

PPMA Excellence in People Management Awards 2019

Best Wellbeing, Engagement or Flexible Working Initiative

Submitted by:

London Borough of Waltham
Forest

Introduction

In January 2018, the London Borough of Waltham Forest became the first employer in the UK to introduce extended maternity and paternity leave, at full pay, for any employee who has a baby born prematurely.

Inspired by a national campaign, the Smallest Things, the council's pioneering new policy means that employees who have a baby born before 37 weeks now receive additional pay and leave for the time their baby spends in hospital up to the original due date.

Over the last twelve months, four council employees have benefited from this policy while employers across the country – including Sony Music and the Greater London Authority – have been inspired to follow suit and introduce similar measures to support their staff.

“Waltham Forest have blazed a trail. Their decision raised the profile of the Smallest Things campaign, paved the way for our new Employer with Heart chartermark, and encouraged other employers to follow the council's lead. By introducing this critical support for employees who experience the uncertainty and sometimes trauma of premature birth, Waltham Forest have shown they are truly an employer with heart.”

Catriona Ogilvy, Founder, The Smallest Things

Background

Every year, around one in eight babies in the UK is born prematurely. As well as being one of the most stressful experiences a new parent can go through, there can be practical and financial implications when a baby arrives earlier than expected.

Statutory maternity and paternity pay start from the day a baby is born. For parents of babies born too soon, this can mean their entitlement is partly or fully used up before their baby leaves hospital and arrives home.

“I've heard sad stories where parents of premature babies used up so much of their maternity and paternity leave to be with their child in hospital. Then, when their baby finally got home, the parents had to go back to work really soon after. That seems so cruel.”

Rosie Tulloch, Waltham Forest employee and beneficiary of the council's policy

The Smallest Things is a charity that campaigns for the good health of premature babies and their families. Over several years, Catriona Ogilvy, the founder of the Smallest Things, worked with her local MP, Steve Reed, to try and pass legislation that would require employers to provide additional paid leave for parents of premature babies. Their efforts, though unsuccessful – at least for now – caught the attention of Cllr Clyde Loakes, Deputy Leader at Waltham Forest Council. As Clyde explains, “Having a premature baby must be one of the most stressful events a new parent can experience. I found myself wondering: do we need to wait for a change in the law to help parents in this position, or could Waltham Forest – an organisation where we value our workforce and care deeply about their wellbeing – just go ahead and put this support in place?”

Implementation

With backing from councillors and trade unions, Waltham Forest launched its Premature Baby Policy in January 2018. Key elements of the policy are as follows:

- any employee who has a baby born before 37 weeks is entitled to receive additional leave at full pay
- this leave and pay cover the time their baby spends in hospital from birth up to the original due date
- employees’ existing entitlement to maternity and paternity leave is unaffected – Premature Baby Leave is an additional entitlement the council provides on top of this

In addition, the council’s policy includes:

- advice for managers on supporting an employee whose baby is born prematurely
- information and guidance for staff, and
- details about additional support available to employees, including expert help from the council’s employee assistance programme, which is provided by a specialist third party

In launching its policy, the council also wanted to support the Smallest Things campaign and encourage other employers to introduce similar measures to help their staff. Councillors heavily promoted the new policy in local and national media, achieving high-profile coverage on BBC and ITV news, while the HR team produced a public version of the policy for other employers to download and customise. A key message was: this is a low-cost change to make as the number of parents who require this support is, thankfully, small – but for those who need it, the difference it makes can be huge.

“This policy is good business sense and ethically the right thing to do. More employers should follow Waltham Forest’s lead.”

Janet Walker, Branch Secretary, Unison, Waltham Forest

Impact

Since January 2018, four employees have benefited directly from the council's policy, each claiming between one and 14 weeks of extra pay and leave, while the council's reputation as a progressive, supportive employer has been enhanced, both internally and externally.

In addition, the impact of the council's decision extends well beyond Waltham Forest. As a result of the extensive media coverage the council's policy attracted, employers from across the UK have taken similar steps to support their staff. For example:

- In July 2018, Sony Music became the first private sector organisation to offer Premature Baby Leave to their employees after a senior executive heard a discussion about Waltham Forest's policy on Woman's Hour.
- In October 2018, the Greater London Authority introduced a similar policy, which their HR team developed with advice and support from Waltham Forest.

"Waltham Forest's HR team were really open in sharing their policy and their experience of implementing it. This helped us deliver our own policy at speed and achieve a positive response from our staff and also externally."

Laura Heywood, HR Business Partner, Greater London Authority

Other organisations that have followed the council's lead include the London Boroughs of Croydon and Southwark, South Yorkshire Police, London Energy, and Medway NHS Foundation Trust – with many more to hopefully follow over the course of 2019.

"Giving birth to a premature baby is a rollercoaster – imagine having three! Within the neonatal unit, you hear lots of stories from people who couldn't spend enough time with their babies and ended up returning to work early or leaving their job. Waltham Forest's scheme has made a huge difference to me. It's great to know your employer is backing you and your finances are stable – it takes away so much stress and worry. I feel proud to work for an organisation that is leading the way on this."

Rochelle Francis, Waltham Forest employee, mother of triplets who were born three months early and beneficiary of the council's policy

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