



**Burnet**  
reach for the many

# Burnet Institute Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) Cygnet Award application: parental leave experience

January 2025





**Image:** Stacey Edwards (Taungurung/Boon Wurrung/Bunurong) 'Bunjil The Creator' 2021, acrylic on canvas.

## Acknowledgement of Country

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Burnet Institute board, staff and students recognise the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which we live and work.

We are proud to acknowledge the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which our head office is located and recognise their strong and ongoing connection to Country. Recognising the ongoing impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, our position as a leading medical research institute demands that we strengthen our commitment to close the gap in health outcomes.

## About the artwork

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Bunjil is the creator of the Kulin Nations. He takes the shape of a wedge-tailed eagle. Any guests of the Kulin Nations have to follow 2 rules: to obey the laws of Bunjil, and to not harm the children or land of Bunjil.



This artwork was created through The Torch, a not-for-profit organisation that provides art, cultural and arts industry support to First Nations people currently in, or recently released, from Victorian prisons.

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# Burnet: SAGE Cygnet 1

## Barrier overview

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Burnet Institute recognises parental leave is an institution-wide barrier.

## Key barrier

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The key barrier addressed in this Cygnet report is staff difficulty in balancing parental leave with career advancement. This challenge, shaped by both structural and cultural factors, significantly impacts the attraction, retention, and progression of staff. At Burnet, we have identified these issues through the self-assessment conducted during the SAGE Bronze application process and other internal reviews. We are committed to enhancing the staff experience throughout the entire parental leave process, including pre-leave planning, leave duration, and post-leave transition.

## Evidence of barrier

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We identified that challenges relating to parental leave were an important barrier to the attraction, retention and progression of staff. This was evident from data gathered in preparing Burnet's Bronze award application as well as subsequent monitoring of Burnet's workplace culture and policies and feedback from staff. The following table lists the key data-gathering activities that included a specific focus on issues pertaining to parental leave and the experiences of parents at Burnet.



## Data sources and methods: staff culture and parental leave analysis 2017/18

Source	Date	Method	Details
Staff culture survey	2017	Confidential online survey of staff experience of Burnet culture, with a mix of structured and unstructured questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respondent overview:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Total respondents: 90 (118 female, 72 male)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Areas of work:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; International Development or International Operations: 25 respondents (13.6%)</li> <li>&gt; Public Health: 61 respondents (33.2%)</li> <li>&gt; Life Sciences: 58 respondents (31.5%)</li> <li>&gt; Organisational Professional Services: 40 respondents (21.7%)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Retrospective review of parental leave records	2017	Descriptive disaggregated analysis of the number of staff taking parental leave, duration of leave, and return to work arrangements using HR records.	HR records, which classified all staff as either male or female during that period.
Staff focus group discussions	2018	A qualitative exploration of challenges staff face at Burnet using facilitated participatory methods.	Unfortunately, we no longer have the data available to determine the diversity of participants or the number of individuals who attended the focus groups. However, a total of 11 focus group discussions were planned and conducted in June 2018.

Based on the experiences and perspectives reported by staff who participated in these activities, we identified 5 key themes which highlight significant obstacles relating to parental leave. Each of these barriers was subsequently addressed through specific actions included in the SAGE Bronze action plan.

# Barriers identified as contributing factors

## 1. Insufficient parental leave provision and low uptake of parental leave by men

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Low uptake of parental and carer's leave by men, partly due to inadequate recognition and support for men's caregiving roles, which affects staff satisfaction.

### **Evidence of this barrier**

2018 parental leave entitlement:

- Twelve weeks of paid parental leave and 10 days of carer's leave.

Focus group findings:

- Need to better recognise and normalise men's caregiving roles.
- Concerns about how men taking carer's leave were perceived.
- Some men feared negative reactions and felt their caregiving roles were not acknowledged.

Bronze application data (2015-2017):

- Four men took secondary parental leave in 2 years.
- Zero men took primary parental leave.

Carer's leave usage:

- No men used carer's leave.

### **Consequences of this barrier**

- This could discourage men from taking parental or carer's leave, potentially leading to dissatisfaction among current staff.
- The lack of support for men's caregiving roles may also deter potential male staff from joining Burnet.

## 2. Unclear leave entitlements

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A substantial percentage of both women and men lack sufficient awareness and knowledge about parental leave entitlements.

### **Evidence of this barrier**

2018 culture survey data:

- 45% of women had limited knowledge and awareness of parental leave entitlements.
- 39% of men had limited knowledge and awareness of parental leave entitlements.

### **Consequences of this barrier**

Limited awareness may result in underutilisation of available leave entitlements, potentially impacting staff well-being and work-life balance.

## 3. Career impact on women

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A significant portion of women experience career interruptions and negative impacts upon returning from career breaks.

### **Evidence of this barrier**

2018 culture survey data:

- Two-thirds of women surveyed reported resuming their careers without significant interruption after their most recent career break (including non-parental leave).
- 19% of women indicated their career break caused interruptions.
- 22% felt that taking career breaks negatively impacted their career.

### **Consequences of this barrier**

- Many women experience career interruptions and slower progression after returning from career breaks.
- Career disruptions contribute to ongoing gender inequality in career advancement and workforce representation.

## 4. Managing transitions: flexible work options for returning staff

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The high rate of part-time work among returning staff indicates challenges in resuming full-time roles.

### Evidence of this barrier

2018 culture survey data:

- Burnet offered generous flexible working arrangements for parents and carers. However, of the staff who returned, only one returned to full-time work, while 94% returned to part-time roles.

### Consequences of this barrier

This shift to part-time work highlights challenges in resuming full-time roles, which may impact career progression and staff retention. It may also hinder long-term career growth, especially in areas like research productivity and travel opportunities, where full-time engagement can be an advantage.

## 5. Lack of infrastructure

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Inadequate privacy and accessibility of lactation rooms caused discomfort and stress for mothers.

### Evidence of this barrier

2018 focus group findings:

- Women expressing milk felt that lactation rooms were not private or consistently accessible, because they were used for other purposes.

### Consequences of this barrier

- Lack of privacy or access could make it difficult for women to express milk comfortably, leading to physical and emotional discomfort.
- Feeling unsupported or anxious due to inadequate facilities could negatively impact women's mental well-being and work performance.

# Activities and outputs

In recent years, Burnet has made significant strides in enhancing progress tracking and data collection, resulting in more informed and targeted decisions and actions across the Institute. Key initiatives include expanding Employee Self Service (ESS) data collection to cover critical areas such as disability status, gender diversity and more. The implementation of our disability action plan (DAP), recognised as a gold standard by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and the ongoing development of the gender equity action plan (GEAP), further demonstrate our commitment to inclusion.

We are also exploring Australian Workplace Equality Index (AWEI) accreditation and advancing the Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan initiative. To support these efforts, we've introduced a centralised system in Microsoft OneNote to track the progress of all action plans, including DAP, RAP, and GEAP. This year, we initiated a comprehensive pay gap analysis, examining factors including tenure, disability and seniority, marking the first step in our commitment to conducting this analysis every 2 years. While some sample sizes were small, we see this as an important milestone. Conducting this analysis every 2 years will help us track progress, and we anticipate increasing trust as more staff update their profiles. Notably, the number of staff identifying as having a disability has increased from 3 to more than 15, highlighting the increase in our inclusivity efforts.

Burnet uses several channels to understand and improve workplace culture, with a strong focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

- An employee engagement survey was introduced in 2024 to replace the culture survey. This confidential survey runs every 2 two years to assess staff satisfaction and engagement. Demographic details are pre-filled to protect privacy while enabling meaningful analysis.
- A DEI survey is conducted every second year. This anonymous survey helps to capture staff's lived experiences and perceptions of inclusion at Burnet. Demographic data is self-reported and helps shape our DEI strategy and targeted actions.
- Staff committees and resource groups provide insights, support community building, and inform inclusive policies. Input is regularly used to drive organisational change.

Together, these mechanisms help to ensure staff voices guide workplace planning and embed DEI principles into both operations and research, supporting our goal of achieving health equity.

## 1. Insufficient parental leave provision and low uptake of parental leave by men

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### Actions and outputs

#### Extended parental leave

- The duration of paid parental leave was extended from 12 to 14 weeks for all carers.
- The distinction between primary and secondary carers was eliminated to ensure equal access to leave for all parents including non-birth parents/ carers. Intersectionality was prioritised by ensuring that inclusive language was used in the policy to cover all family structures.
- The previous qualifying period requiring staff to have been employed for at least 12 months to be eligible for employer-funded parental leave has now been removed.

#### Superannuation contributions

- Employer superannuation contributions were extended as a parental leave entitlement for up to 12 months (previously only 6 months), covering both paid and unpaid leave periods.

#### Expanded personal leave

- Sick leave was renamed as personal leave, and the definition was expanded to cover both carer's and sick leave. Staff now receive 14 working days in their first year and 21 days annually thereafter, with pro-rata adjustments for part-time staff and leave accruing over time. Previously, only 10 days of sick leave were provided annually.

### Implementation challenges

- Ensuring that all managers and staff fully understood and effectively utilised the updated leave options, including the continuation of superannuation contributions during extended leave periods.
- Using software for leave to split entitlements into different periods.
- Capturing accurate data on parental leave using 2 separate systems within the People team. Integrating data, including manually updating gender information, is labour-intensive.

## 2. Unclear leave entitlements

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### Actions and outputs

#### Comprehensive guide

- Developed a comprehensive guide with 2 tailored checklists (one for staff, one for managers) detailing parental leave entitlements, eligibility criteria and the application process. Content included a focus on diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds for inclusivity. The guide and checklists are available digitally and are easily downloaded from the intranet.

#### Keeping in touch days

- Information about Keeping in touch days was included in the guide and communicated to staff. These days are designed to ease the transition for staff returning to work.

#### Information sessions

- Held staff information sessions.

#### Manager engagement

- Encouraged managers to share information and experiences with each other.

#### Staff support

- Supported staff to participate in coaching and resilience programs for working parents offered through the Alfred Research Alliance.

### Implementation challenges

- Ensuring the guide was more easily accessible on the intranet, which was addressed by linking the guide to relevant policies.

### 3. Career impact on women

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#### Actions taken

##### Inclusive meeting guidelines

- Introduced in August 2020, these guidelines promote full participation by addressing issues like interruptions and assumptions about gender, race, or sexual orientation. Meetings are scheduled during core hours (10 am to 4 pm Melbourne time) and meeting days and times are rotated to accommodate part-time staff and those in different time zones. To further enhance accessibility and inclusivity, the Institute invested in advanced audio-visual systems to support hybrid meetings, allowing both in-person and virtual participation. To better support parents and carers, scheduling during school holiday periods or pick-up hours is generally avoided.

##### Travel grants and awards

- We updated our travel grant criteria to include the option for additional funds to support childcare arrangements if needed. We also introduced 3 new travel awards:
  - > **\$13,000 award:** for PhD students who have confirmed their candidature and are primary carers of young children, covering international conference travel, childcare, or partner travel.
  - > **\$10,000 award:** for primary carers of young children attending international conferences in biomedical sciences, public health, or international health, including childcare or partner travel. Available to all research staff.
  - > **2 x \$5,000 awards:** for professional services staff attending conferences or completing professional development activities. Those returning from parental leave can also apply, ensuring they have the opportunity to catch up and advance their careers.
- Recognising the barrier to self-advocacy for women, including those currently on parental leave, we issue annual personalised reminders to encourage and motivate women to apply for promotions.

##### Implementation challenges

- Ensuring the guide was more easily accessible on the intranet, which was addressed by linking the guide to relevant policies.

## 4. Managing transitions: flexible work options for returning staff

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### Actions taken

#### New policy

- A flexible working arrangement policy and procedure was introduced to accommodate a range of needs, including those of parents and staff with various personal circumstances.

#### Clear communication

- Flexible work hours were communicated to managers and staff through a range of internal communication channels.

#### Gradual return

- Staff were supported through a phased return to work, which included the option to work reduced hours or from home.

#### Enhanced flexibility

- To support parents in setting their own pace for returning to work with manager collaboration, we introduced a range of actions:
  - > **80% rule:** allowing parents to work 80% of their hours while receiving 100% of their salary in an acknowledgment of additional responsibilities.
  - > **COVID leave:** providing additional leave for staff to care for their loved ones. This measure lasted for nearly 2 years, demonstrating Burnet's flexibility and trust in staff.

### Implementation challenges

Ensuring the guide was more easily accessible on the intranet, which was addressed by linking the guide to relevant policies.

## 5. Lack of support and infrastructure

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### Actions taken

#### Designated rooms

- Established 2 breastfeeding and expressing rooms in the Burnet Melbourne office, equipped with comfortable chairs and fridges for milk storage. These rooms serve nearly 90% of Burnet's Melbourne-based staff, as they are located on the floors where most staff are based. The rooms are inclusive of diverse needs: there is ample space to administer injections, and fridges for for storing breast milk and medication. This creates equitable support for all staff who require privacy and care infrastructure.

#### Communication

- Actively communicated the availability of these spaces and invited further feedback.

### Implementation challenges

- Managing the logistical complexity of establishing lactation rooms at all locations. We focused first on high-traffic areas and plan to expand as resources allow.
- Ensuring all staff are aware of these rooms and utilise them as needed, supported by ongoing communication efforts.

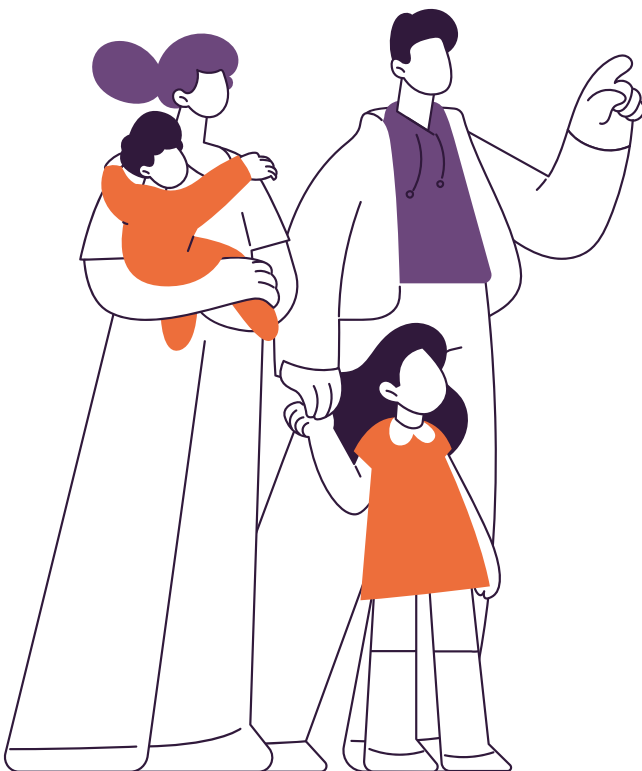
# Outcomes

This suite of actions was designed to enhance the staff experience throughout the entire parental leave process, targeting the 5 contributing factors. While no specific targets were set at Bronze, our outcomes and impact data show improvements in usage and satisfaction with parental leave entitlements and support. We recognise that further action is required to continue to enhance the staff experience.

## Challenging norms: the low uptake of men's parental leave and the implications for workplace satisfaction

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Parental leave data was extracted in June 2024, covering the period from January 2022 to January 2023. It shows 6 men benefited from the 14-week parental leave entitlement in this period. This is in contrast to the 2015-2017 period when no men took primary parental leave, with 4 using the secondary carer's leave. Case Study 1 in the impact section highlights the impact of the change in entitlements for one Burnet father.



## Outcomes

A significant cultural transformation appears to have occurred regarding caregiving responsibilities, leading to the normalisation of men taking carer's leave. While no men utilised carer's leave between 2015 and 2017, recent data shows a rise in men utilising this leave, contrasted with a decline in usage among women. This shift may indicate that changing workplace norms and increased flexibility are fostering a more supportive environment for men to take parental leave (see table below).

### 2022 carer's leave utilisation statistics

Gender	Number of people	Total carer's leave days	Average days per person
Women	52	164	3.2
Men	23	52	2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>2.9</b>

### 2023 carer's leave utilisation statistics

Gender	Number of people	Total carer's leave days	Average days per person
Women	69	179	2.6
Men	26	124	4.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>3.2</b>

Despite improvements, there is still progress to be made in addressing cultural norms and expectations around parental and carer's leave. The impact and further actions sections outline the changes men and other non-birthing parents believe would enhance their parental and carer's leave experience.

## Parental leave entitlements: bridging the awareness gap

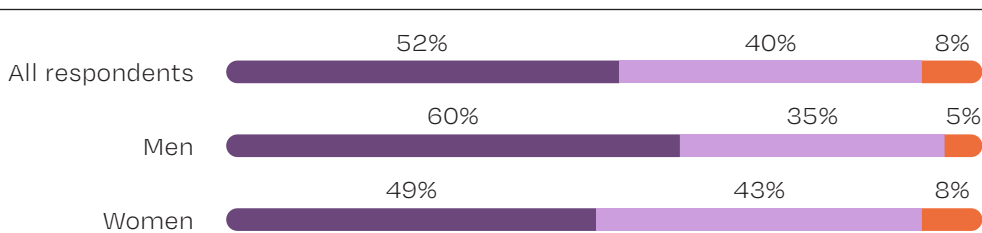
The 2018 culture survey found that 45% of women and 39% of men had limited knowledge and awareness of parental leave entitlements. That survey has not been repeated and has now been replaced by the D&I survey which started in 2023 and will be repeated biennially. This means we cannot compare current data to the past, but we can use it as a benchmark for our future work.

In response to the 2023 D&I survey question "I believe that Burnet provides parents and carers with the necessary information and resources to perform their job well, supporting their career development while balancing their parental and/or caregiver responsibilities", 52% of respondents agreed, 40% were neutral, and 8% expressed dissatisfaction. Men were more positive about the support than women.

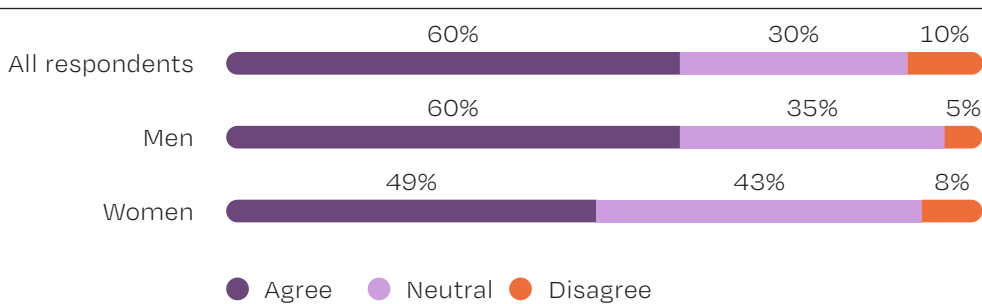
### Perceptions of information and resources for parental leave at Burnet Institute (2023 D&I survey results)

Looking at the data for the parent and carer cohort, it is pleasing to see a more positive response than the overall staff response. This suggests improved awareness and satisfaction with parental leave entitlements and resources at Burnet. While a similar proportion of men and women agreed, men were the most dissatisfied of any cohort (13%). This shows there is still work to do to ensure men are supported to balance work and parental and/or caregiver responsibilities. Challenges with navigating entitlements was a key topic of discussion during the 2024 focus groups and is explored in the impact and further actions sections.

#### All staff



#### Parents and carers



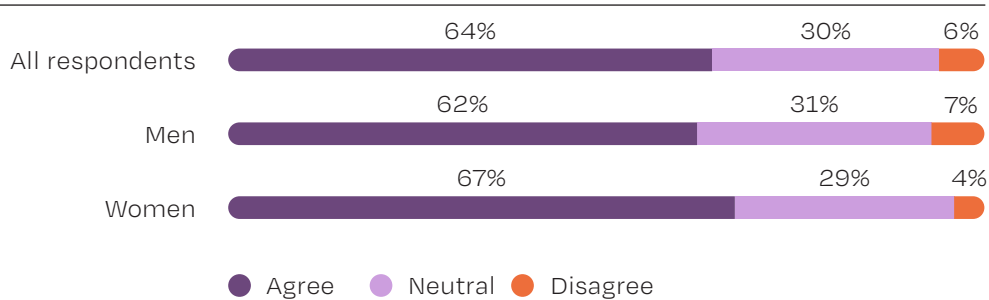
## Re-entering the workforce: the struggles parents face after career breaks

In the 2018 culture survey, two-thirds of women reported resuming their careers without significant interruption after a career break. Nineteen percent of women indicated their career break caused interruptions, and 22% felt that taking career breaks negatively impacted their career. The 2023 D&I survey does not allow a direct comparison, but it provides current insights and a benchmark for our future work.

The bar graph below shows 64% of parents and carers who responded felt they have equal access to career opportunities, with consideration for their responsibilities. There was only a small difference by gender, with 62% of men and 67% of women agreeing. Men were more likely to disagree (7%) highlighting the need to provide further support to this cohort. Career impacts were a key topic of discussion during the 2024 focus groups. More on this in Further actions, on page 32.

### Perceptions of equal access to career opportunities among parents and carers at Burnet Institute (2023 D&I survey results)

#### Parents and carers



## From full-time to part-time: barriers to resuming full-time employment

Data analysed for the SAGE Bronze application (2015-2017) showed a 97% rate of return from parental leave. While it is currently unclear whether the returnees changed their fraction<sup>1</sup>, what we can observe is that 94% returned to a part-time role. At Burnet, part-time work can range from as little as one day per week up to 4 days per week.

<sup>1</sup> In this context, fractions refer to how much of a full-time role someone works. For example, 0.5 is half-time work, and 0.8 typically indicates that someone works 4 days per week.

## 2015–2017 parental leave return rates: fraction changes and resignations by gender

Gender	Total staff	Return to same fraction	Changed fraction	Resigned
Women	36	1 (3%)	34 (94%)	1 (3%)
Men	0	n/a	n/a	n/a

## 2021–2023 parental leave return rates: fraction changes and resignations by gender

Gender	Total staff	Return to same fraction	Changed fraction	Resigned
Women	24	17 (70.8%)	5 (20.8%)	2 (8.3%)
Men	10	10 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Between 2015 and 2017, 94% of women adjusted their work hours, either by switching to a 4-day workweek or further reducing their existing part-time hours. Notably, no one returned to a full-time position. However, between 2021 and 2023, only 23.8% of women (5 out of 22) changed their work fraction. Most of these changes involved transitioning to 4-day work week or further reducing already part-time hours. One individual increased their work fraction, moving from part-time to a full-time position. Additionally, 10 out of the 22 women (45.5%) successfully returned and continued working in full-time roles. This shift may indicate that our initiatives have supported greater flexibility and stability in work arrangements, a trend further explored further explored in page 26, under case study 2.

# Impact

Impact data was collected to understand if we have enhanced the staff experience throughout the parental leave process. This is shown in the survey summary, interviews and focus groups exploring parental leave experiences and career satisfaction.

## Data sources and methods: staff culture and parental leave analysis 2023/24

Source	Year	Details
D&I survey	2023	This confidential biannual survey featured a small section on parental leave and career satisfaction. Out of the 202 Burnet staff who participated in the survey, 132 identified as women, 63 as men, 2 as non-binary, 2 used another term, and 3 preferred not to disclose their gender.
Key informant interviews	2023	These semi-structured interviews were conducted with recent returnees from parental leave and managers. They explored issues relating to parental leave and how it affects parents of young children at Burnet. We interviewed 6 people manages, including 2 women and 3 men, as well as 10 other staff members who had returned from parental leave, including 6 women and 4 men.
Focus groups	2024	<p>Based on the insights from the survey and interviews, we convened 2 focus groups to address challenges and brainstorm solutions in response to 8 themes. A total of 16 participants (2 men and 14 women) attended the sessions, where they discussed key themes identified in the surveys. These discussions have been incorporated into the further action section on page 32.</p> <p><b>Themes</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. travel/balancing responsibilities</li> <li>2. backfill</li> <li>3. workplace culture/gender norms</li> <li>4. manager knowledge/experience</li> <li>5. flexible work arrangements</li> <li>6. navigating entitlements/responsibilities</li> <li>7. facilities (e.g., lactation rooms)</li> <li>8. better access to opportunities, development, and advancement</li> </ol>

## Staff reflections on Burnet's parental leave

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### Focus group insights: Burnet's parental leave described in 3 positive words

Overall, participants shared positive insights on parental leave at Burnet. The most frequently used descriptors were:

- **Flexibility:** 9 out of 16 focus group participants highlighted this as a strength.
- **Supportive:** 4 participants felt the approach was supportive.
- **Inclusive:** 3 participants highlighted the inclusivity of the policies.

Other terms included "comprehensive," "generous," "accommodating," and "reassuring," reflecting strong satisfaction with our parental leave policies.

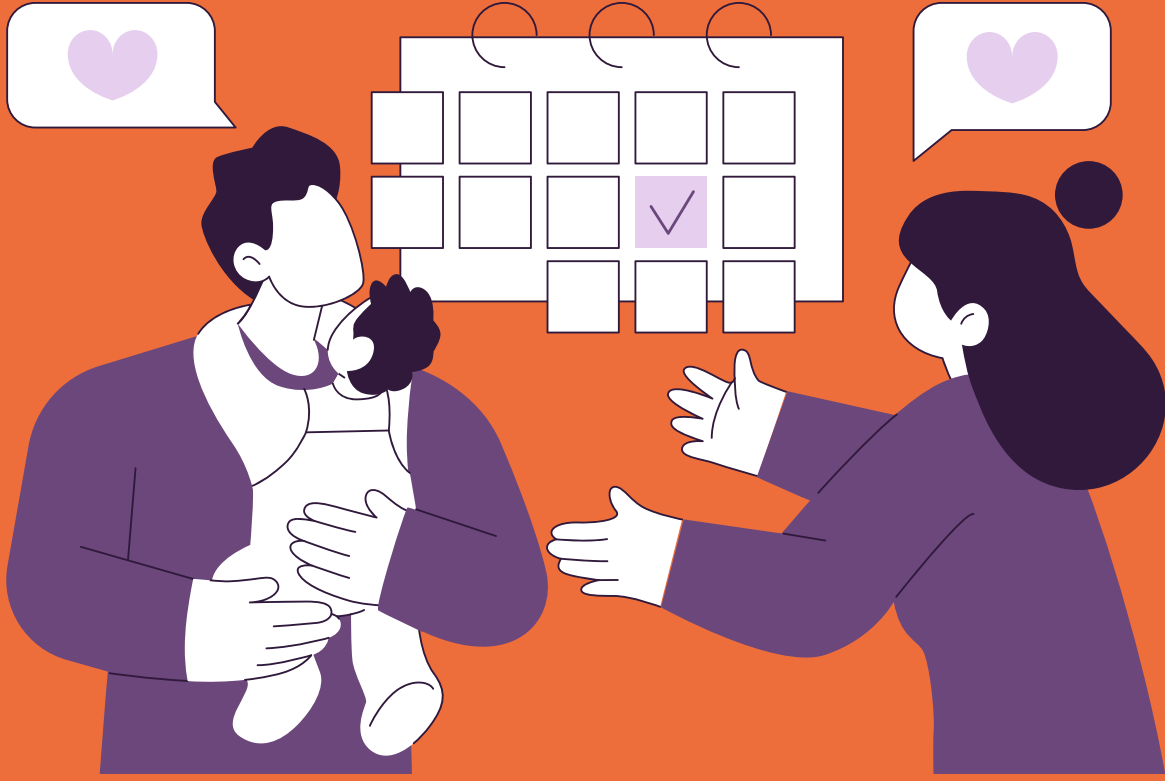
### Staff perspectives on the benefits of Burnet's enhanced parental leave options

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Several staff specifically mentioned that they benefitted from our enhanced parental leave options.

- **Parent A:** "I benefitted from a 14-week extension. I really appreciated the option of half pay and double time. I really support the fact that leave entitlements are extended to non-birthing partners."
- **Parent C:** "Having 14 weeks of leave was the greatest feeling, considering I initially anticipated only a 2-week period. However, due to policy adjustments, I was granted 14 weeks, which was both amazing and incredibly necessary!"
- **Parent E:** "There have been huge positive changes since secondary and primary carer leave options were dropped."





# Case studies

# Case study 1 – Redefining parental leave for men: a personal journey at Burnet

Insight from a senior research officer's experience with evolving parental leave policies

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I have had the privilege of working at Burnet over the last 10 years. During that time experienced the impact of changes in parental leave entitlements at the organisation as a non-birthing parent and secondary carer of my 2 children, one born before the changes, and one born after the changes. In the first instance, I was only entitled to one week of parental leave as a secondary carer which was not sufficient to afford me enough time to support my wife with caring responsibilities and bond with my newborn child. They were still in hospital when the leave ran out, forcing me to take an additional one week of annual leave. This was woefully insufficient and didn't offer any significant benefit. It was a greatly overwhelming experience that left me feeling stretched, frustrated, tired and undervalued at work. In turn, this negatively affected my productivity and morale, as well as my relationships at home and work. In the second instance, the secondary carer distinction had been scrapped and I was allowed 12 weeks of flexible parental leave which I was able to spread over the first 12 months from the birth of my child. Combined with additional annual leave and Burnet's flexible working arrangements, I was able to take a combined 5 months off work. This allowed me to bond with my newborn child in ways I could never have done before and offer great support to my partner including during their return to work. Overall, I've left very supported, appreciated, valued and productive at work. The positive impact on my work and personal life has been immense.”



Despite the positives, focus group discussions revealed areas requiring further action to fully support parents and carers in taking leave.

- **Clarity for students:** focus groups highlighted the need for clearer parental leave details for students, particularly PhD candidates.
- **Need for flexible leave:** current policies only allow parental leave in chunks, while some men prefer a more flexible approach (e.g. taking leave a day at a time). However, implementing this flexibility is complicated by payroll processes that require manual adjustments.
- **Extension of carer's leave:** extending carer's leave beyond 12 months post-birth would better support ongoing caregiving needs and accommodate staff who face difficulties taking leave immediately after childbirth.
- **Challenges with navigating entitlements:** focus groups revealed that staff still find it difficult to understand parental leave options and make the right decisions for their family.
- **Norms and expectations:** despite improvements, progress is still being made in addressing cultural norms and expectations around parental leave. Ongoing efforts are needed to ensure all staff feel equally supported.

How we address these challenges will be outlined under Further actions on page 32.

## Return from parental leave

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As noted, staff value the flexibility offered at Burnet to shape their own return from leave.

- **Parent A:** "I returned to full-time work after parental leave. However, I used the option of working half an hour extra per day to accrue 2 days off every month. I also worked from home with one day in the office per week. Being able to accrue 2 days off per month has very positive impacts on work-life balance. When I work from home, my child goes to daycare 3 days per week and gets to be at home for the rest of the time, so I don't lose transport time, for example."
- **Parent B:** "I gradually increased my work fraction from 0.4 to 0.8 before condensing 1.0 into 4 days. The transition allowed me to balance family responsibilities and maintain career progression."
- **Parent C:** "I wasn't provided with explicit information about what was possible, but my manager was very supportive and accommodating of my needs. This significantly reduced the stress of managing both work tasks and responsibilities at home. Having the flexibility to move things around, including appointments, was a great source of support. Overall, the support I received made a significant difference. In fact, I ended up relocating for better access to family support and now I can work entirely remotely, only occasionally visiting the Melbourne office. So very positive impacts on work-life balance."

People managers also emphasised the benefits of flexible work arrangements, with one manager valuing results-oriented management, noting the ease of managing staff working from home, and another stressing a collaborative, case-by-case approach, noting the importance of flexibility and open communication in ensuring a smooth transition for returning parents.

# Case study 2 – Return-to-work: Burnet's family-friendly approach

Insights from global health emergencies specialist  
and projects manager

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The return-to-work conditions were supportive; I was able to do part-time hours until I eventually increased to 5 days a week. What made it possible for me to return to full-time work was the flexibility and support to work from home. This allowed me to manage childcare around my meetings without having to also factor in the daycare-to-work commute. This freed up an average of 2 hours in my day, where I can manage all the other bits and pieces that come with raising a family, as well as make space for my own exercise and self-care activities. I know from friends and family working at other organisations that this a luxury they do not enjoy, and unfortunately the time for exercise and self-care is often the first thing to go (which has repercussions for mental health, wellbeing and productivity). It goes without saying that allowing the option to work from home means I am able to earn a full-time income which would otherwise not be possible. This is a barrier many other (predominantly women) primary carers face in their return to work. Since my return to full-time work, I understand that the financial impact of parental leave has been further addressed by now including superannuation payments, which is a significant change.

Receiving the Burnet travel award has been an immensely supportive and career-changing. I was able to use the funds from this award to bring my daughter and my mother with me on work trips, where I would have otherwise been unable to travel or forced to leave my daughter at home while I was away. This has meant I haven't missed out on as many special milestones of the early years that I would otherwise have — I was able to breastfeed (more easily) for longer, and my career hasn't been greatly jeopardised by becoming a parent. The reality is that travelling and meeting face-to-face with partners to see where they live and work is essential to working in global health. Without the financial support to make this happen, it would have been necessary to rethink my role and capacity to meet essential requirements.



Further to this, Burnet's flexible working arrangements and culture of support and understanding has meant that during these work trips (as well as not on work trips), my colleagues have been extremely understanding and patient with me. This is not something a policy or process can influence in my opinion, but rather a reflection of the working culture and the kind of people we attract and hire. Everybody has their own personal responsibilities and carer duties in one form or another, and my colleagues have shown generosity in understanding that I have to adapt my working hours to accommodate daycare pick-ups, sick days, and so on. This certainly comes from a place of trust and respect from the employer, managers, and co-workers, and an understanding that we are stronger as a team that supports each other. I believe this is reflected through the output-oriented management system at Burnet, where we are trusted to meet our deliverables and milestones.

I have observed a real shift in how Burnet demonstrates a commitment to supporting people on parental leave in the last couple of years. While communication was limited during my leave (my choice), I felt comfortable contacting my colleagues (both direct team members and those in support areas such as people and finance teams with queries). I knew that should I wish to be involved in team activities, this option would be available to me. I was allowed to keep my work laptop throughout my leave which made it easier to stay in touch and my colleagues even offered to hold some meetings close to my home so I could join with my little one. This flexibility and support allowed me to stay connected without feeling pressured, and I'd encourage Burnet to continue similar approaches into the future.

Finally, Burnet's willingness to allow travel with children demonstrates a true commitment to making our workplace a family-friendly one. To me, this really shows Burnet's commitment and leadership in making our workplace a truly supportive one."

## Case studies

During the interviews conducted in 2023, staff and managers suggested creating a repository of return-to-work options for inspiration, providing examples of how others in similar roles have managed their transitions. More on page 35 under flexible working arrangements in Further actions.

### Satisfaction with information and supports provided

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Staff particularly noted the usefulness of the keeping in touch (KIT) days.

- **Parent B:** "I used KIT days to attend weekly team meetings to ease back into what was happening and slip back into the team."
- **Parent C:** "I used KIT days to attend a team planning conference before returning to work, come into the office and carry out various tasks at home. It was great to have access to them."

One parent commented that they didn't use our KIT days and instead negotiated an extension of the leave period, showing Burnet's flexible approach.

Interviews also revealed that, despite extensive communication efforts, many staff returning from parental leave were unaware of the available breastfeeding and expressing rooms. A system similar to re-onboarding is needed to ensure returning staff are informed about these facilities. In addition, as we transition to the new Australian Institute for Infectious Disease (AIID) building over the next 4 years, we will ensure that the facility has inclusive spaces such as parenting rooms, changing areas, lactation rooms, and family rooms. We will also develop a children in the workplace policy to support staff who may need to bring their children to work, particularly with the inclusion of a family room in the new building (see Further actions, under facilities on page 37).

### Satisfaction with access to career opportunities

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Case study 2 highlights how the travel grant greatly enhanced the staff work-life balance by allowing them to bring their daughter and mother on work trips. This support prevented the need to leave their child at home, enabling them to attend crucial meetings while remaining present for important family milestones.

However, despite the changes we have implemented, the career impacts on women was a key topic of discussion during the 2024 focus groups. Through this investigation, additional relevant topics emerged, including difficulties associated with:

- **Backfilling:** inadequate role coverage when staff are on leave created uncertainty and affects the ability to plan, focus and continue work.
- **Travel responsibilities:** parents who travel frequently for work face unique challenges, including exposure to health risks when visiting certain countries or offices testing infectious diseases. Additionally, competitive grants limit opportunities to travel with children, adding pressure to balance work commitments with family time.

- Access to opportunities, development and advancement: staff reported that, when on parental leave, they often struggle to stay connected to internal roles, development opportunities and support systems. This can lead to a sense of being forgotten and missing out on opportunities for advancement.

Items 1, 2 and 8 in the Further actions section are all aimed at addressing these challenges and enhancing career impact, particularly after returning from parental leave.

While these insights confirm the positive impact of the actions taken since the SAGE Bronze application, they also highlight areas needing improvement, especially in navigating entitlements and enhancing support for staff. The specific actions to address these issues have already been discussed with stakeholders and are integrated in our planning for the coming years. The next section details these planned actions.

To ensure ongoing effectiveness, we will continue to benchmark results through the biennial D&I survey and will either conduct qualitative interviews with returning parents and their managers or hold focus groups every 3 or 4 years, depending on the needs at the time. Additionally, as part of our planning for the next 2 years, we will introduce a dedicated survey for parents returning to work to further assess and enhance the support we are providing.







# Further actions

# Further actions

## Travel/balancing responsibilities

**Action 1: conduct focus groups and surveys with frequent travellers to gather feedback on their experiences and needs related to parental responsibilities**

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### Rationale/evidence

Frequent travellers with parental responsibilities face unique challenges

### Output

A report detailing findings from these sessions including actionable recommendations to better support travelling parents

### Timeframe

2025-2027

### Personnel/group responsible for implementing

Diversity and inclusion manager

### Senior leader accountable for the action delivery

Deputy director gender equity, diversity and inclusion

### Desired outcome/targets/success indicators

Improved support for travelling parents, with actionable changes implemented based on feedback from focus groups and surveys

## Backfill

**Action 2: develop and implement a comprehensive backfilling support resource hub, including coverage strategies. Ensure these resources and strategies are effectively communicated to all staff**

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### Rationale/evidence

Inadequate role coverage creates uncertainty and affects employees' ability to plan and focus. A structured support program can improve coverage and clarity

### Output

A structured backfilling support resource hub with detailed coverage strategies and clear communication materials distributed to all staff

### Timeframe

2025-2027

### Personnel/group responsible for implementing

People manager

## **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Enhanced clarity and standardised approaches through the implementation of new resources

## **Workplace culture/gender norms**

### **Action 3.1: review the parental leave policy to include an option for extending the leave period to 18 or 24 months and implement the change**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Current parental leave policies may not fully accommodate the diverse needs of staff, especially non-birthing partners, and there may be limited awareness about these options. This can hinder gender equality and impact the use of parental leave among all staff

#### **Output**

An updated parental leave policy outlining extended leave options and a comprehensive communication plan to ensure all employees, including non-birthing partners, are aware and supported to access their entitlements

#### **Timeframe**

2025-2027

#### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

Diversity and inclusion manager

## **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Increased uptake of parental leave options by a broader range of staff, including non-birth partners

### **Action 3.2: launch a communication campaign with success stories and clear parental leave guidelines for men and non-birthing parents**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Many men and non-birthing partners are unaware of their parental leave options. Improved communication and clear guidelines are needed to address these issues

#### **Output**

A campaign with success stories and updated guidelines on parental leave, along with revised policy documents

#### **Timeframe**

2025

## Further actions

### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

Diversity and inclusion manager

### **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Increased uptake of parental leave among men and non-birthing parents, fostering a more inclusive work environment and promoting gender equality

### **Action 3.3: develop and distribute clear, accessible information on parental leave eligibility for students, and provide targeted guidance through the people team**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Students often face confusion about their eligibility for parental leave. This uncertainty makes it challenging for them to plan and access the necessary support

#### **Output**

A comprehensive guide outlining parental leave options for students

#### **Timeframe**

2025–2026

### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

People manager

### **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Increased clarity and accessibility of parental leave information for students, leading to better planning and utilisation of available support

## **Manager knowledge/experience**

### **Action 4: develop a centralised resource hub with detailed parental leave information, including in vitro fertilisation and fostering, and integrate it into manager onboarding with a clear communication plan**

---

#### **Rationale/evidence**

Managers often direct staff to outdated resources to better understand entitlements. This leads to confusion and inconsistent policy application due to recent changes in parental leave policies

#### **Output**

A detailed online resource hub with information about current entitlements, and training workshops for managers

## **Timeframe**

2025–2026

## **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

Diversity and inclusion manager and manager, organisational development and learning

## **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

## **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Enhanced manager understanding of entitlements, leading to more consistent application and improved support for teams

## **Flexible work arrangements**

### **Action 5: develop and distribute a guide on flexible working arrangements, including practical examples and tips**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Staff often lack clarity on how to fully use Burnet's flexible working options, leading to missed opportunities and underutilisation. Clear guidance and examples are needed to help them take full advantage of this policy

#### **Output**

A comprehensive guide and a series of educational sessions on flexible working

#### **Timeframe**

2026–2027

## **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

People manager

## **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

## **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Increased staff understanding and utilisation of flexible working arrangements, leading to better work-life balance and higher job satisfaction

## **Navigating entitlements/responsibilities**

### **Action 6.1: create a centralised resource hub with frequently asked questions, checklists, and personal success stories, and implement a communication plan to promote it**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Providing regular parental leave information and sharing success stories can help staff navigate and understand their options better

## Further actions

### Output

An online hub with detailed information and success stories, supported by a communication plan

### Timeframe

2025

### Personnel/group responsible for implementing

Diversity and inclusion manager

### Senior leader accountable for the action delivery

Chief people officer

### Desired outcome/targets/success indicators

Improved staff awareness and understanding of parental leave options, leading to better decision-making and support for returning staff

**Action 6.2: revise the parental leave policy to include a clear statement that it is inclusive of all LGBTQ+ family units, not just same-sex families. This will involve updating the policy language to reflect this broader inclusivity**

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### Rationale/evidence

Current language in the parental leave policy that mentions same-sex families does not fully encompass the diversity within LGBTQIA+ communities, including trans and gender-diverse people

### Output

An updated parental leave policy that explicitly states inclusivity for all family units, ensuring there is no ambiguity regarding coverage

### Timeframe

2025

### Personnel/group responsible for implementing

Diversity and inclusion manager

### Senior leader accountable for the action delivery

Chief people officer

### Desired outcome/targets/success indicators

Enhanced clarity and inclusivity in the parental leave policy, providing comprehensive support for all staff and their family units

## Facilities

### **Action 7.1: promote awareness of facilities by including maps and other details in the centralised parental leave hub, and include information in checklists for employees and managers**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Returning parents often face difficulties locating and accessing key workplace facilities, which can add stress and hinder a smooth transition. Integrating facility information into the parental leave hub and checklists ensures easy, consistent access to this information

#### **Output**

A detailed map of workplace facilities in the parental leave hub, and updated checklists containing facility information

#### **Timeframe**

2025

#### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

People manager

#### **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

#### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Increased staff awareness and use of available facilities

### **Action 7.2: develop a return-to-work information pack for managers to distribute to staff on parental leave, covering essential resources, policies, and facilities**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Returning parents need a clear, structured way to access crucial information when coming back from leave, which is not always consistently provided by managers

#### **Output**

A standardised return-to-work information pack distributed by managers, ensuring all returning staff receive consistent and thorough support

#### **Timeframe**

2026

#### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

Diversity and inclusion manager

#### **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

## Further actions

### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Smoother reintegration for returning parents, improved access to resources, and stronger support from management

### **Action 7.3: collaborate with architects during the planning and design phase of the new AIID building to ensure that inclusive spaces are integrated into the layout**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

As we plan our future transition to the AIID building, it is essential to ensure that it is designed to be inclusive and supportive of all staff. This includes incorporating lactation and family rooms in our own and shared spaces

#### **Output**

The new building design will include dedicated inclusive spaces, such as lactation rooms, as part of its infrastructure to meet the needs of all staff

#### **Timeframe**

2024–2025

#### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

AIID BI project manager

#### **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Head, laboratory operations and facilities support

### **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Enhanced support for staff, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, leading to a more inclusive and supportive work environment that accommodates the diverse needs of the workforce

### **Action 7.4: develop the policy framework with guidelines and procedures**

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#### **Rationale/evidence**

Create a children at work policy to support staff who may need to bring their children to the workplace, especially with the new AIID building including a family room

#### **Output**

A formal policy document

#### **Timeframe**

2025–2026

#### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

Diversity and inclusion manager

## **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

## **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Enhanced workplace inclusivity

## **Access to opportunities, development, and advancement**

**Action 8: brainstorm and identify effective, inclusive, and easy-to-maintain processes to help staff on parental leave stay informed about internal roles and development opportunities. This will involve exploring different communication methods to determine the most suitable approach**

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### **Rationale/evidence**

Staff on parental leave often struggle to stay informed about internal roles, development opportunities and support systems. This leads to a sense of being forgotten and missing out on opportunities for advancement

### **Output**

A report outlining recommended processes for keeping staff on parental leave connected to internal opportunities, along with a pilot of the chosen method

### **Timeframe**

2026–2027

### **Personnel/group responsible for implementing**

Diversity and inclusion manager

## **Senior leader accountable for the action delivery**

Chief people officer

## **Desired outcome/targets/success indicators**

Develop and test a pilot system to keep staff on parental leave informed about internal roles and career opportunities, enhancing their engagement and connectivity

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