

# Euro MP's back 20-week maternity leave plan <sup>[1]</sup>

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Euro MPs have backed a controversial draft law to extend maternity leave to 20 weeks on full pay and make that mandatory in the EU.

UK business leaders and Conservative MEPs lobbied against the proposal. The European Commission earlier recommended an extension to 18 weeks.

One assessment said the 20-week proposal could cost UK businesses an extra £2.5bn (2.8bn euros) a year.

Minimum maternity leave in the EU is currently 14 weeks.

Even though MEPs have approved the 20-week plan it cannot become law unless EU governments back it too, and the UK's coalition government is among those lobbying against it.

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The UK Department for Business said it was "very disappointed" by the vote. "We know other member states share our concerns about the real costs of this directive," a department official said.

The plan was adopted in a first reading on Wednesday, but long negotiations are expected with the governments - known collectively as the Council - before the new rules become law.

It is not yet clear what compromise will be reached with EU governments, nor when that will happen. A qualified majority is required in the Council for the plan to go back to MEPs for a second reading.

On 20 weeks the vote was 327 MEPs in favour, 320 against. And on full pay, the vote went 354 for, 308 against.

Danish MEP Britta Thomsen, of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), said the measure would encourage women to have more children - at a time of widespread concern about Europe's ageing population and low birthrates.

Under the Commission's alternative plan, mothers would be entitled to 18 weeks' paid maternity leave, but not necessarily on full pay - it could be at or above the sick-leave rate.

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They also said two weeks of paid paternity leave for fathers - as a minimum - would be affordable. It would probably increase female participation in the workforce by "much more" than the 0.04% needed to cover the paternity leave costs, they argued.

Paternity leave is part of the package approved by MEPs. They also want pregnant workers to have their job or an "equivalent" post kept open for them and to be safe from dismissal for at least six months after their maternity leave ends.

Women in the UK are currently entitled to 12 months' maternity leave, with the first six weeks on 90% pay followed by 33 weeks on Statutory Maternity Pay of just under £125 a week.

Mother and baby - file pic Maternity allowances and benefits vary widely across the 27-nation EU

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BusinessEurope, a major lobby group representing a wide range of firms in 34 European countries, said MEPs should not interfere in the diverse national systems offering a mix of leave arrangements.

The group's director general, Philippe de Buck, said the proposal threatened to "increase the complexity of hiring women".

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