

Laer leads German child care revolution [DE] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

A pretty but sedate town in rural Westfalia, Laer is unremarkable except for one thing: it has made headlines in Germany for its high birth rate and its radical approach to child care.

Only 16% of German mothers with children under six go to work. In Britain it is 67%.

Germany has one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe.

And in a country worried about population, productivity and pensions, improving family policy has become a priority.

Women have begun to push for change too. And the town of Laer has been showing the country how change can happen.

"I want to work and I need to work," Elke Pangert exclaimed. She is in her 30s, a teacher, and mother of Paul.

Nine years ago when she moved to Laer, just after Paul's birth, she became frustrated because there was nowhere to leave him when she was at school.

State care for children under three years in Germany is almost non-existent.

"When Paul was two-years-old I tried to get him into a nursery school but I didn't get a place because he was too young," she said.

So Elke and a small group of Laer mothers set up their own day care centre for toddlers and infants, taking it in turns to do the child-minding.

Since Paul was a baby Laer has acquired six nurseries and kindergartens.

And children can stay all day in Laer's primary school, as Paul does, which is another rarity in Germany.

Laer is a town of 6000 people, and about one sixth of them are children.

There are children everywhere, playing on the streets, on their bikes, in their gardens.

In Germany birth rates have halved in the last 40 years, but Laer has among the highest number of births in the country, which has been attributed to its child-friendly policy.

Laer's childcare system works because of the concerted efforts of parents, teachers, churches and local authorities, and because of money.

Funding was assured when the town's mayor, Hans-Jurgen Schimke, took it into his own hands to lobby the local authorities and to support the scheme.

He has become a bit of a local hero.

"We know our town is special and Laer is proud to have children. Other mayors say: 'You with all your children!' They laugh at first, but now they are taking it seriously," he said.

The mayor and the town of Laer are today making waves beyond the town's borders: he now sits on a federal commission on children in Berlin.

Gerhard Schroeder's government, urged on by its economic problems, pension worries and falling birth rate, is now pledging money and action.

The good news about Laer is spreading, and people are moving there specifically for the childcare, just as Meike and Guido Ritter did five years ago.

They have two children. Meike is a Lufthansa flight attendant and her husband a college lecturer.

"We were looking for a house and childcare was the top of our priority list," she said, "and Laer provided everything we needed, so we stopped looking."

- reprinted from the BBC News

Region: Europe ^[2]

Tags: funding ^[3]

accessibility ^[4]

demographics ^[5]

availability ^[6]

mother's labour force participation ^[7]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/05/06/laer-leads-german-child-care-revolution-de> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demographics> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/availability> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8142>