

# More babies, more votes [UK] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Declining fertility rates are now a dominant feature of the demographic landscape of western Europe. The UK's current rate is the lowest on record - but at 1.63 children per woman it has yet to reach the depths seen in southern Europe, where the rate in some countries has fallen to less than 1.2.

Denmark is one of the few countries to have bucked this downward trend.

Twenty years ago its fertility rate was below the European average. Today's rate of 1.74 is among the highest in the EU; only France and Ireland are higher.

Why has Denmark been different? Part of the answer lies with public policy. Demographers like to remind us that there is no simple relationship between a country's rate of fertility and its level of publicly funded family support. But it is also widely acknowledged that an individual's decision to have a child is influenced, at least in part, by perceptions about the likely impact of becoming a parent.

Surveys show that Europeans want, on average, more than two children per family but it seems other factors - including the difficulties of combining work and family life - stop them.

The Danes began making a connection between falling birthrates and levels of support for families as early as the 1960s. Amid concern about declining fertility rates at a time when more women were taking up employment, a law was passed almost unanimously by parliament in 1964 to substantially increase public funding for childcare.

As a consequence, one calculation that no Danish expectant parent has to make is whether they will be able to find or afford good quality childcare. For almost 30 years all children over the age of six months have been guaranteed a place in a publicly-funded childcare facility. More than half of children under the age of three have some experience of childcare and for those over three it is near-universal; almost 92% of 3- to 5-year-olds and 75% of 5- to 14-year-olds attend some sort of facility.

In Britain, on the other hand, there is only one childcare place for every five children under the age of eight. Despite a substantial increase in investment in early years' services by the government, we still have pitifully low levels of provision. Affordable childcare for children under three is particularly limited. And out-of-school services for older children are scarce; there are estimated to be fewer than 500 out-of-school clubs for the 3 million young people aged between 10 and 14. Parents often have to piece together formal and informal childcare arrangements to enable them to work.

Britain is only just waking up to the potential of integrating early years and after-school provision with mainstream education services. In Denmark, childcare provision is now so well integrated with school services that it is generally assumed that once the school day is over, most children will visit their local childcare service. Since the school day ends at lunchtime for children under the age of 10, childcare forms a large part of a child's early experience.

Childcare services are not only available all day but also all year round, without half-term or summer breaks: they are also stable and long-term. For many years Denmark has had age-integrated provision; it is normal for services to cater for children aged between three and 14. Consequently children and their parents have a long-term relationship with their local childcare centre, a relationship that is just as significant as that with the local school.

By comparison, most British parents can only dream of wrap-around care that caters for all of their children, all day, in the same place. By the end of 2004 all three- and four-year-olds will have access to publicly funded nursery education; but this comprises just two-and-a-half hours per day - working parents have to find alternative arrangements for the rest of the day. Most childcare services remain in the for-profit sector and many services struggle to remain open, as the majority of the cost of providing good quality childcare has to be met by parents.

Denmark, like many other European countries, has taken the view that early childhood services are a social responsibility. In comparison to the 0.4% of GDP that the UK spends on early childhood care and education, Denmark spends 2.37%. And affordability has been an important prerequisite. Danish federal law prohibits local authorities from charging parents more than 33% of the cost of a place. Parents

pay according to their income, the type of childcare place and the number of children they have. Broadly speaking, what Danish parents typically pay for one month's childcare, British parents typically fork out each week.

For Denmark the benefits of universal quality childcare services not only lie in a turn-around in fertility rates. The child poverty rate in Denmark is about one quarter of that of the UK, and falling. While in the UK we may balk at the idea of replicating the Scandinavian model of the welfare state wholesale, we nevertheless share many of the same objectives: increasing employment opportunities, eradicating child poverty and enhancing early child development.

Childcare services have now become so much a part of everyday life in Denmark that no political party would dare tamper with them. In the runup to the next election, politicians would do well to take a look at what the Danes have achieved. Shifting welfare fiscal resources so that they support children's life chances and society's future productivity is potentially a win-win policy. It might not only lead to more babies; it could be a vote winner.

-Reprinted from The Guardian

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