

## Centre for Labour, Employment and Work

### Partners and Parental Leave – what do people do?

*Kirsten Windelov and PSA Policy Team, January 2017*

#### Introduction

Officially, 13 men working for the public service took parental leave in 2016<sup>1</sup>. But in a 2015 survey by Victoria University of over 14,000 people working in public services, a higher proportion of men than women said that they took parental leave and men were more likely than women to say that there were accessing flexible working arrangements<sup>2</sup>.

Partners<sup>3</sup> juggle the birth, fostering or adoption of their children and the responsibilities of parenting with their employment responsibilities. Over the last 30 years successive governments have recognised the need for workplaces to acknowledge this through provision in legislation<sup>4</sup>.

Last year the parental leave legislation was changed to extend eligibility to parental leave but made no change to partners' entitlements. Did these changes catch the legislation up enough to meet current social need and parents' expectations?

The current provision for partners is:

- Up to 18 weeks of primary carer leave that attracts government parental leave payment if transferred from the mother
- Up to 52 weeks (inclusive of any primary carer leave taken) unpaid extended leave with job protection that can be shared between both parents if they're both eligible<sup>5</sup>
- 2 weeks additional unpaid partner's leave<sup>6</sup>.

This is the same overall amount of entitlement to various forms of leave as mothers. In addition, any worker can request, but does not have a right to, flexible working arrangements.

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<sup>1</sup> [2016, SSC Human Resources Capability Survey](#)

<sup>2</sup> 2016, Plimmer and Cantal, [Workplace Dynamics in New Zealand Public Services 2016. P31](#)

<sup>3</sup> We use the term "partners" rather than "fathers" as this group is broader than fathers and is the term used in the legislation.

<sup>4</sup> Parental Leave and Employment Protection Act 1987

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/parental-leave/types-of-parental-leave/>

<sup>6</sup> Those who meet the 12 month criteria for parental leave can access these provisions. For provision for those who do not meet these criteria see <https://employment.govt.nz/leave-and-holidays/parental-leave/eligibility/eligibility-table/>

## We asked PSA members who are partners what they do/did

We wanted to understand more about what partners do in practice on the birth<sup>7</sup> of children and for childcare purposes. In the December 2016 email newsletter to PSA members we asked those who are partners of someone who has had a child to share with us their experience of taking leave when their children were born and for childcare purposes. 179 people responded.

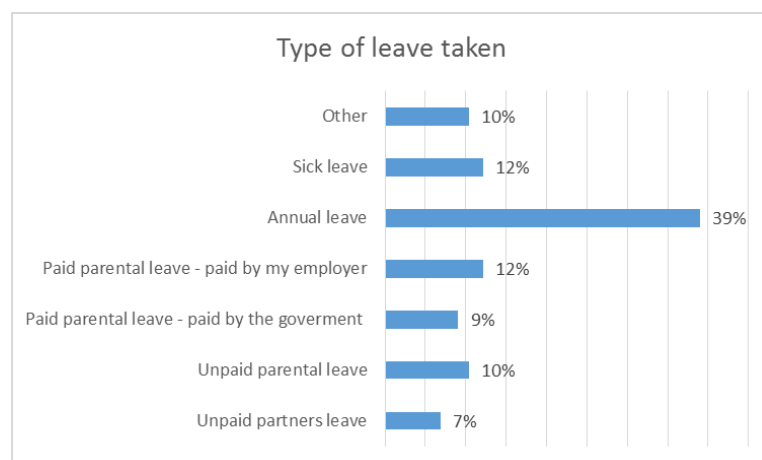
### What partners said

#### *Leave taken on the birth of a child*

Most (9 out of 10) partners took some form of leave around the birth, adoption or fostering of their child.

Unpaid partner's leave was not a popular option - only 7 percent of partners reported using it. Partners most commonly took annual leave (39%) exclusively. Many others made use of a combination of leave types. Twelve percent used employer paid parental leave (most commonly 6 weeks paid retrospectively after having returned to work for 6 months) and 9 percent used government paid parental leave. Interestingly this may indicate that the use of paid parental leave by partners has increased over the past decade as 2005 Department of Labour research involving a similar sized sample found only 1 percent of partners at that time took paid parental leave<sup>8</sup>.

Other forms of paid leave taken included domestic leave, long service leave, statutory holidays and accrued time off in lieu.

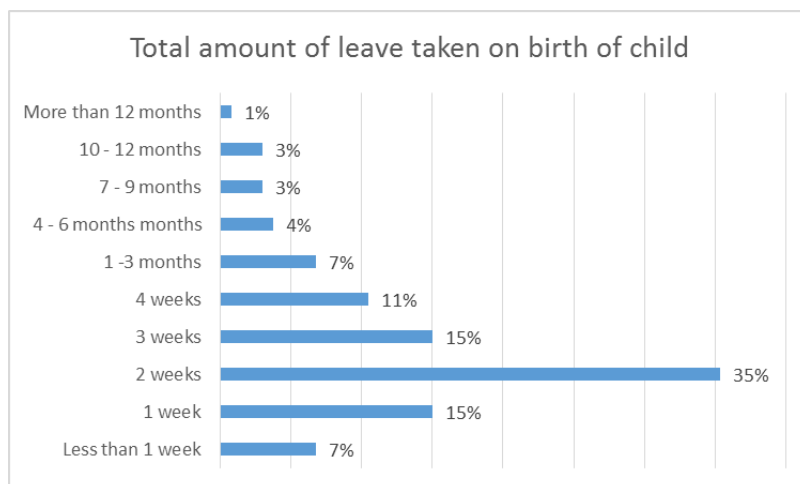


Most partners (57%) took up to 3 week's leave in total. This may indicate that partners are taking significantly more leave than they did a decade ago - the 2005 Department of Labour research found 84 percent of partners took up to 2 week's leave and only 6 percent took 6 weeks or more. This may be evidence that some partners are taking on more primary care

<sup>7</sup> Most of those who responded did so in relation to the birth of children, others did so in relation to the fostering or adoption of children.

<sup>8</sup> [2007, Department of Labour, Parental Leave in New Zealand \(2005/2006\)](#), p 40.

responsibilities, although we note that the 2005 Department of Labour research found that father's ideal leave is four weeks concurrent leave with the mother<sup>9</sup>.



### *Partners deeply value this time*

Many partners commented that they deeply valued the time with their family that the leave they took allowed them.

*“Absolutely critical, would have been near impossible for my wife to cope without this.”*

*“This type of leave is something you can not put a price on. As a father/parent to support your partner/wife/de facto is a key factor in terms of the mental, physical and any post antenatal issues that may arise. - The support person prior and post birth is crucial to the wellbeing of one's family and extended Whanau.”*

*“The leave was important as we had a premature baby and needed to go to the NNU each day. My support was needed once our baby was home.”*

*“I would never regret the years I set aside from the 'normal' working world to BE with our girls through their formative years. As a result we have great relationships.”*

*“Wonderful chance to bond with first child. Allowed wife to work, and secure her position at her job.”*

*“An experience I would not have missed for the world!”*

### *Ongoing changes to working arrangements*

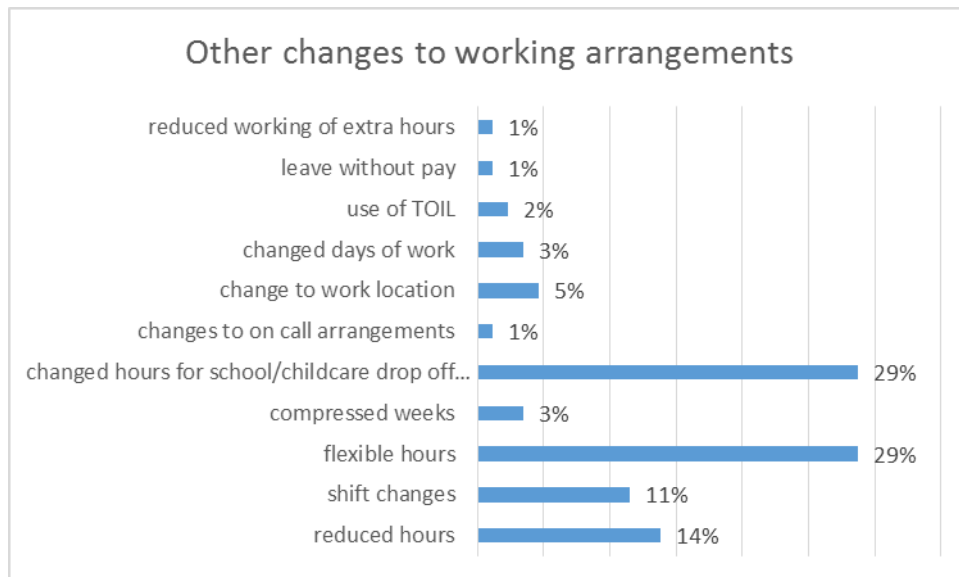
Traditionally, some have assumed that after a partner returns to work following the birth, fostering or adoption of a child their working life returns to business as usual. We wanted to test this and asked partners whether they continued to take leave or made changes to their working arrangements for childcare purposes.

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<sup>9</sup> This should be read conservatively – both of these pieces of research have small sample sizes and may not be representative of the general working population.

Once partners had returned to work over half (56%) of those who responded continued to take leave for childcare purposes. Annual leave was most commonly used (73%) along with sick and domestic leave and accrued time off in lieu.

We also asked partners whether they'd made changes to working arrangements, other than taking leave, for childcare purposes. Just over half (51%) said that they had. Most commonly this involved changing hours of work to enable school or childcare drop-offs and pick-ups and using flexible hours.



### What partners think of the arrangements they have access to

Many of those who completed the webform very generously shared their views about the arrangements they had and have access to and what more is needed.

#### *Leave around the birth of a child*

*Many were satisfied with the support they received...*

Many were very satisfied with the support they received from their employer around the birth, adoption or fostering of their children and the leave they were able to access. Managers who were flexible and understood and accommodated the inherent uncertainty in leave start dates around the birth of a child were especially appreciated.

*“Both children were born early and my employer was very accommodating for me to take all the time needed. I had no issues with my experience”. (Took 1 week unpaid parental leave)*

*“Excellent manager who enabled me to use domestic leave to be away from work for parts of the 4 weeks following the birth.” (Took days of domestic leave over 4 weeks following the birth)*

*“My 1st child is due on (date) and I have been approved as per my request 2 weeks annual leave from (date 4 days later). However my manager and I have also agreed that this 2 week block is 'floating' and should my child come late or early my leave can float each way as required. This response I felt works quite well as I have my leave*

*guaranteed for 2 weeks and with the significant staff shortages in my office this is a real stress off my shoulders."*

*"It was good. Team leader and co-workers were very supportive allowing me to commence my leave when the child was born rather than having a set date." (Took 2 weeks annual leave)*

*"It was easy and flexible regarding start and end point, just in discussion with my manager. I got good support with the paper work before and after. I had to go back after 7 months rather than a full year as I am the main earner in the family and we couldn't afford a longer unpaid break." (Took 7 months in a combination of government paid parental leave and unpaid parental leave)*

*"Brilliant! Was working for (department) and wife rang me halfway through a shift. Boss said leave and he'll start A/L leave tomorrow and take as much time as I needed. 3 weeks was enough as it only equated to 10ish days off A/L. Nice relaxed approach from a supportive boss helped." (Took 2 weeks annual leave)*

*Others were not satisfied with either the support they received or the leave arrangements they achieved.*

Some commented on a lack of understanding from their employer or that their employer had not agreed to the leave they had sought. Others found that information about what leave was available and the process for applying for it complicated, unclear or not well understood by their employer. Uncertainty and delays in approving leave arrangements were particularly stressful. Sick leave was used when other arrangements could not be agreed.

*"Two weeks was all I was allowed. It was very difficult to get employer to be understanding. They believed it was the women's job to care for the child. Eventually we came to a small compromise." (Took 2 weeks annual leave)*

*"The birth was at a very busy time for work, so I took only a short time off. There was, of course, no recognition of my dedication to my work from my employer." (Took less than 1 week of annual leave)*

*"Totally stressful having applied to my manager to utilise sick leave around the birth of my child and not hearing back from him at all. This made planning very difficult." (Took 2 weeks sick leave)*

*"It was difficult to organise and hard to understand what my rights were." (Took 12 months in a combination of sick leave, annual leave and government paid parental leave)*

*"First experience dealing with HR about leave was demoralising when I asked for 3 days sick-leave while my wife was incapacitated in hospital. Eventually had it approved retrospectively but not without considerable energy and numerous emails required on my behalf." (Took 3 weeks - a combination of sick leave, annual leave and time off in lieu)*

*Many were surprised at what was (not) available...*

Many partners were surprised or dissatisfied that there are not better paid leave entitlements for partners in legislation or in their employment agreements. Unpaid leave was largely

regarded as unaffordable. Many expressed a desire to have taken more time or regret at not having been able to take more time.

*"I was very surprised by the lack of options for me at this important time. I negotiated one week of unpaid leave but couldn't financially afford to take any more time."* (Took 1 week unpaid parental leave)

*"What I would like to see is greater flexibility so that if both are working (even if in different organisations) you can share 12 months. And that 12 months lasts for at least the first five years and can be taken as and when needed (in agreement with your employer)."* (Took 2 weeks annual leave)

*"It would have been great to be able to use specific parental leave, it seems unfair and outdated that dads don't have this. Also as a result of taking my entire allocation of remaining annual leave it meant that it was ages before I could take a proper chunk of time off to spend with my family as I had to wait for my next a/l allocation to build up."* (Took 1 week of annual leave)

*"I was surprised and disheartened that there was no paid provision of days off when my daughter was born. I had assumed that there would be paid paternal leave, but there wasn't. I could have taken paid annual leave but did not want to as I wanted to use this at other times as I have other children. In our case, there were complications and our baby was in SCBU for over a week and my partner needed support. The unpaid leave that I took was at the discretion of my employer. We were quite out of pocket after the two weeks. I really do think there should be better provision for this!"* (Took 2 weeks unpaid parental leave)

*"I think it is going to be disastrous for me. I am taking unpaid parental leave in (month) and 2 weeks of annual day holidays. My wife's employer has not granted her any paid parental leave. So I don't know, how we will survive the most financially poor weeks (the time we both won't be working) when our baby is born."* (Planning to take 4 weeks - combination of unpaid parental leave, unpaid partner's leave and annual leave)

#### *Leave and other working arrangements for childcare purposes*

Partners continued to take a variety of forms of leave for childcare purposes following their return to work. There a broad range of different flexible working arrangements accessed. Annual and personal sick leave entitlements are commonly used for childcare purposes. The descriptions partners provided of these arrangements are included as appendix one.

Many partners found their employer supportive to some extent of them taking leave and using various forms of flexible working arrangements for childcare purposes. For those working shifts the ability to swap or turn down particular shifts was highly valued.

*"Usually associated with school holidays; have not any issues with leave requests"* (Uses annual leave)

*"My manager is very understanding about taking time off for childcare needs. Particularly in the early years of life, these needs can be varied and unpredictable. In the first 12-18 months, I had to take a lot of time off to juggle childcare requirements."* (Uses annual leave)

*"I now work three days a week while my daughter is in the on-site daycare. I intend to slowly increase my work time. Again, there has been lots of support for this, I can't fault anything in the process and the support here at (workplace)."*

*"My husband and I both use flexi-time options in our workplaces, so that one of us is always available to pick up the kids at 2:45 from kindy/school. Our supervisors have been very supportive of our flexitime arrangements. We are both PSA members, but work for different organisations."*

*"My manager has been great about altering my work hours to be able to collect my son from school. She has also allowed me to bring him into work (staff room)."*

Some did not get the support they'd needed from their employer and others found that their employer tolerated rather than fully supported their arrangements.

*"Not a great deal of empathy from employer/managers for childcare leave, as I'm 'only the father' - still expected to do just as much work as anyone else. - - I'm being forced by employer to take unpaid leave at Christmas, so I can have some leave next year when our twins arrive. This doesn't seem like a very family friendly employee, nor is the government really committed to giving our next generation the best possible start." (Uses annual leave, special leave and sick leave)*

*"I informed my employer at the time that I wanted to drop down to 4 days a week. This was reluctantly agreed upon by them. However when applying for new jobs, potential employers would not agree to reduced hours, especially for a man. There is still a very 1950's mentality in NZ when it comes to dads looking after children during the week or doing daycare runs."*

*"Once again had frustrations around HR, who wanted to make this a change to my conditions of work and record the regular day off for childcare. However, given my considerable leave balance and the nature of my work, my manager of the time prevailed and I was able to work flexible hours - working up to 10 hours per day on the remainder of the week to make up for any lost time, as well as some hours during childcare days when possible."*

*"Often hard to finish early - culture of 'where's he off to - its only 4pm - he can't have much commitment...'"*

*"Most child care centres in the area that I work only operate until 3.30pm. This drastically minimised my options for childcare given the expectations that (department) has on its staff in terms of employment. This only left one childcare facility available for me."*

## **Conclusion**

Most partners take leave on the birth of a child and after their return to work continue to take leave and change working arrangements for childcare purposes. They value this time highly. Some are well supported by their employer to do this and others are not. Many are dissatisfied with the amount and kind of leave and other arrangements available to them and would like to see more support from government and employers.