



Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union

Assessment of current provision



Employment,
Social Affairs
and Inclusion

This policy memo provides an overview of the current paternity and parental leave provisions across EU Member States, and examines these provisions against the changes proposed within the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the proposal for a Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers.

As of 2018, all EU Member States offer some form of **paternity** and/or **parental** leave following the birth of a child. However, there are large variations in terms of the leave length, compensation levels and whether leave is a family or individual right.

Sometimes the distinction between paternity and parental leave can be unclear and confusing. This is because some countries do not offer paternity leave per se, but provide a share of parental leave reserved exclusively for fathers. Typically, leave payments come from contributory insurance funds, financed by employers and often employees, and sometimes from general taxation (Blum et al. 2017).

The proposed Directive would establish leave as an individual and non-transferable right to encourage fathers to be more involved in childcare. Several studies have pointed to the potential benefits of such 'fathers' leave':

- The uptake of parental leave among fathers is shown to be much higher when leave is their individual and non-transferable right (Schulze & Gergoric 2015);
- Uptake among fathers increased in several EU countries after the introduction of dedicated leave entitlements

for fathers (so called 'daddy quotas') (OECD 2016; Van Belle 2016);

- Fathers' leave influences the sharing of domestic work by men (Hook 2006; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel 2007); and
- A positive relationship has been shown between men's engagement in unpaid work and women's employment rates (Hook 2006; Kotsadam & Finseraas 2011; Norman et al. 2014).

Definitions:



Paternity leave

A short period of leave available to fathers usually immediately after the birth of a child;



Parental leave

A period of leave to care for children in their first years of life;



Individual entitlement/ Non-transferability of leave

A period of leave time that is reserved for the use of the mother or father only;



Family right to leave

Leave is a family right and can be transferred between parents.

Source: Blum et al. (2017); Van Belle (2016).

With the establishment of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), the European Commission aimed to take a step towards building a more inclusive and socially just Europe, and to deliver a positive impact on people's lives. [New Start](#) is one of the initiatives that have been launched under the Pillar. The objective of this initiative is to enable parents and carers to balance their professional and family responsibilities, and to encourage a more equal sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men. New Start aims to modernise the existing EU legal framework by setting a number of new or higher minimum standards for parental, paternity and carers' leave. In 2017, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a [Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers](#). The proposal includes:



The introduction of paternity leave of at least 10 days around the time of birth of the child, compensated at least at the level of sick pay;



The strengthening of parental leave by making the 4 months of leave non-transferable between parents and compensated at least at sick pay level; parental leave may be taken in a flexible way until a child is 12 years old;



The introduction of carers' leave of 5 days per year for workers caring for seriously ill or dependant relatives, which would be compensated at least at sick pay level; and



The extension of the right to request flexible working arrangements for all working parents of children up to 12 and carers with dependent relatives.

Who benefits from paternity and parental leave taken by fathers?

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Children | Fathers' participation in children's lives from birth has positive, long-lasting outcomes for child development, such as improved cognitive and emotional outcomes and physical health. |
| Mothers | Acknowledgement by employers that both mothers and fathers have caring responsibilities leads to improved gender equality in the labour market. |
| Fathers | Fathers involved in their children's lives have longer, healthier lives, better relationships and more personal satisfaction. |
| Employers | Paid leave has positive impacts on businesses, promoting and reducing employee retention, increasing morale and productivity, and reducing absenteeism and staff turnover. |
| Families | More equal share of professional and domestic responsibilities has a positive impact on work-life balance in families. |

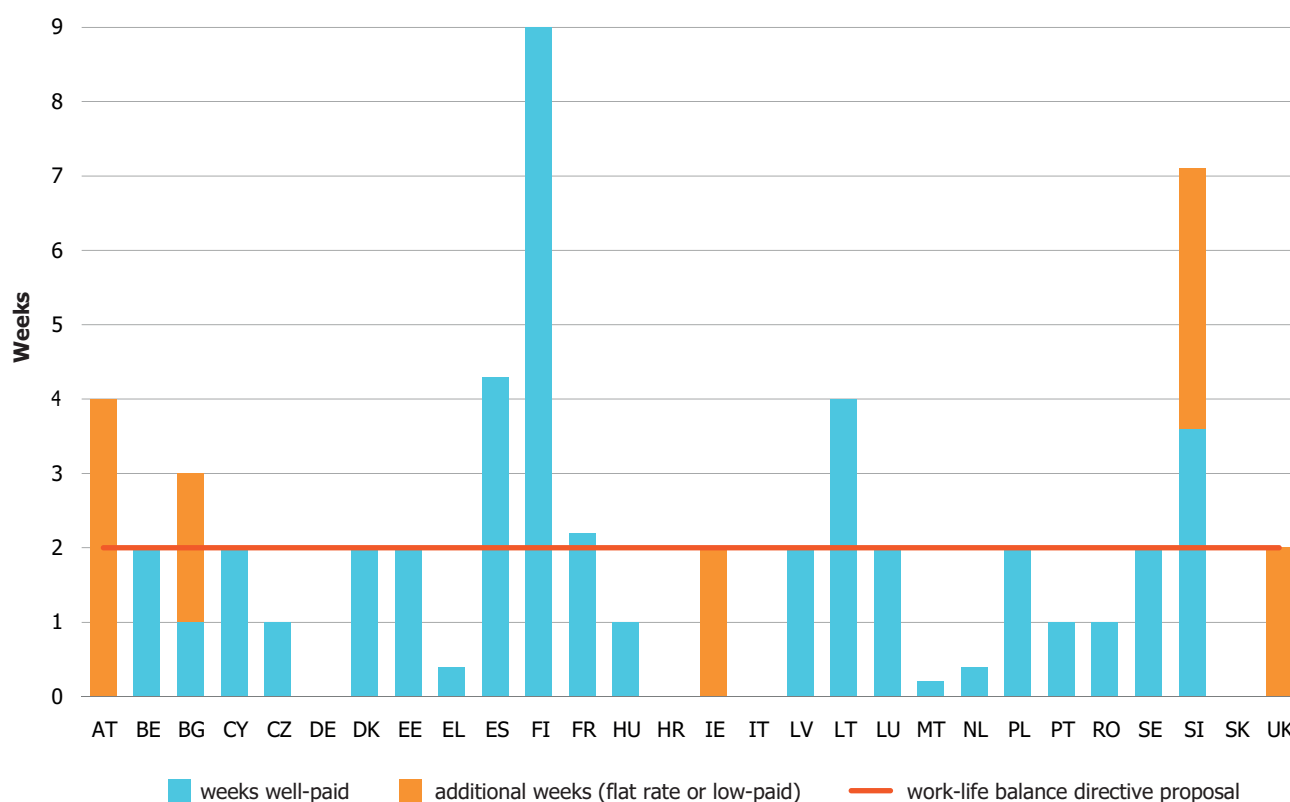
Sources: Eurofound (2015); O'Brien & Wall (2017); Schulze & Gergoric (2015); Van Belle (2016).

Paternity leave

At present, the length and compensation of paternity leave is regulated at the national level, and varies considerably across Member States. Overall, 17 Member States already

meet the proposed minimum of 2 weeks' paternity leave at the time of the child's birth. However, of these countries, only 13 offer 2 weeks of *well-paid* paternity leave.

FIGURE 1: PATERNITY LEAVE IS OFFERED IN NEARLY ALL EU28 MEMBER STATES BUT THE LENGTH AND COMPENSATION LEVELS VARY



Source: Based on Blum et al. (2017) and European Platform for Investing in Children (2018).

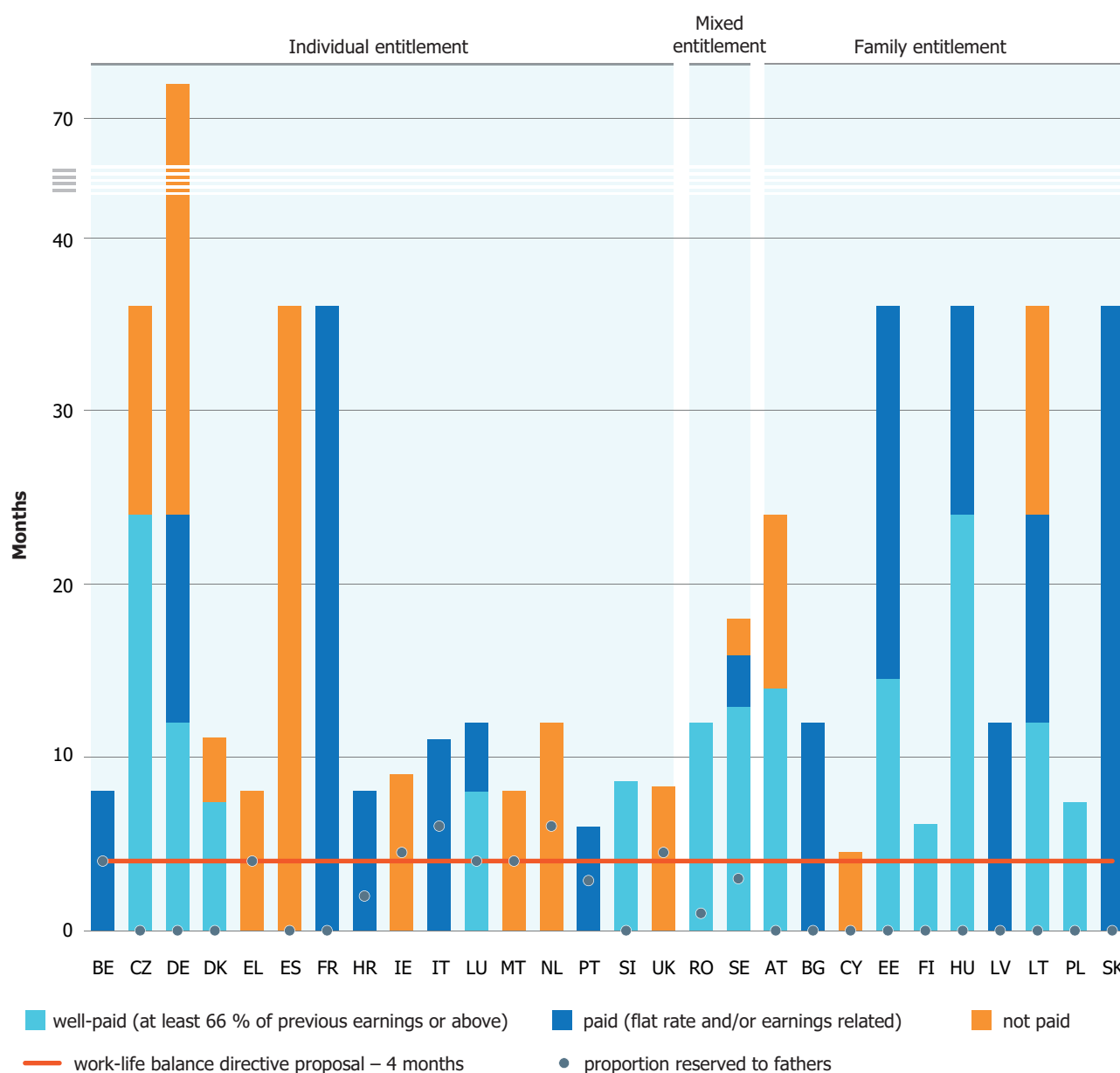
Note: Well paid is defined as at least 66 % of previous earnings. This threshold is set by the European Commission (2010) and indicates that earnings below 66 % create a risk of a low wage trap.

Fathers commonly take a few days off immediately after their child is born (usually **paternity leave**). But they rarely extend this period into longer **parental leave** (Van Belle 2016). Subsequent parental leave can help to maintain a balance of parental care in the first few years of a child's life. However, 90 % of fathers across the EU do not use parental leave entitlements (Borg 2018).

Parental leave

Across the EU, parental leave is an individual right in 16 Member States; it is a mix of an individual and family right in 2 Member States; and a family right in 10 Member States. Only 10 EU countries have a period of leave reserved for fathers, but, even in these countries, this entitlement can often be transferred to mothers. In addition, while 13 Member States offer a well-paid parental leave, only in 10 is this period of well-paid leave equal to or longer than 8 weeks (which is the minimum entitlement proposed by the new Directive).

FIGURE 2: JUST OVER A THIRD OF EU28 MEMBER STATES RESERVE A PROPORTION OF PARENTAL LEAVE TO FATHERS. IN ADDITION, PARENTAL LEAVE IS OFTEN NOT WELL PAID



Sources: Based on Blum et al. (2017); European Platform for Investing in Children (2018).

Note: Well paid is defined as at least 66 % of previous earnings. This threshold is set by the European Commission (2010) and indicates that earnings below 66 % create a risk of a low wage trap.

How does the new Directive propose to tackle challenges for the uptake of paternity and parental leave?

| Challenges for the uptake of paternity and parental leave by fathers | How the new Directive is proposing to tackle these challenges |
|--|--|
| Low compensation levels act as a strong disincentive to take leave | Guaranteeing that leave provisions are paid |
| Lack of flexibility in the timing of leave | Extending the timeframe when leave can be taken |
| Cultural norms and perceptions about gender roles in child rearing | Securing part of leave for fathers to provide incentives for men to assume an equal share of caring responsibilities |
| Eligibility criteria (e.g. employment length) | Providing the right to paid leave to all workers |

Sources: Eurofound (2015), Schulze and Gergoric (2015), Van Belle (2016).

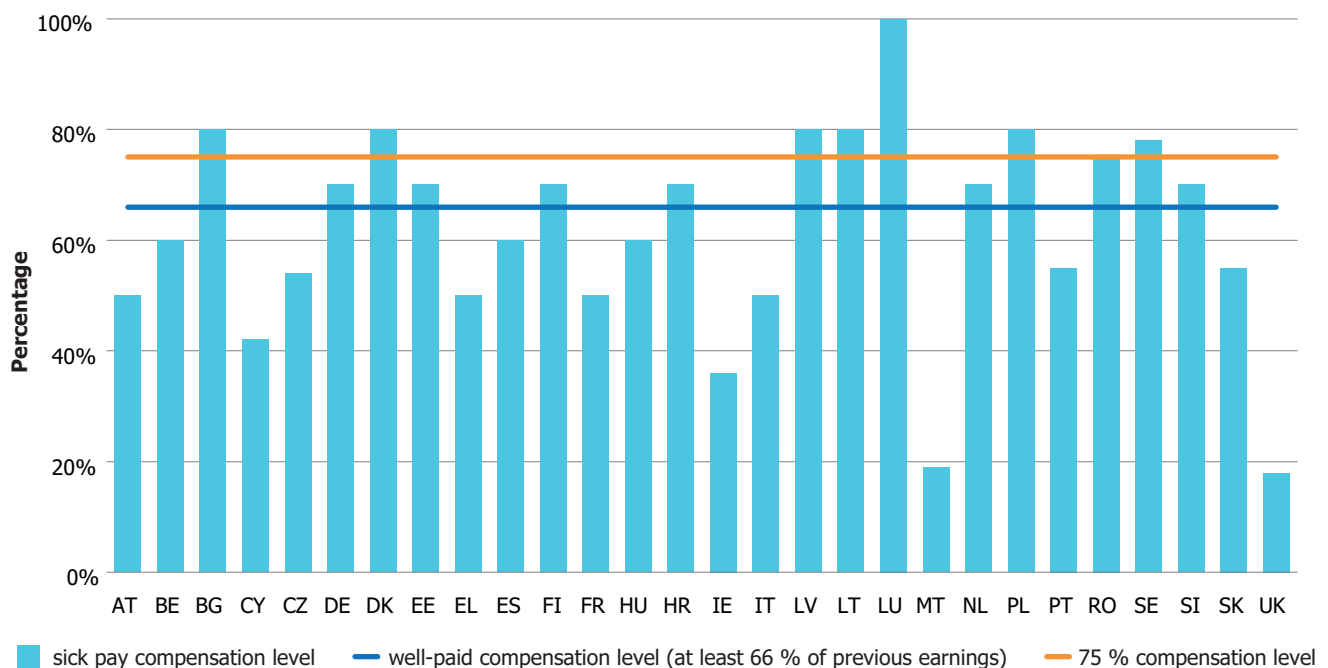
The proposal for a new Directive recommends that the leave provisions should be compensated at least at the level of sick pay. However, as shown in Figure 3, sick pay compensation levels vary considerably across the EU28. Overall, only 14 Member States offer sick pay that could be considered as well paid (at least 66 % of previous earnings).

The European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs reviewed the proposal for the Directive and suggested increasing the compensation level to at least the equivalent of 75 % of the worker's gross wage. At present, only eight Member States offer this level of sick pay.

Other of the European Parliament's amendments to the draft Recommendation include:

- Emphasising the importance of the availability of quality, accessible and affordable childcare infrastructure as a work-life balance reconciliation measure;
- Allowing parents to take leave until the child is 10 years old; and
- When planning leave provision, taking into account the constraints of micro and small and medium-sized enterprises.

FIGURE 3: ONLY HALF OF THE EU28 HAVE SICK PAY COMPENSATION LEVELS THAT ARE WELL PAID



Source: Adapted based on Spasova et al. (2016).

Note: Well paid is defined as at least 66 % of previous earnings. This threshold is set by the European Commission (2010) and indicates that earnings below 66 % create a risk of a low wage trap.

In sum

Decisions about childcare responsibilities are naturally taken by families themselves. Available evidence shows that fathers' involvement in childcare has considerable benefits for the child, fathers, mothers and employers. However, data also show that uptake of paternity leave and fathers' parental leave is limited in the EU due to various barriers. By reserving a proportion of leave for fathers, governments can support families in the more equal sharing of care responsibilities. In addition, policies can lessen the financial disincentives by reducing the opportunity cost to those parents who choose to take leave if wage replacement is at a high level.

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