

Parental leave in the UK in the global contexts

Comparing UK, Australia, and Poland

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Why parental leave?

A well designed parental leave can help shape

- **The Motherhood Penalty**

Maternal leave is very long → as it reinforces women as default caregivers & Employers perceive mothers as less committed, compounding disadvantage on return → restricts economic growth

- **Family well-being**

Leaves shape maternal and paternal health in early stages of child's life + later on child's life + gender division of labour shapes couple satisfaction and family well being + children's emotional cognitive abilities

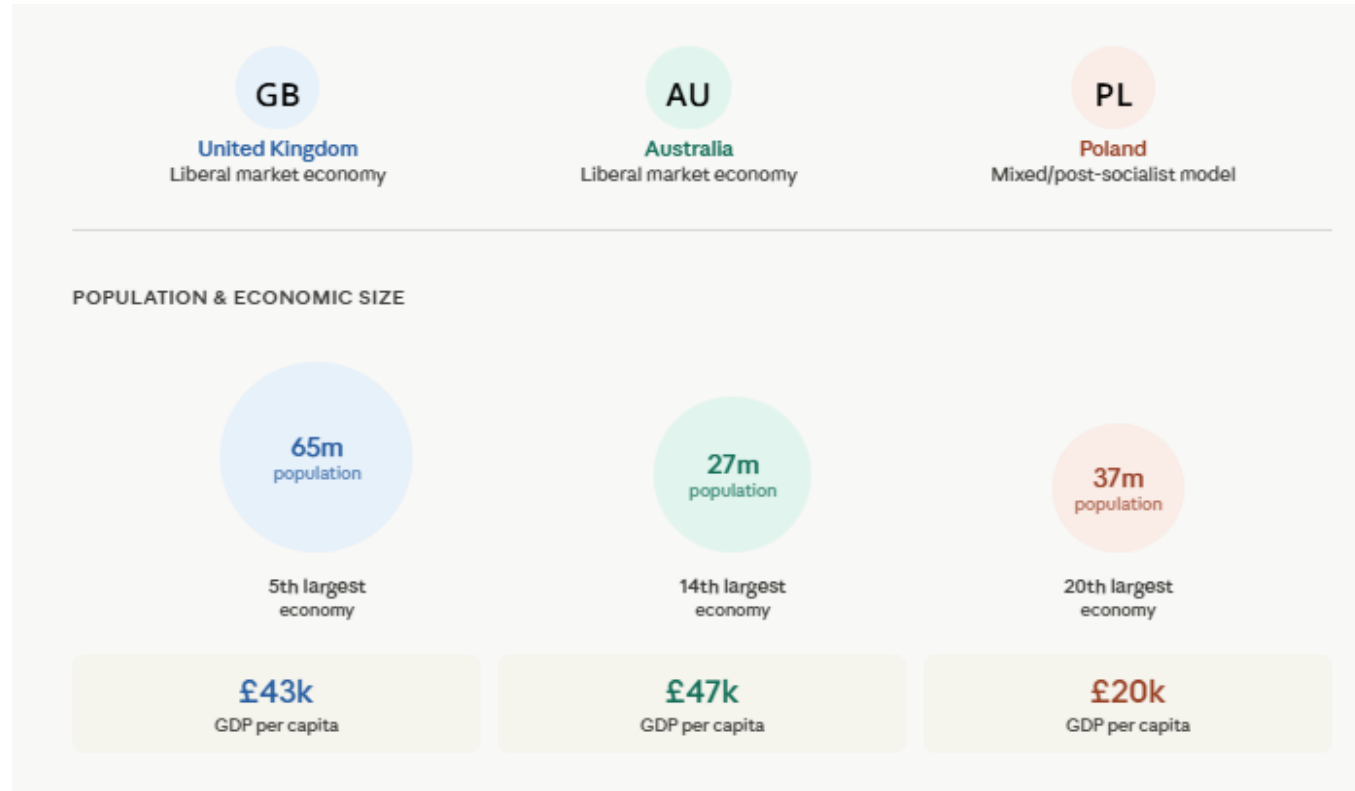
- **Gender role attitudes**

On a larger societal level shapes what it means to be a man, woman – moving away from the biological determinisms – help shape wide range of social issues... but only when designed well

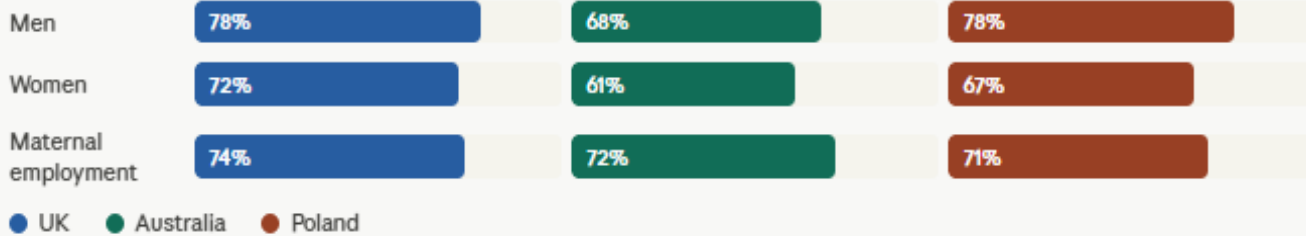
Full report download here



Why these three countries?



EMPLOYMENT RATES



THE STRIKING DIFFERENCE — MOTHERS IN PART-TIME WORK



Mothers in part-time employment — proportional circles

UK Parental leave system

- **Maternity leave:** 52 weeks (39 paid – of which 6 weeks 90% 33 weeks flat rate 1/4 of median full time pay; 13 unpaid).
- **Paternity leave:** 1–2 weeks (paid) 90% or flat rate
- **Adoption leave:** 52 weeks (mirrors maternity).
- **Shared Parental Leave (SPL):** Up to 50 weeks transferable from the mother/adopter to a partner (37 paid weeks max).
- Parental leave – 18 weeks per parent per child - 4 weeks per year, unpaid
- Time off for dependents (discretionary), carers leave (1 week), neonatal care (from '25), parental bereavement leave, antenatal appointments

Three Systems, Three Choices

Same challenge. Radically different policy responses.

GB United Kingdom

Maternity leave + parental leave

39 wks (+ 18 weeks unpaid parental leave)

Paternity leave

2 wks at flat-rate (+18 weeks unpaid parental leave)

SPL uptake

1% mothers · 4% fathers

Pay model

6 weeks 90% + 33 Flat-rate (25% median pay)

Verdict

Long on paper. Short on pay.

AU Australia

Paid parental leave

26 wks by Jul 2026 + 12~24 months unpaid parental leave

Father-specific leave

4 wks reserved per parent

Father uptake

~40% of eligible fathers

Pay model

Flat-rate (min. wage; approx. 66% of median earnings)

Verdict

Reformed & expanding. Pay still flat.

PL Poland

Maternity leave + parental leave

20 wks (+41 wks parental leave of which 9 ear marked + 23 sharable) + 36 week childcare leave

Father-specific leave

11 wks non-transferable + 23 sharable

Father uptake

24% (2025) — up from 1%

Pay model

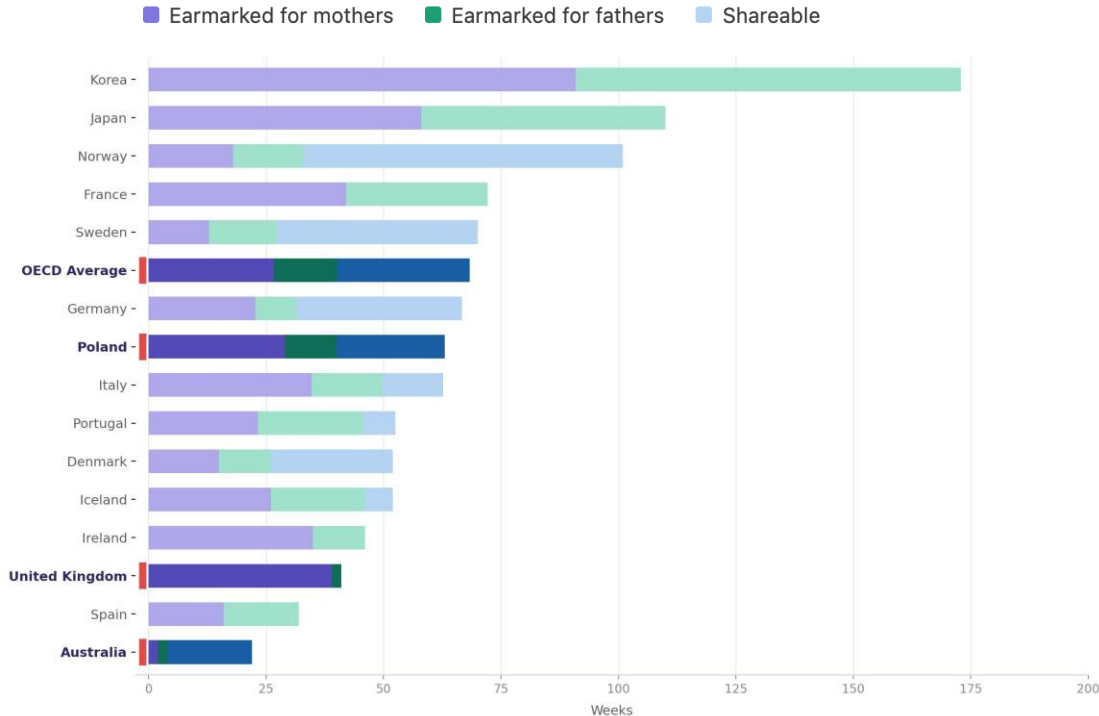
Earnings-related 70–100% - insurance based

Verdict

Fast reform fast take up.

UK has long maternity leave with low income replacement

Paid paternity by country: maternity + paternity + parental leaves (weeks) · OECD Family Database PF2.1 (April 2025)



GB UK

25% replacement for median pay
13 FRE weeks

PL Poland

100% pay
20 FRE weeks

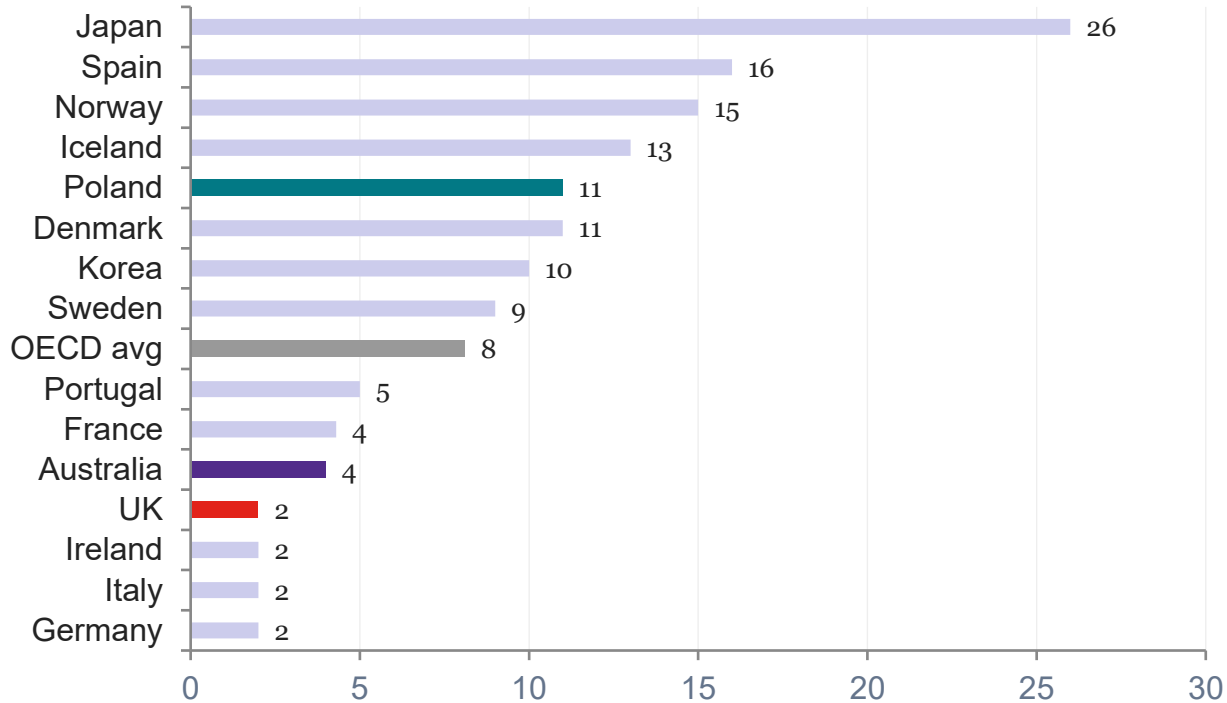
AU Australia

66% pay replacement for median pay
14 FRE weeks effective

FRE = Full-Rate Equivalent weeks (duration × payment rate).

Father-Specific Leave: UK Near the Bottom

Paid paternity + non-transferable parental leave earmarked for fathers (weeks) · OECD Family Database PF2.1 (April 2025)



GB UK

2 weeks

~30% minimum wage
SPL: only 4% of fathers use it

PL Poland

11 weeks




Non-transferable
70–100% earnings-related; capped only for
top 1% earners

OECD Average




8 weeks

65% replacement rate of average wage

Key policy differences (1/2)

Dimension	GB UK	AU Australia	PL Poland
 Pay & Income Replacement	<p>⚠ WEAKEST Flat-rate £194/wk — 25% of median wage. 65% of parents find stat. pay inadequate.</p>	<p>~ MODERATE Nat. min. wage (~46% median). Floor for all, but poor replacement for higher earners.</p>	<p>✓ STRONGEST 70–100% earnings-related for 63 weeks. Min. PLN 1,000/mth guaranteed.</p>
 Father Quota Non-transferable	<p>⚠ WEAKEST 2 wks paternity only. SPL: 1–5% uptake. No use-it-or-lose-it structure.</p>	<p>~ DEVELOPING 4 wks reserved/parent (Jul 2026). Flat-rate limits appeal for higher-earning fathers.</p>	<p>✓ STRONGEST 11 wks non-transferable (2×100% + 9×70%). Uptake: 1%→24% in two years.</p>
 Job Protection Employment rights	<p>~ MODERATE Day-one rights from Apr 2026. Pension only during paid leave.</p>	<p>~ IMPROVING Right to return under NES. Super on leave from Jul 2025</p>	<p>~ MODERATE Full ZUS social insurance. Pension protected for entire leave duration. Those on unstable employment contracts not covered.</p>

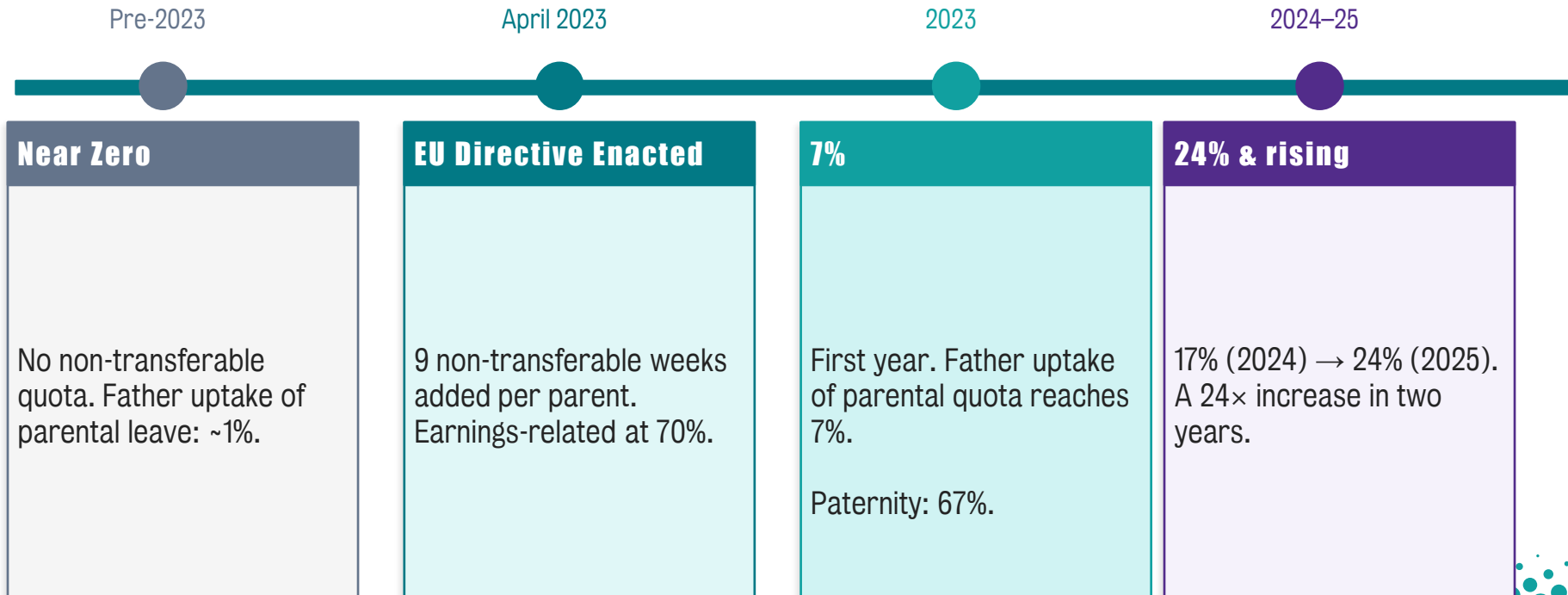
Key policy differences (2/2)

Dimension	GB UK	AU Australia	PL Poland
 Flexibility & Accessibility	<p>⚠️ LIMITED Flat-rate excludes low-income & self-employed from longer leave. Rigid notice rules.</p>	<p>✓ BROAD Any non-working day to child's 2nd birthday. Covers casual, PT, self-employed. Also includes kinship carers for single parents.</p>	<p>✓ MOST FLEXIBLE Split across periods, part-time options. Self-employed covered under ZUS.</p>
 Childcare Alignment	<p>⚠️ GAP Childcare costs = 49% of avg wage — OECD top. Funded hours end at different age to leave limited to working parents and only term time</p>	<p>~ IMPROVING Child Care Subsidy up to 90% for lower earners. 72 hrs/fortnight guaranteed Jan 2026.</p>	<p>✓ IMPROVING Active Parent Act (2024): PLN 1,500/mth for working parents of 12–35 month-olds.</p>
 Gender Equality Overall impact	<p>⚠️ WEAK Reinforces maternal caregiving. Post-Brexit divergence widening. System stagnating.</p>	<p>~ STRENGTHENING Gender-neutral design, growing reserved portion. Pay still a barrier.</p>	<p>✓ STRONG POTENTIAL Fastest father-uptake growth & Cultural norms shifting.</p>

How Reform Happens

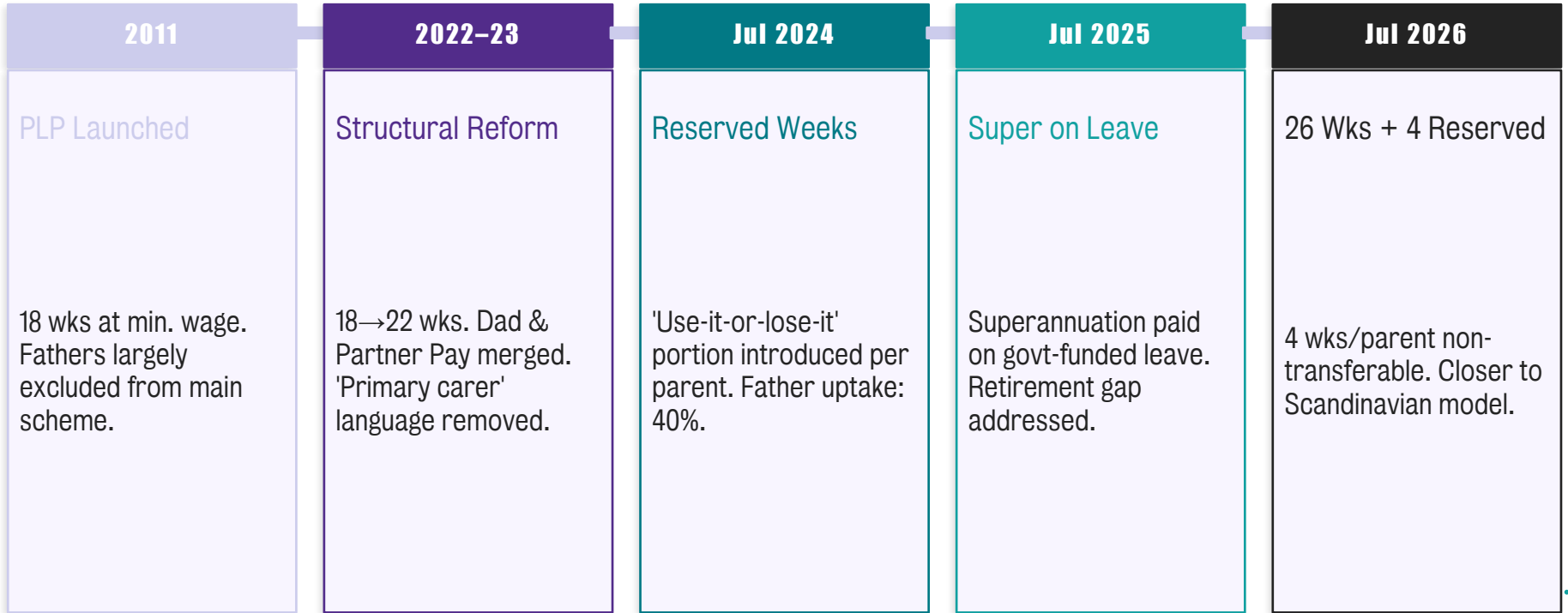
Poland & Australia — from diagnosis to measurable results

PL Poland: 1% → 24% in Two Years



Lesson: structural entitlement + adequate pay = fast, measurable change.

AU Australia: Gradual Reform, Real Progress



⚠ Flat-rate pay still limits uptake by higher-earning fathers

✓ 40% father uptake — 10× the UK's SPL take-up rate

What Drives Success: Three Design Principles

The same lesson, replicated across Denmark, Germany, Quebec, Spain and Poland.



Principle 1

Adequate levels of pay

Low flat-rate systems fail. Denmark: reforms **with adequate pay** raised mothers' wages; flat-rate entitlement had no effect. Fathers 3× more likely than mothers to cite affordability as barrier.

Dunatchik & Ozcan (2021); Andersen (2018); HM Government (2025)



Principle 2

Non-transferable father quotas are necessary

Fathers take leave reserved for them and little else. Spain: 2 earmarked weeks → mothers more likely employed at 6 and 12 months post-birth. Germany: daddy months → mothers' employment +10pp years 3–5. Poland: 1%→24% uptake in two years.

Farré & González (2019); Frodermann et al. (2023); Share the Care & ZUS (2026)



Principle 3

Leave must connect to
Childcare & flexible working

The post-leave transition is the critical juncture. UK childcare costs high. For families who don't qualify for funded hours, returning to work is financially irrational. Policy must be designed end-to-end. Flexible working still limited and met with bias → need better protections and rights

OECD (2024); IFS (2022); MRPIPS (2026)

Economic & Employment Outcomes of well-paid paternity leaves

£65,618¹

earnings lost by mothers
in 5 yrs post first birth

+10pp²

mothers' employment
(Germany, yrs 3–5)

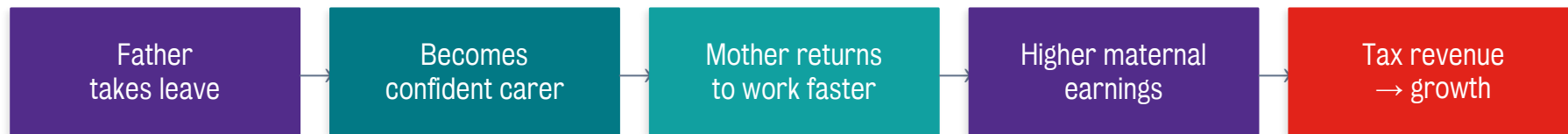
+4-5pp³

mothers' employment
(Quebec & Denmark)

£2.68bn⁴

extra UK growth from
6 weeks paternity leave

The mechanism:



→ Effects are conditional on pay — Quebec & Denmark show effects only when leave is well-paid, not flat-rate

→ Germany: mothers return to pre-birth employers at higher rates; gains strongest in high-earning couples

→ £2.68bn UK estimate assumes 74%+ take-up at 90% wage replacement — making pay the critical variable

Social & Wellbeing Outcomes



Child Development

Fathers taking leave are more involved in overnight care, feeding & play. Effect only materialises at 2+ weeks — 1 week makes no difference. Higher paternal involvement → better cognitive, academic and emotional outcomes at ages 2–3 and beyond.

◦ Tanaka & Waldfogel (2007); Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel (2007); Huerta et al. (2014), Chung (2021)



Family Stability

Unequal care leads to relationship breakdown. Sharing care → lower parental stress, higher satisfaction, lower separation risk. Family breakdown costs the UK Exchequer £50bn+/year — even a modest reduction has significant fiscal value. → potential effect on fertility and marriage rates as well

◦ Relationships Foundation (2018); Schober (2013); Ruppanner et al. (2018)



Intergenerational Effects

Sons of involved fathers more likely to share care themselves & fathers show new forms of masculinities – impacting lost boys crisis. Daughters of employed mothers earn more & hold more senior roles. Better outcomes → higher attainment → higher lifetime earnings → more tax revenue. Paternity leave is a productivity investment.

◦ Cunningham (2001); McGinn et al. (2019); Fernández et al. (2004)



Norm Shift & Bias Reduction

Denmark: expanding earmarked leave 2→11 weeks → parents shifted to more **progressive gender-role beliefs**. Earnings gap narrowed 2.8%, hours gap 1.4%. Germany: 'A good father takes 2 months' became a cultural norm. With the rise of tradwives, mansphere such norm changes are crucial.

⁴ Kleven et al. (2026) [Denmark]; Lott & Klenner (2018) [Germany]

Lessons for the UK (1/2): The Problem

25%

of median full-time wage
stat. pay replaces

65%

of parents find
stat. pay inadequate

3×

more likely — fathers
cite affordability

1–4%

SPL uptake since
2015 — 10 years

⚠️ Low flat-rate pay is a structural barrier

At £194/wk, statutory pay is below minimum wage and replaces only a quarter of median earnings. 107,000+ signed a petition calling for NLW-linked pay.

UK Parliament (2025); Working Families (2024)

⚠️ Lack of father's right to care

Fathers do not have ample right to care – with SPL being mother's entitlement. Ear-marked leave specified for fathers are needed

HM Government (2025)

⚠️ The UK is an outlier — and diverging

Post-Brexit, the UK did not implement the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. UK paternity provisions are now below the OECD average in both duration and pay. Australia has passed us.

OECD PF2.1 (2025); EU Directive 2019/1158

Lessons for the UK (2/2): What Needs to Change

1

Raise pay — earnings-related or NLW-linked

Pay is the prerequisite. Without it, every other reform is symbolic. Move to earnings-related (ideally ~60% prior earnings) or at minimum link to National Living Wage. This is the single most evidence-backed lever across all OECD systems.

OECD (2025); Dunatchik & Ozcan (2021); Andersen (2018)

2

Introduce non-transferable father-specific weeks (min. 6–9 weeks)

Poland: 1%→24% uptake in two years. Non-transferable 'use-it-or-lose-it' leave reserved for fathers is a necessary condition — not a marginal design feature. When transferable gender norms dictate women should take up parenting.

Share the Care & ZUS (2026); Farré & González (2019); Kleven et al. (2026)

3

Connect leave reform to childcare provision & Flexible working rights

UK childcare costs = 49% of average wage. The funded hours expansion is welcome, but must be designed in coordination with when leave ends. Flexible working still limited in many occupations/work cultures especially for fathers.

OECD (2024); IFS (2022); Clifton-Sprigg et al. (2025), Chung & Yuan (2025), Wang & Chung (2026)

4

Reframe leave and family policies as economic policy — not welfare

£2.68bn additional growth from 6 weeks. £65,618 lost per mother. Ear-marked paternity leave removes a structural barrier to economic growth. The cost of inaction compounds year on year, borne disproportionately by women.

Clifton-Sprigg et al. (2025); ONS (2025)

Conclusion

- UK in comparative terms at a poor position
- System is not only hindering gender equality and potential family well-being but also economic growth potentials
- We need clearer political will to ensure that right policies are put in place to meet the demands of the current population backed by scientific evidence around what works



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