

Government must do more for working parents

Working parents across the country will have felt their hearts sink last week with the Prime Minister's announcement that schools will stay shut until at least early March.

Even before this news came out, the main topic of conversation in mums' WhatsApp groups was how much longer women, already stretched to the limit, could keep on juggling their jobs, parenting and home-schooling responsibilities.

Chats have been full of funny gifs or videos about being driven to drink, of struggling to teach fronted adverbials, or more serious exchanges reflecting growing levels of serious anxiety or depression.

Worryingly, many women are also talking about how they may need to give up work for good if this goes on too much longer. That is neither good for them, or for the economy.

Before the pandemic, record numbers of women were employed in the UK. But the coronavirus has reversed years of progress, as so many female-dominated sectors – notably retail and hospitality - have been the hardest hit with the highest levels of job losses.

There is strong evidence from the ONS and others that it is women who are shouldering the bulk of these additional responsibilities – including home schooling – as family support, school and wrap around care have all fallen away.

Some are calling for a right to furlough for all working parents. While this is desirable in principle, the reality for employers and for individuals is more complicated.

The BCC's Quarterly Economic Survey – the UK's largest independent business survey – has illustrated the profound impact the crisis has had on businesses. The QES has seen an unprecedented proportion of businesses, particularly consumer-facing and smaller firms, reporting falls in revenue, cash flow, and investment.

Furloughing working parents could leave some employers without the personnel they need to keep their business afloat and leave some families struggling financially.

Moreover, for some parents, work offers much needed relief from the traumas of homeschooling, temper-tantrums, and the constant demand for snacks and entertainment.

In the vast majority of cases employers and employees are working together to find different ways of making it work during this difficult time, whether that's allowing reduced hours, a more flexible working week or a temporary redistribution of responsibilities.

None of these solutions is perfect, nor do they fully alleviate the feeling of 'failing on all fronts' that working parents are expressing at the moment. As author and working-mum Katie Kirby put it recently in a widely shared social media post, "Something has got to give, I just don't know what".

For businesses, last week's headlines on the timeline for schools reopening was a further hammer blow. Government has been clear that it will be schools that open first, but if they don't fully reopen until late March or April, what does that mean for the thousands of businesses which are closed but continue to incur costs?

At the end of 2020, the Chamber Network called on the Chancellor to quickly set out a support plan that would be put in place for businesses throughout this year.

And yet, even with closures likely to push into the Spring and Summer, firms are still being told they must wait until the Budget on March 3 to hear what support will be available.

Many are looking ahead to hefty tax bills come April and are asking themselves now whether or not they are going to be able to carry on or whether it is better to shut up shop altogether.

We will all pay the cost of business failures and the job losses that go with them. It is essential that, having got this far, the Government does whatever it can to ensure that businesses survive so that they can power the recovery when the time comes.

What parents and firms both want is a safe return to school for all pupils as quickly as possible. While the Prime Minister's letter to parents and carers last week was well-intentioned, it's not replacement for a clear plan of action.

So what is the plan?

The Government has promised a roadmap out of this lockdown and it cannot come soon enough.

Top of the list must be clarity on when and in what way pupils will be able to return to school. Schools and government must work together to agree what can be done to reopen our schools as quickly and as safely as possible.

If there is one thing the success story of the vaccine has taught us it is that when our nation puts its mind to something, we can get it done.

The damage of schools being closed for any longer than necessary will continue to take its toll on working parents, particularly mothers.

It will also be seen in lower business productivity, increasing mental health difficulties, and, of course, the damaged education of a generation of children which will have social and economic consequences for many years to come.