

## **Best Start Partnership – 6<sup>th</sup> May 2025**

The Best Start Partnership believe that whilst recent legislative changes represent a positive move in the right direction, further progress is required to fully align policy with research evidence regarding the critical importance of the first 1,001 days. In particular, we advocate for extending parental leave by at least an additional year. This extension would enable bonding, secure attachment, and continued home-based care further into this crucial developmental window, supporting both maternal wellbeing and optimal outcomes for babies.

At present, as a Best Start Partnership, we do not hold specific data on the benefits of extended leave provisions and flexible working rights. However, through our involvement in the Common Strategic Policy, we are supporting the launch of a Parental Childcare Survey. This initiative will provide valuable data and evidence in the future to better understand the real-world impacts of any changes to or new policy on children and families. We would also support any further work to explore barriers faced by families, fathers, or parents with protected characteristics in accessing their rights.

We would recommend that parents be offered the genuine choice to remain at home to care for their babies for the first two years of life, supported by financial measures that make this option accessible and affordable, including confirming the protection of the parents contribution record, during this time. This support could form part of a broader childcare strategy that recognises the developmental benefits of home-based parental care, ensuring that families are not forced to choose between financial stability and optimal early child development. We acknowledge that many parents face pressures such as cost of living, employment demands, and career aspirations. Nevertheless, enabling and normalising this choice would provide critical flexibility for families who wish to prioritise home care in their child's earliest years.

We welcome the introduction of new rights for working parents of babies receiving neonatal care, rolled out in England, Scotland, and Wales from 6 April 2025. Parents in these locations, whose babies are admitted to neonatal care are now entitled to up to 12 weeks' additional leave, alongside their maternity or paternity leave. Some employees, depending on their length of service and earnings, are eligible for up to 12 weeks of neonatal pay at £125 per week. Further information about neonatal leave and pay can be accessed through the national charity Working Families, and the charity Bliss offers support to parents of premature or sick babies.