



**John Lewis Partnership
Equal Parenthood Policy
Flexible Working Policy
(Transcript)
Nikki Humphrey
Executive Director, People, John Lewis Partnership**

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Nikki Humphrey

Nikki Humphrey became Executive Director, People, for the John Lewis Partnership in September 2020. She has overseen the development and implementation of the Partnership's Equal Parenthood Policy (the first for any major UK retailer), which launched in late 2021, and has continued the expansion of their Flexible Working Policy. Before moving to John Lewis, Nikki held senior executive roles in Virgin Atlantic, Lloyds Banking Group and Scottish Widows insurance.

The **John Lewis Partnership plc** operates [John Lewis](#) stores, Waitrose supermarkets, its banking and financial services, and other [retail](#)-related activities. The company is owned by a [trust](#) on behalf of all its employees who are known as 'Partners'.

"We wanted to really make sure that both John Lewis & Waitrose, as well-known brands, were a place where people would aspire to come and work with us and we really feel, irrespective of people's backgrounds, that's what their experiences are and they really feel they can thrive within our business. Those principles are really important to us.

Last summer we announced a package of support for our working families in the business and we did it because Partners were telling us it was really important to them. We also had been reporting on our gender pay gap for the last 3 or 4 years; we understood from other research that we knew this was an area in which we wanted to be market-leading. So I was going to touch upon a couple of areas, in particular our new Equal Parenthood Policy and also our approach to flexible working because we feel both of them we think are making quite a stepchange compared to some of our competitors and within retail.

Like I said at the start it is still quite early days, changes we introduced towards the back end of 2021. We are starting to see some interesting findings. We are going to need to keep tracking that so it could be something that in a year's time, I'll come back and share how we're progressing. In the meantime we are happy to share some of the early insights we have seen already. So I guess just speaking to the experience in this virtual room, I know

there's many studies that tell us that sharing childcare is really good from a gender equality perspective, and definitely helping reduce the gender pay gap and yet being able to afford to take the time off is a real barrier particularly for low income families. I'll touch upon of the insights and research that we've done to understand that.

We heard really loud and clear from our Partners. We have a Working Parents Network and we also have a Gender Network whereby they shared with us really loud and clear, in particular if you looked at the two weeks paid paternity leave we offered, it just wasn't enough and actually what we did offer for many it wasn't affordable for them to take the time off just wasn't long enough for them to really have time with their new family and it caused them a real affordability challenge to be able access that support. So working with our network we developed our Equal Parenthood Policy which essentially means that all of our partners, regardless of how they have become a parent, so that includes adoption as well as natural birth, receive 26 weeks' paid leave, so that's 14 weeks for contractual pay, followed by 12 weeks at 50% contractual pay once they've worked with us for a year they are entitled to access that support.

We did have to think quite carefully about how we designed this policy because of the diverse nature of our business. We were acutely aware that we have both office jobs that may be easier to accommodate, all the way through to operational roles whereby we needed to ensure the policy could fit across a diverse range of working environments. So we had to think about things such as backfilling Partners when they took leave, how roles and responsibilities were divided up and how that could work in some of our shops and warehouses.

Since we introduced the new policy, we have seen quite a significant increase in the takeup of what was paternity leave, and we now call it co-parent leave, so importantly we have also changed the terminology of it, actually for single sex parents - you know the traditional maternity and paternity leave - we have purposely gone to call it equal parenthood leave. And on average Partners are taking 16 weeks leave when they have a child and then only a quarter of our Partners so far are taking the additional 12 weeks leave at half pay and I think that comes back to the point around affordability as a really important factor when people are taking parental leave because they just have to balance the books, still afford the home along with time with their children.

We have also seen an increase in Partners taking up shared parental leave too and we think that's because the Equal Parenthood Policy has really raised awareness of their options. So whereas before it was because it was either Partners could take their maternity leave (5.00), when it was such a short paternity leave, now that there's a lot more equality there, it's actually generally driving a conversation about shared care because some the affordability part has been taken off the table, how would they want to go and share those conversations and it has opened up a dialogue that I don't think made that feasible before. Interesting to see to see and interesting to go and track them. what it means to them. We really have had an overwhelming response from parents taking the leave. It's been incredibly positive. It was positive when we launched it and we continue to get great feedback on such a difference it makes to the early part of bringing a child into the household and actually there's the options and their ability to really play a key part. Actually it's been really important, a real

sense that they can be in it together with their birth partner from the start and have that important bonding time which we just know is really critical with their new baby. We've also had quite a bit of feedback from our co-parents whose partners have had traumatic births or they have faced long recoveries, as say from C sections, and that's because they've been able to take the extra time off and we had heard even before we brought in the policy that that was something our Partners really struggled with: there were difficult circumstances with, say a birth, and someone could only take a week off because they had to go straight back to work and couldn't take any more off. So it's definitely created quite a shift for the not straightforward situations to give people again optionality to provide more support. We've also heard that it's really helped them when their partner is self-employed, and that is where their partner works outside John Lewis, and they might be running their own business, and we've heard that they have, in particular that our new policy has allowed some women that are self-employed to go back to work, to retain their responsibilities for running a business, keeping the business going and enabling their partner, co-partner, to take over the burden and some of the responsibilities of a child coming into their family which again is an interesting dynamic when you go into how we help women with either running their business or running their careers because they have got more options. So we know we are learning lots, these are quite initial observations, we are only three or four months into it and we are going to continue to monitor the impact of the policy and in particular the experience of our Partners that are coming back from extended leave to see whether this flexible approach for all genders is really working in our business. It'll be interesting to see how that plays out but we are confident just given the positive response that we will continue to have it in that way.

The second area I wanted to just touch on was flexible working. We have done quite a lot of work around our flexible working that started earlier than 2021. I think it's fair to say that the pandemic has really accelerated our thinking and I think other organisations would say the same by need and necessity. We know that retail has been a destination of choice particularly for women because of the flexible working that's built into jobs in the way retail is structured. So often working hours, shift patterns, can be agreed around caring responsibilities and we know it's one of the few sectors along with education, health and social care which also often offers jobs that are close to home as well, which makes a real impact allowing them to look after their caring responsibilities as well as their jobs as well. So as I say our flexible working has existed within our business for quite a while and we have done quite a bit to think about how do we creatively make it work more. Like I say the last two years has really made us think about how do we open it up. We have nearly half of our Partners that work part-time, so that's just over 45,000 Partners that work part-time, and we have been looking at how do part-time workers progress more in their career, sort of address some of the cultural barriers that we have and perceptions of part-time working. There has been a historical view that if you work reduced hours this means your contribution is not as much and therefore that you are not the type of person that would want a role because you are working part-time because of other responsibilities. So we've really been trying to challenge those attitudes and views to recognise that part-time working adds significant value and contribution to our business. We partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team a couple of years back within the Government Equalities Office to trial a flexible working wording on our job adverts. We tried to be a lot more proactive in showing that we embrace flexible working and this definitely showed an increase in

applications. We saw an increase of about 50% in the vacancies we were advertising internally and we also saw an increase in the proportion of applications from women as well for those roles, where we saw an uplift of about 13%. So, it was incredibly positive with us being more proactive, with us recognising that there are different ways of working than the traditional full-time.

So we now have a Flexible First policy. All vacancies that we advertise across the whole of the Partnership, upfront that it doesn't matter where you are, we are very explicit that we will consider flexible options. We do have a few operational reasons that we might restrict it but that's in the minority.

We have really pushed all of our leaders to start with, 'You could be able to work flexibly, let's go and have a conversation' and so far we have definitely seen that stepchange. So I guess we know there is more that we could be doing, I don't think we have seen the best of it all, but we are pretty proud of some of the inroads we have made and we really want to make the Partnership a goto place in terms of the employment perspective, so people come and think they could be themselves, have caring responsibilities while holding key responsibilities and roles and being able to progress their careers in the Partnership. So we feel pretty excited about it."