

Questionnaire

UK COVID-19 Inquiry: Module 2 - Rule 9 Request to Maternity Action

Reference: M2/R9R/MA/TJS

1. Maternity Action is a UK wide maternity rights charity, established in 2008. Our online information, telephone and email advice services provide specialist advice (by legally qualified advisers) and information to pregnant women and new parents about rights at work, social security benefits and asylum support, and access to housing and healthcare.

2. We support and represent pregnant women, new parents, and their families.

3. From March 2020, demand for our advice services exploded. We prioritised our online information and advice on employment rights, social security benefits, and the two Covid-19 support schemes for workers (CJRS) and the self-employed (SEISS). We analysed each change in government guidance and immediately updated our online FAQs, and we translated those online FAQs into six languages. We worked closely with RCM and RCOG on official guidance for pregnant workers and their employers. And we made repeated representations to UK Government ministers and officials about gaps in their response to Covid-19 in respect of pregnant women and new parents.

4. In April 2020 we submitted [written evidence](#) to the Women & Equalities Committee's [inquiry](#) on the impact of Covid-19 on people with protected characteristics, and in July 2020 our Director gave [oral evidence](#) to the Committee's associated [sub-inquiry](#) on Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact; this evidence was cited in the Committee's February 2021 report ([HC385](#)). Also in April 2020, we submitted [written evidence](#) to the BEIS Committee's [inquiry](#) on the impact of Covid-19 on businesses and workers. In June 2020 we submitted [written evidence](#) to the Petitions Committee's inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on maternity and parental leave, and this evidence was cited in the Committee's July 2020 report ([HC526](#)); in July 2021 our Director gave [oral evidence](#) to the Committee for its October 2021 follow-up report ([HC479](#)). In August 2020 we [published a report](#) *Overdue: six pain-free fixes to end six months of ministerial inaction on protecting pregnant women & new parents from the impact of Covid-19*. And in December 2021 we [published a report](#): *Unsafe and unsupported: workplace health and safety for pregnant women in the pandemic*.

5. No, pregnant women and new parents were not adequately considered when decisions about the response to Covid-19 were made by the UK Government. On 16 March 2020, the Prime Minister and Chief Medical Officer used a televised press conference to announce that pregnant women were especially vulnerable to Covid-19 and should in effect self-isolate. However, this very public advice was not followed up with any guidance to employers on how to treat the hundreds of thousands of pregnant workers and new parents approaching the end of maternity or other parental leave and due to return to work. And that initial oversight was followed by months of ministerial inaction in relation to gaps in the Covid-19 support schemes for workers and the self-employed – gaps repeatedly drawn to the attention of UK Government ministers and officials by Maternity Action and others. Indeed, every single iteration of the CJRS and SEISS support schemes and associated guidance failed, at least initially, to address the specific circumstances and needs of pregnant women and new parents in the workforce. And this caused immense economic hardship and anxiety to tens of thousands of pregnant women and new parents.

6. Yes, from March 2020 we wrote repeatedly to ministers and officials in the UK Government to express our concerns about the consideration being given to pregnant women and new parents in the workforce. This correspondence includes: [letter of 30 March 2020](#) to the Chancellor and the SoS

Work & Pensions (no response); [letter of 7 April 2020](#) to the Chancellor and other ministers (no response); email of 8 April 2020 to DWP officials (no response); [letter of 17 April 2020](#) to the Chancellor (no response); [open letter of 21 April 2020](#) to the acting Prime Minister (no response); email of 24 April 2020 to DWP minister and officials (no response); email of 27 April 2020 to BEIS minister and officials (no response); [letter of 18 May 2020](#) to the Chancellor (no response); [letter of 1 June 2020](#) to the SoS BEIS (no response); [letter of 3 June 2020](#) to the Chancellor (Government reversed policy in question on 9 June); letter of 17 June 2020 to the SoS BEIS (no response); [letter of 27 July 2020](#) to the SoS Work & Pensions (DWP minister replied on 19 August 2020); letter of 18 August 2020 to the SoS Health & Social Care (no response); and letter of 17 November 2020 to the Chancellor (led to brief, unproductive email dialogue with Treasury officials).

7. Clearly, the specific circumstances and needs of pregnant women and new parents were repeatedly overlooked by UK Government ministers and officials in the early weeks and months of their response to Covid-19, and one would hope that such oversights would not be repeated in any future pandemic situation. But a more general lesson, perhaps, is that ministers and officials failed to establish adequate mechanisms for consultation with and input from specialist stakeholders such as Maternity Action, who were directly observing the impact of gaps in the support schemes and associated guidance on real people in real time, through our telephone and email advice services. Our letters to ministers (all copied to officials) were intended not to harangue, but to inform and offer pragmatic solutions. Yet almost invariably our letters were met by silence and inaction, and such limited engagement and dialogue as we were eventually able to achieve simply came too late.

Maternity Action
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