

Parental Leave for Councillors - Case Studies

Case Study – Cllr Alice Perry – Islington Council

I had been a Councillor for around seven years before I became pregnant with my daughter. My maternity leave began just after the start of my third term as a Councillor.

If I hadn't been able to take parental leave I am not sure I would have been able to continue to stand to be a Councillor. Looking after a new born baby is intense and for the months after she was born, all my energy was taken up looking after her. Parents of young children regularly use council services and it is very advantageous to have this important group of residents represented in local government. The LGA has also been working hard on a cross-party basis to enable more women to get involved with politics so access to parental leave is vital. We need councillors from across society and no one should lose their voice because they have a family.

My Labour Group were very supportive throughout my pregnancy and during my maternity leave. I attended meetings and community events when I could but people understood that I needed to prioritise looking after my baby. My local members were also brilliant and understood I needed to leave ward meetings early to be home to give my baby her nightly feed. When I was able to start attending meetings regularly again everyone made me feel very welcome and valued - this was also important as returning to work can be challenging for new parents.

Access to parental leave is very important but so is having a supportive and understanding group culture. Our shared Labour values and belief in the importance of equality, dignity and respect should mean that this is a given in 2019.

Case Study – Cllr Waseem Zaffar – Birmingham City Council

I was first elected in 2011 and had been a councillor for seven years when my second child was born. When my first child was born a week before my election in 2015 there was no parental leave available to me as a councillor, but when my second child was born in 2018 this had just been introduced for councillors by Birmingham City Council.

Having a child is a major event for new parents, and councillors who are new parents shouldn't have to sacrifice spending important time with their partner, new child and any other children at this time. Councillors spend so much time working away from home during the evenings and weekends so it is important that the time after a child's birth or adoption is devoted to the family, knowing that the appropriate support is being provided to cover your councillor duties.

As I said, my first child was born a week before my election in 2015. Two hours after he was born I was speaking at a rally in my ward rather than supporting my partner and enjoying these precious moments – all because there was no support available to me as a councillor and a new parent. But after the birth of my second child, which was a few months after Birmingham City Council passed a parental leave policy for councillors, I was able to switch off completely from councillor duties – my support team took care of all the cabinet work that they were able to, and the Labour Group office supported me with ward casework. It meant that I was able to spend quality time with my partner and two children as opposed to divide my time between my family and councillor duties.

I know of so many councillor colleagues across the country who have had personal difficulties balancing family life with councillor responsibilities, and having a parental leave policy in place

signals that the council and the Labour Group is supportive of councillors who have children. The rights of councillors are limited in comparison to normal employees, and adopting a parental leave policy will go a long way in helping councillors, both male and female, receive the support they need during this special but challenging time in their life.

One of the major barriers that councillors who are about to become parents face is the impact that the scale of their councillor duties has on their personal life. The lack of rights they have does not encourage people to remain councillors, or even become councillors in the first place. As a councillor who has experienced both sides of this – not having access to parental leave for my first child then having access to it for my second child – I can wholeheartedly say that having a parental leave policy in place makes a very positive difference to councillors and their families.

Case Study – Leah Hosker – Erewash

I'd been a councillor for three and a half years when my baby was born and I took parental leave. I think it's really important for councillors to have access to parental leave – the role of a councillor can be demanding and stressful with constant new challenges, and becoming a parent is also challenging. Having to attend council meetings and carry out council activities when you have a new child will mean you can't spend quality time with your baby, and also mean it's harder to carry out council duties. My family were incredibly supportive but you can't always leave your baby with someone else. Most new parents will be taking maternity or paternity leave from their full time jobs and as the role of a councillor becomes more demanding, it is right that councillors can also take parental leave from this role.

Erewash Labour Group implemented the parental leave policy for Labour Groups a few months before I had my son. It really benefitted me as I could focus my time on me new baby and not attending meetings – having to attend evening meetings soon after he was born would have made it difficult to establish evening routines early on. My fellow councillors kept me up to date on what was happening so I was still in the loop, and I still received my allowance so I wasn't penalised financially for having a baby. My group colleagues were really supportive of me taking parental leave and it really helped me.

I think every Labour Group and council should pass the parental leave policy, and I'd urge you to do so if you haven't already. It really benefitted me and my family, and I felt much more positive about being a councillor at a time in my life that was bringing big changes and new challenges. Having a parental leave policy in place encourages young candidates in particular to put themselves forward to be a councillor as they know they will have this support if they choose to have children. All new parents need parental leave to bond with their babies, and being a councillor doesn't exclude you from needing to do this.