

Monday, 1st February 2010

News

[Blackpool](#)
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[Fleetwood](#)
[Wyre news](#)
[Lancashire news](#)
[North West News](#)
[National](#)
[News video](#)
[Daily feature](#)
[Business](#)
[Web chats](#)
[Traffic & Travel](#)
[Gazette Features](#)
[Memory Lane](#)

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[Blackpool FC](#)
[Pool Passion](#)
[National Sport](#)
[National Football](#)
[TV Sports Highlights](#)
[Fleetwood Town](#)
[Fylde RU](#)
[Golf](#)
[Sports video](#)
[Sport columnists](#)
[Allstars](#)
[Racing Tips](#)

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[Entertainment news](#)
[What's On](#)
[Showbiz](#)

Warning that dads' leave will hit firms**Published Date:** 29 January 2010

NEW rights for fathers to take up to six months paternity leave will increase pressure on Fylde companies, business leaders today warned.

From April 2011, fathers will be able to take the place of the mother at home for the last three months of her nine-month maternity break.

Fathers would be eligible during that three-month paternity leave to statutory Government pay of £123 a week but after that their leave will be unpaid. At present, fathers are allowed two weeks of paternity leave when their child is born.

That will continue, but after the mother has spent six months of her permitted nine months maternity leave, she will be able to return to work – swapping with the father. The announcement has infuriated business groups who say it is wrong to impose more regulation on companies already facing difficult economic conditions.

Hugh Evans, director of policy at North and Western Lancashire Chamber of Commerce based in Blackpool, said: "We seem to be getting mixed messages from the Government.

"We know the Government understands how important it is for businesses to be competitive, yet these new plans will put more pressure on Fylde firms. Now is not the time to be introducing new employment legislation as businesses still have to deal with the impact of the recession." Steve Pye, chairman of the Federation of Small Business in Fylde, described the new rules as "a nightmare" for small firms.

He said: "Small businesses depend on their staff so this will prompt a lot of employment issues. Temporary staff will have to be brought in and there will be admin issues, both of which mean extra cost."

But ministers expect that only between four and eight per cent of those eligible to take the new leave will do so. The Business Department claims that only one per cent of small firms will be affected. Fathers would have to consider the impact on their career of taking an extended paternity break.

Bettina Bender, partner and employment specialist at law firm CM Murray LLP, said: "The Government plans to allow parents the right to essentially swap maternity leave is part of the drive to allow for more flexibility in the workplace for parents.

"It remains to be seen whether fathers will feel able to take the extended period of leave to look after a new baby without fearing that their career will suffer."

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