomy and Self-Management***
"I was left to get on with it with no support. However, this did mean I could manage my own time."
"My first day back was business as usual. In my role, we are in control of our own workload."

5.2 What worked well on return and what could have worked better?
These themes highlight the need for comprehensive planning, communication, and support systems to facilitate a smoother transition for employees returning from leave.

- ***Need for Structured Support and Planning***
Many respondents expressed a desire for a clear plan and structured support upon returning to work.

"A plan for what I'd be doing in that first few days at least, notification of any changes that were relevant."
"Would have been nice to meet to set out a plan and expectations."

- ***Phased Return and Flexibility***
There is a strong preference for phased returns and flexible working arrangements to ease the transition back to work.

"I feel on reflection I would have liked to do a phased return."
"Phased return which wouldn't have involved using annual leave or KIT days."

- ***Communication and Information Sharing***

Effective communication and updates on changes during leave are crucial for a smoother transition.

"I needed a run down on what had happened/changed during my leave which never occurred."
"More information and training regarding changes in the workplace."

- ***IT and System Access***

Access to IT systems and necessary tools before returning is essential to avoid disruptions.

"Could not access Trak or emails for a few days which wasn't ideal."
"In the first 1-2 weeks I was seeing patients and running clinics without any IT access which is ridiculous."

- ***Emotional and Peer Support***

Emotional support from colleagues and understanding from management are highly valued.

"I could have had better support from managers on my return."
"Supportive colleagues. Took a long time to get a parking permit even though I was breastfeeding and had to pick up from nursery."

- ***Managerial and Organizational Support***

Respondents highlighted the importance of proactive support and understanding from managers.

"More support from management. Phased return."
"Would be better if communication with managers & compassionate/empathetic discussions to feel I matter and will be looked after upon my return."

- ***Practical Considerations***

Practical aspects such as workspace setup, introductions to new team members, and facilities for expressing milk were mentioned.

"Would have been nice to be properly introduced to the new team, told where to put belongings, where tea/coffee is kept and the system."
"More support would have been good, shown where I could express etc."

5.3 Personal experiences that people thought would help shape supportive resources for those returning from leave.

These themes highlight the need for comprehensive support systems, clear communication, and empathetic management to facilitate a smoother transition for employees returning from leave.

- ***Managerial Support and Understanding***

Employees emphasise the importance of supportive managers who understand the emotional challenges of returning to work.

"A supportive manager and good teammates make all the difference."
"Managers need to be reminded about the need for flexibility, that childcare can be difficult to get in place."

- ***Emotional and Mental Health Considerations***

There is a need for managers to be aware of the emotional health of returning employees and to provide appropriate support.

"I think it would be valuable for managers to be aware of some of the common responses, and to ask about emotional health."
"I have had a decline in mental health since having my son. I would have benefited in counselling in the first year."

- ***Phased Return and Flexibility***

A phased return to work is suggested to help employees regain confidence and adjust back to their roles.

"I think for any specialty with high intensity/high stakes medicine, phased return should be the norm."
"I think everyone taking leave >3 months should have a compulsory phased return."

- ***Communication and Information***

Clear communication about changes in the team, policies, and available support is crucial.

"More information for line managers on how to support and engage with people starting/during/finishing leave."
"Policies clearly identifying the rights on leave in particular for me."

- ***Practical Support and Resources***

Employees need practical support such as IT access, training plans, and information on entitlements.

"The process of getting access to my computer, emails, Trak etc was very long and not very good."
"Having everything in place for the return (i.e. IT/ training plan/ settling in plan)."

- ***Childcare and Flexible Working***

Flexibility in working hours and understanding of childcare challenges are important for working parents.

"For working parents to have the opportunity to work flexibly if job role permits."
"Juggling childcare and work is really hard, especially when you don't have any family around you for support."

- ***Peer Support and Team Integration***

Having a colleague or mentor to help reintegrate into the team can ease the transition.

"I think it's always good to have a colleague to help you on your return, to try and get you up to speed."

- ***Awareness and Sensitivity to Bereavement***

There is a call for sensitivity and support for those who have experienced bereavement.

"It would be good to acknowledge as an organisation that not all pregnancies or births lead to a living, well baby."

6. Recommendations and Next Steps

The purpose of these recommendations is to:
- Improve the experience of staff during the whole leave process.
- Support managers to be confident in supporting their staff.
- Build on and improve existing functions that support the maternity / parental leave process.
- Offer informal guidance and insights to support individuals navigating the leave process, as well as their managers, addressing aspects not typically covered by formal policies.

6.1 Recommendations

- Ensure managers are fully trained and equipped to support employees before, during, and after maternity leave through clear accessible guidance, online drop-in sessions, training around empathetic communication, proactive planning and KIT days.
- Provide employees with transparent information on maternity pay, leave entitlements, flexible working options, and practical tools to reduce uncertainty and aid decision-making.
- Prior to leave, promote structured communication and support systems, including regular updates from managers, access to mental health resources, IT access and formalised return-to-work plans.
- Facilitate a seamless transition back to work by ensuring logistical readiness, such as IT access and workspace preparation, while promoting phased return to work programmes and flexible working arrangements.
- Resources in place signposting to resources around emotional support, childcare and work-life balance, mental health support and bereavement services.
- Strengthen peer support and integration by fostering welcoming environments, assigning mentors, and maintaining clear communication channels to help employees adjust effectively.

6.2 Next Steps

1. Discuss findings and report with HR, Finance, IT.
2. Share Report with Women's network and invite comments.
3. Collaborate with stakeholders to develop an implementation plan to support improvements.
4. Plan for wider dissemination.

Conclusion

Supporting employees through maternity leave and their subsequent return to work is critical for fostering a positive, inclusive, and productive workplace culture. This report highlights the varying experiences of our workforce, with some poor experiences and some examples of best practice. Clear themes have emerged around comprehensive manager training, ensuring pay transparency, and enhancing communication. Seeking improvements in this area can significantly improve the maternity leave experience for employees. These measures not only address practical and emotional challenges but also promote employee well-being, engagement, and retention.

Ultimately, supporting the recommendations outlined in this report and investing in these changes will help build a supportive framework for employees during this critical period in their personal and professional lives. This reflects a commitment to fairness and support, benefiting both the employees and the organization.

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"A supportive manager and good teammates make all
the difference."