

‘I was 90% in the room and 10% sorting out work’

Anthony feels so strongly that self-employed dads like him need paid leave, that he wrote to his MP



Anthony Friend, 32, and his wife are both self-employed musicians living in London. They had their first child in 2021 and are now expecting their second in June. Ahead of the birth of their first son, Anthony was surprised to learn that self-employed men are not entitled to statutory paternity leave or pay – unlike self-employed women, who can receive a maternity allowance. Dads like Anthony make up around 20% of fathers in the UK. He is disappointed dads in his position aren't supported or paid to take time off work to bond with their babies and support mothers.

As my wife and I prepared to welcome our first son in 2021, I quickly discovered that self-employed men are not entitled to statutory pay of any kind. My wife has a part-time teaching job alongside her freelance

performing career, and was told she was entitled to paid maternity pay from her employer for a number of weeks before switching over to statutory maternity allowance, which was a significantly lower payment. The pay was not going to be nearly enough to live on.

It seemed strange to me that fathers don't have any entitlement if they're self-employed, while self-employed mothers do. When I wrote to my Labour MP, Ellie Reeves, about my concerns, she told me that the previous year, 94,000 men were in the same position as I was.

As a self-employed dad, without some sort of paternity leave and pay in place, we need to keep working to both keep current, and to make money. I can't simply put on an out of hours message on email – I'd lose future work and income, and if I take time away, no one will protect my work for me so that it's there when I get back.

I planned to book in work that could be easily rearranged around our baby's due date, but in the end, he came weeks earlier than expected. I was in the hospital texting to try finding cover for work.

A few days after Raphael was born, I was practising the clarinet, preparing for a last-minute performance with the English National Opera. I couldn't afford to say no to the offer, even though our son had just been born. We needed the money and I needed to make sure I continued to be open to work. This meant I had to be practising regularly, even with a new baby to look after – you always have to be ready to go out and play if the phone rings.

During those very early days, I was 90% in the room and 10% sorting out all my work commitments. I wasn't on paternity leave, so I felt I couldn't ever turn down work and had to maintain a state of constant readiness to perform.

I ended up receiving a one-off grant of £200 from the Musicians Union, but otherwise received no financial support as a new dad who wanted to be woven into the life of my new child.

At one point I more-or-less took 3 months off entirely unpaid, because my wife went back to working full-time. I went on a few tours with her and the baby to support her. It was a stressful time during that first year.

In addition to trying to navigate the huge change of having a child, we also had to give each other plenty of space to work.

I would have loved to have at least part of this time off recognised and compensated by a government who understands that modern dads want to be equal caregivers as mothers, but they need the support to do this. We can and do play a vital role in the early months of a child's life, but we aren't empowered to do so.

It's not just about the finances, although that's important. It's about the structural framework - self-employed dads should have to take time off with their families after a birth. Dads shouldn't need to be ready to work at the drop of a hat, while taking on the responsibility for their partner and baby. We should be able to know there is support in place to take a given number of weeks off.

But when I wrote again to my MP, her message to the Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch was passed on to MP Kevin Hollinrake, the minister responsible for Health and Safety, who replied to me explaining that parental leave and pay was solely given because of health and safety concerns.

The letter back pointed out that self-employed men have flexibility and can choose when to take time off, but the issue is that paid parental leave would support us to do so; if we do not work, we do not get paid, so time off results in lost income that most people cannot afford. Even the meagre statutory maternity allowance offered to self-employed women would make a big difference, particularly if both parents were able to receive it.

Now expecting our second child, the system hasn't changed at all. This time around, my wife is planning to take more time off work. With our finances tighter than ever, I am already feeling the pressure to book work around and after the due date. I feel a huge urgency for my career to be doing well, for the sake of our family. It's really stressful.