

Report No. 7

FATHER-INCLUSION AND WELFARE SYSTEMS IN THE UK AND SWEDEN:

**LEARNING FROM AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF YOUNG FATHERHOOD**

Dr Linzi Ladlow, Prof. Anna Tarrant, Dr Laura Way,
Georgie Horner and Nicki Pierce

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

Ladlow, L., Tarrant, A. Way, L., Horner, G. and Pierce, N.
(2023) Father-inclusion and welfare systems in the UK
and Sweden: Learning from an international comparative
study of young fatherhood, FYFF Findings and Innovation
Series 2020–24, Report 7, [https://fyff.co.uk/
files/42f268ce6437971228443c93e41fb94fe691639c.pdf](https://fyff.co.uk/files/42f268ce6437971228443c93e41fb94fe691639c.pdf).



Following Young Fathers Further is funded by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship and led by Professor Anna Tarrant, Director of the Centre for Innovation in Fatherhood and Family Research, University of Lincoln.

KEY POINTS

- Young fathers in both the UK and Sweden share an ideology of parenting that embodies gender equality and a commitment to engaged fatherhood.
- Despite evidence among both cohorts of a strong desire to 'be there' for their children, the welfare and family policy systems in each country operate differently, with Sweden enabling greater opportunities for father-inclusion than the UK.
- Current UK welfare and public policies are doing little to facilitate the social and familial participation of young fathers. For example, age-graded policies that reduce the level of financial entitlements to young people, make it more challenging to achieve the stability and independence young fathers aspire to.
- (In)adequate parental leave systems also impact on the well-being of young parent families and influence the extent to which young fathers in the UK and Sweden feel recognised as parents and can fulfil their parenting commitments.
- Comparative research with young fathers in both countries demonstrates the benefits of family-friendly policies and comprehensive access to welfare in supporting them to 'be there' for their children and to invest in gender equality at home.

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we highlight the need to establish a more explicit relationship between father-inclusion and wider welfare and family policy systems. In the UK we are beginning to see the seeds of change for a cultural shift towards engaged fatherhood, including among men in low-income circumstances (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Neale and Tarrant, 2024), as well as encouraging evidence of recognition of the value of father-inclusive support provisions within service and professional contexts (Bateson et al. 2017). However, major systemic barriers, especially in the UK, mean there is still a notable lag in supporting fathers in UK policy and across universal and mainstream practice (see Report 3). This contrasts with places like Sweden, where welfare systems have developed over time to promote gender equality and involved fatherhood (Brandth and Kvande, 2020; Andreasson et al. 2023).

Strand Three of the [Following Young Fathers Further](#) study (see Report 1) is the first empirically driven international comparative study of young fatherhood, with young fathers residing in the UK and Sweden. A core focus of this work was to explore the impact of different cultures of understanding and expectations on young fathers, and how varied professional responses and family and welfare policy systems shape their experiences, their orientation to fatherhood and their capacity to sustain positive relationships with their families. As we outline in Report 1, Sweden was considered a valuable site for exploring the implications of differences in policy approaches to young fatherhood because of its distinctive approach to family welfare. Sweden is often considered a useful case for comparative gender policy analysts because of its dual-earner policies and their potential consequences for the behaviour and well-being of parents and children (Ferrarini and Duvander, 2009). Furthermore, existing research indicates that in the Nordic states, young fathers are often portrayed as a high-risk group (Johansson and Hammarén, 2014), but not regarded as a social problem like they are in the UK and US.

A sample of ten young fathers were recruited by our academic partners, Professors Thomas Johansson and Jesper Andreasson in Sweden between 2020–2021. Four of these agreed to be followed up in 2023, creating a small longitudinal sub-sample. These methods produced a comparative cohort experiencing young fatherhood concurrently in the UK and Sweden, albeit in different welfare contexts. Here we present analyses of data generated with 32 young fathers in the UK and the 10 in Sweden to explore these differences. Our analysis focused on areas of welfare and family policy that impact on parenthood to consider how and to what extent policy and welfare systems influence young fathers' abilities to be there for their children.



WELFARE, FAMILY POLICY AND PARENTING IN THE UK AND SWEDEN: A BRIEF CONTEXT

Negotiating the provision of care and work-life balance from the birth of a child, through the first year of a child's life, is crucial in the transition to parenthood for parents of all ages. Countries across the world have public policies, including earnings-compensated leave systems and childcare services, that are designed to support parents to reconcile their work and care responsibilities (O'Brien and Wall, 2017). Some countries are more effective at providing these essential infrastructures than others.

The multiple interacting systems that comprise the welfare state in the UK, for example, means that gains in work-care balance between men and women, that might be occurring at the level of family and in service contexts, are currently undermined. David Lammy MP highlighted why this might be the case in 2015 when he said:

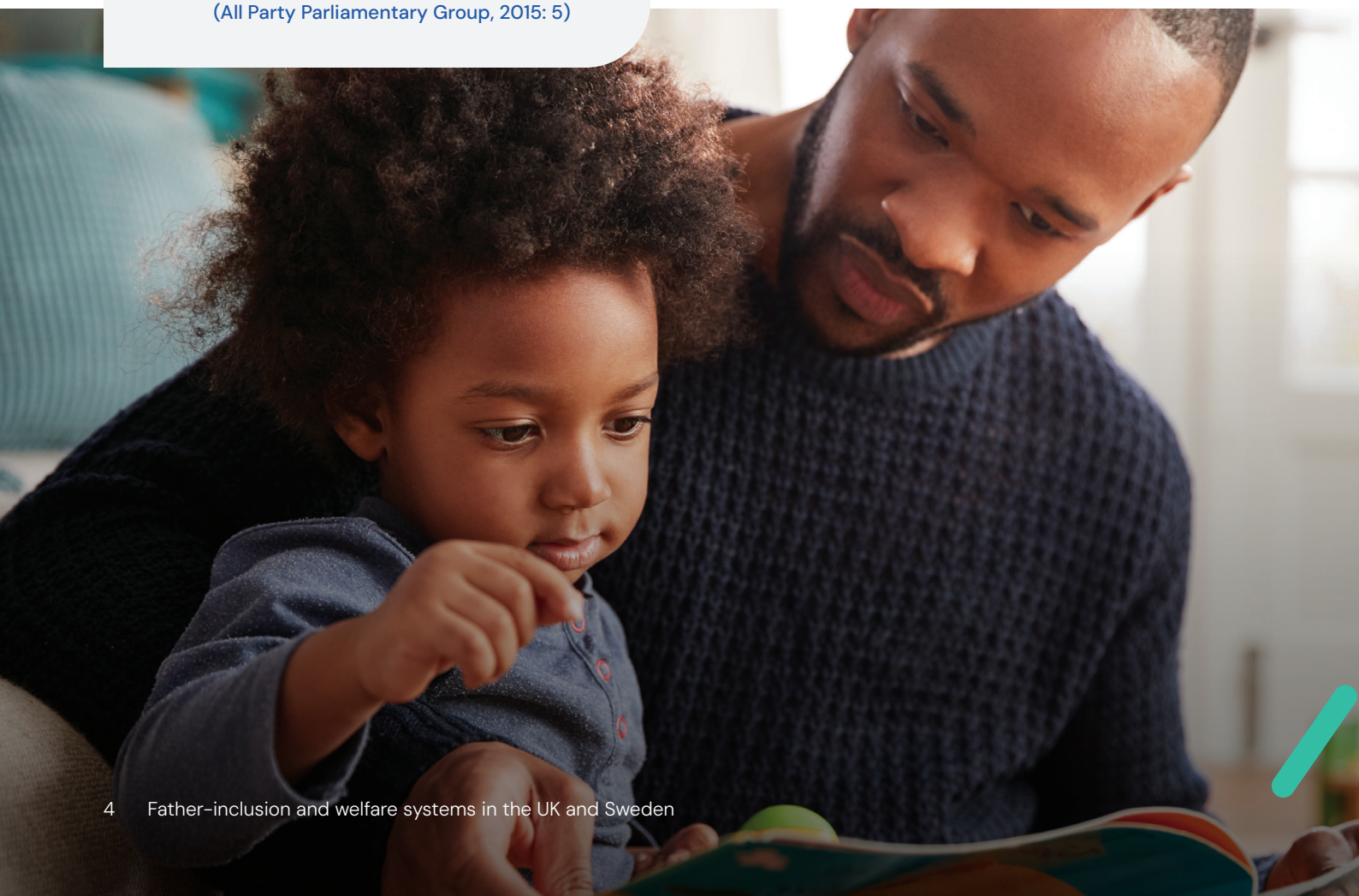
“ *The present parenting support offer across the UK is fragmented, with little leadership from national government. With family policy spread across a number of departments, a lack of joined up government is a key barrier to any successful parenting support . . . Any parenting support scheme must not be overly prescriptive, and cannot be seen by parents as a punishment if it is to be successful . . . Fathers are an important resource in early years child development . . . but are under used and often side lined when family services are developed.*

(All Party Parliamentary Group, 2015: 5)

Little has changed since. The UK sits among several countries (including Spain, France, Switzerland, and Japan) where policy developments are weaker in terms of the enhancement of fathers' entitlements to leave (see O'Brien and Wall, 2017). Efforts to transform and reconfigure UK leave policy from one of maternalism towards greater gender equality through the introduction of shared parental leave have largely failed (Moss and O'Brien, 2019). The current statutory 2-week paternal leave offer is insufficient to allow fathers the time to forge a meaningful bond with their newborn and to adapt to the birth of a baby (Gheyoh Ndzi, 2023).

In contrast, the 'dual-earner, dual-carer' (Björnberg, cited in Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021) approach in Sweden, which is often considered an exemplar of gender equality at policy level (Lane and Jordansson, 2020), embeds effective state support for working parents through a combination of paid parental leave, accessible public childcare, and paid leave to support care for sick children (Wissö and Bäck-Wiklund, 2021). While by no means a panacea, especially as neoliberal governmental rationalities and welfare retrenchment are increasingly taking hold in Swedish policy (Norberg, 2021; Lane and Jordansson, 2020), conditions for young families in Sweden are ostensibly favourable when contrasted with the UK.

It is in the contexts of these ideological and systemic differences between the welfare states of the UK and Sweden that we examine young fathers' narratives about parenthood and about their access to key entitlements including welfare support and paid leave.



ENGAGED FATHERHOOD: A SHARED INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENT

While the UK and Swedish welfare systems differ, commitments to engaged fatherhood were apparent among both cohorts of young fathers in the UK and Sweden. As captured by a social engagement framework (see Report 1), these young men described entry into parenthood as a transformative experience regardless of their existing relational, socio-economic and environmental resources. Both cohorts expressed an understanding of gendered responsibilities around parenthood and awareness of the value of involved fatherhood for the promotion of gender equality with their co-parent:

“ To be fair, I think just being present. Obviously, there is a lot more to it and stuff like that, but at the core of things, it's just being there, more than owt... I don't really look at it as a good father or good mother, I just look at it as a good parent.

(Trevor W2, aged 23, cohabitant, employed, UK).

“ I think mums and dads have an equal role in bringing children up.

(Craig W2, cohabiting, stay at home dad, aged 29, UK).

“ Yeah well, we talked a bit about it, that it would be fun. We mentioned it when we were together that ... we would want to be young parents, and it was well ... I think what you have to do, maybe when you meet someone and want to be dad and mum straight away then I think you have to make it clear from the start what you want.

(Charlie, age 23, cohabitant, employed, Sweden)



These examples are illustrative of young fathers' investments in balancing a more nurturing role in the family with breadwinning (Neale and Tarrant, 2024), and reflective of wider accounts in the literature of their increased investments at home, in child-rearing, and in supporting maternal health behaviours (Rua, 2015; Elkington, 2017; Torres de Lacerda et al. 2014; Ayton and Hansen, 2016). They also demonstrate a shift towards what have been theorised as caring masculinities, which are often problematically considered the preserve of middle-class men and fathers (Elliott and Roberts, 2020; Tarrant, 2021).

Having established these commitments to be there for young fathers in the UK and Sweden, we explored what helps in enabling young fathers to fulfil their expressed commitments to their children and co-parents. Our comparative analyses revealed the importance of the appropriate resourcing of young people and families and of effective parental leaves systems.



ACCESS TO SOCIAL SECURITY IN DIFFERENT WELFARE CONTEXTS

The retrenchment of the welfare state under austerity in the UK and the increasing conditionality of welfare support has increased the precarity of already low-income families (Garthwaite et al. 2022) and significantly weakened the settlement between families and the state. This was apparent in the narratives of the participants in the Following Young Fathers Further study, who referred to two specific policies that were impacting on their financial circumstances; the two-child limit and age graded access to universal credit. Under the new Universal Credit model, benefits are reduced for young people aged 25 and under (CPAG, 2021). Here Dominic reflects on the discriminatory nature of the age graded benefit in Universal Credit and argues that rather than discourage people from becoming parents it simply disadvantages:

“ I think that’s wrong, and I’d be interested to see what the theory is behind why that’s in place really. Is it to discourage people being parents, cause I think ultimately, no-one will, no-one will factor in I’m not gonna have a child under 25 or just the circumstances in how it arises becoming a parent under 25, that wouldn’t be factored in, it’ll only be after that you’d think, oh, I’m financially at a disadvantage to someone who’s over 25, so I think it’s wrong. I don’t understand why there would be that difference.

(Dominic, wave 3, became a father aged 15, single, employed)

The two-child limit similarly restricts the child element in Universal Credit and Tax Credits to two children in a household. This affected three participants, all of whom were experiencing significant financial hardships:

“ We get money for two kids, but not the other two. That’s really bollocks because obviously we’ve got four kids. The monthly money for all four kids. Sounds like enough, but it’s not really when you’re paying for nappies and wipes and baby milk. Cause this tub of milk alone. That’s ten quid for a tub of milk and we’re lucky if it lasts four days. So milk alone every month, we’re paying like 60 quid on baby milk, then there’s like the bottles and stuff like that.

(Liam, wave 3, aged 23, cohabitant, employed, UK)



Despite being designed to disincentivise fertility 'choices', there is evidence that the policy is driving child poverty because of the mismatch between the assumptions that underpin the policy and the situated realities of larger families (Patrick and Andersen, 2023). As Liam's quote demonstrates, the policy is simply increasing hardship at a time when the cost of living is rising in the UK.

Where policy incentives in the UK have been devised to deter and even nudge particular behaviours and decisions, perversely increasing precarity and hardship, in Sweden, the fathers acknowledged and valued the support they received for parenthood:

“ There is [are] a lot of support systems in Sweden...with both [social security] allowance and parental leave like the large amount of parental leave we have compared to really the entire world. That is really good, I would say. So, no, the conditions in order to manage family life in Sweden I would say are... really good, actually.

(David, wave 1, aged 22, cohabitant, part-time employed, Sweden)

“ I think a very big part of me being so secure about being a parent is that I know that even if I am unemployed, I can get support from unemployment support, and even if I, if I'm injured, I can too.

(Jesper, wave 2, aged 25, cohabitant, Student, Sweden)

In contrast to the punitive approach to social security in the UK, Swedish universal support services offer a significant amount of protection, including amidst global and national economic crisis (Tarrant et al. 2022). However, Sweden's welfare state provides more than a mere safety net. Family-friendly policies are embedded at every level and do not discriminate by age in the same way that UK policies do.



PARENTAL LEAVE SYSTEMS

Parental leave systems in the UK and Sweden are vastly different and illustrate how family welfare policies can enable or constrain father-inclusion. In Sweden, couples can share up to 480-days of parental leave. In a deliberately father-inclusive move, part of the offer is ring-fenced solely for fathers with three months of leave being reserved for one of each parent as a 'use it or lose it' approach. Shared care, underpinned by an ideology of gender equality, is therefore institutionalised and integrated into the experiences of family life in Sweden.

The Swedish young fathers had a clear understanding of their entitlement to parental leave. Nevertheless, while navigating a substantial parental leave offering, many young parents took time to work out how to ensure their entitlement could benefit their family's circumstances:

“ We spoke first about that we were going to have half and half. Because it was like that, we wanted it to be equal. But then we went through it, and we have the plan that she's going to be on maternity leave for a year, and then she's going to study. And then there's three months there that come after, that the dad can take. And if I don't take them then no one can take them, so that's just money that gets thrown away. So, we have the plan that I'm going to try and take those three months, after one year.

(Johan, wave 1 aged 20, cohabitant, part-time employed, Sweden)

“ I was doing like a zero-hour contract at the time, so I wasn't, so there would be times I'm off, sometimes I would just go, I would just go in. The first two weeks after she was born, [MOC/partner] was bonding with her for the whole time herself, so just baby got to kind of know who she is, and yeah, and I was just working.

(Elijah, wave 2, age 25, cohabitant, stay-at-home dad, UK)

In the UK, paternity leave consists of 2 weeks paid leave, but this comes with stipulations that exclude fathers who are self-employed, in education, or on zero-hour contracts. This means that young fathers in the UK are especially disadvantaged in terms of their access and entitlement to paid paternity leave:

“ I think I only got 2 weeks with each child. I think it's unfair that fathers only get two weeks, you know, to have with that child. I think they should have a little bit more time. It's just so then the father can bond with the child as well as the mother bonding with the child. I would have taken longer but because I got told that it would have been unpaid it were a case of well I really can't financially do that.

(Craig, wave 2, aged 29, cohabitant, stay-at-home dad, UK)

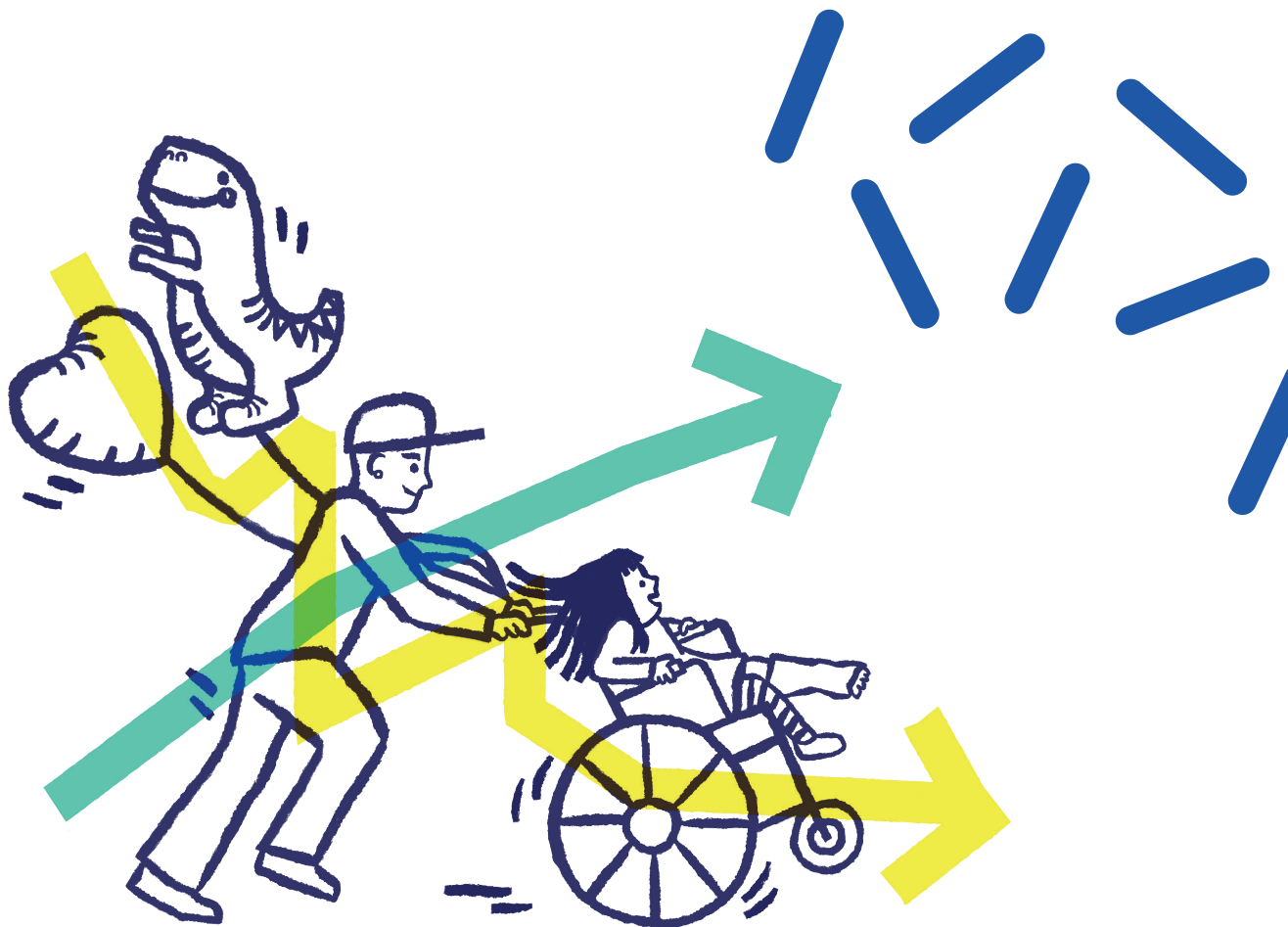
As these quotes demonstrate, young fathers in the UK are often disadvantaged by their circumstances and on the policy emphasis on employment as one of few routes to financial security. This meant that they missed out on valuable time to bond with their children. When asked if they would have taken time off for parental leave, they unanimously responded yes. In contrast, Swedish fathers were more readily able to take time out of work or education to bond and care for their children, enabling these fathers to fulfil what both Swedish and UK participants articulated as important to them and their families: greater gender equality and opportunities to care for their children without having to compromise financially.

CONCLUSION

International comparative evidence in the UK and Sweden demonstrates encouraging shifts in commitment among young fathers to father engagement. However, our findings confirm that welfare and family systems are reflective of a social engagement view of young fatherhood. Reductions in welfare entitlements associated with young age and family size are creating a perfect storm for young fathers in the UK, compounding the disadvantages that they experience and undermining their abilities to be there for their children in the ways that they, and indeed societies, expect.

Our comparative research with Sweden confirms that effective family, youth and housing welfare and policy systems are paramount for young fathers, especially where they lack the material, familial or financial resources to contribute to parenting (see Report 2 and Neale and Tarrant, in press, 2024 for a review). In the UK, far from disincentivising young parents from having children, punitive family and welfare policies combined are creating an environment that punishes rather than supports. This paradoxically reinforces and perpetuates the problematisation of young parenthood in ways that are less apparent in Sweden. The orthodox 'problem/deficit' views of young fatherhood in the UK (see Report 2), which so readily blame young fathers for their marginalisation, are therefore directly associated with and reinforced by the arrangements of welfare and family policy systems, suggesting the need for ecosystemic change.

We conclude that if we are to take father-inclusion seriously as an idea, ethos, practice, and social movement, there is much to be learned across country contexts. There is value in generating comparative evidence about welfare and family policy systems, especially from countries that are responsive to shifting gendered patterns of care and that invest in supporting the parenting commitments of those who are marginalised and vulnerable.



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