



We champion the wider family who care for children

Grandparents Plus' Response to *Support for All: the Family and Relationships Green Paper*

April 2010

Grandparents Plus is the national charity (England and Wales) which champions the role of grandparents and the wider family in children's lives, especially when they take on the caring role in difficult family circumstances. We do this by:

Campaigning for change so that their contribution to children's wellbeing and care is valued and understood.

Providing evidence, policy solutions and training so that they get the services and support they need to help children thrive.

Building alliances and networks so that they can have a voice and support each other, especially when they become children's full-time carers.

Our objectives

We have identified three key objectives for our work:

To redefine the family for policy makers and service providers – moving us beyond the nuclear model of family life and instead considering the extended family.

To ensure that the informal caring role is recognised and rewarded.

To ensure that the needs of full-time grandparent carers are considered and met, alongside those of other families.

Introduction

We welcome the publication of *Support for All* and the recognition which it contains of the role of grandparents and the wider family in family life. In particular we welcome the commitments to strengthening support for family and friends carers and to ensuring that Children's Centres become exemplars in making services accessible and welcoming to all family members.

Question 1

What more can we do to help create a culture in which seeking help for relationship or parenting problems, or other family difficulties, is considered socially acceptable?

As the charity championing the role of the wider family in children's lives, our main concern here is that parenting services are currently too narrowly focussed and targeted at parents exclusively, and that commissioners and providers often fail to recognise that around 300,000 children are raised by grandparents and other family and friends carers. We are also concerned that for many families experiencing difficulties the cost of services may be a barrier to them accessing those services and therefore we consider that three free sessions of mediation or relationship counselling should be available to families at risk of breaking up. More specifically, in response to the consultation question, we consider that promoting and locating services within health clinics and GPs surgeries as well as children's centres might be helpful, as there is no stigma associated with accessing early years or health services, and they are widely accepted as confidential. Parents and other family members may be reluctant to access services located in schools because they fear that confidentiality may not be assured and they may not want teachers, other families or students to be aware that they are using those services.

Question 2

Which issues should be prioritised by Government in seeking to strengthen families and support family relationships in this country?

Whilst warmly welcoming the recent changes introduced by the Government to recognise and support the vital role which grandparents and the wider family play in family life and children's wellbeing, we believe that more needs to be done. We would like to see the following measures introduced:

1. The introduction of the right to request flexible working for all staff. This would assist grandparents to combine work and caring commitments and reduce the likelihood of them dropping out of the labour market. It would also achieve the shift in workplace culture that is needed and make flexibility the 'norm'.

Grandparents Plus agrees with the Equality and Human Rights Commission that the right to request flexible working should be extended to all. The right to request currently operates as a concession to particular groups (parents and carers) within the workforce but employers who fully embrace flexibility place it at the heart of their organisational culture and make flexible working available to all staff. The Commission's *Working Better*¹ investigation has found that older workers in particular would benefit from access to flexible working, enabling them to stay in the labour market or return to work. They also found that there is a lack of awareness amongst carers of their right to request. Our ageing population means that older workers are a key group in the labour market, and access to flexibility is an important factor in their labour market participation.

Within this group of older workers grandparents who provide childcare enabling parents to work are a group who need access to flexible working but have no right to request it. Many are of working age and some either drop out of the labour market or reduce their paid working hours to provide care. The care they provide enables parents to make an economic contribution and also enhance their family living standards, keeping some families out of poverty. Our own research² has found that working age grandparents on low incomes are the ones who are most likely to be providing childcare and to say they have reduced their paid working hours or dropped out of the labour market to do so. They are also the group

most likely to say that they are finding it difficult to cope financially, although they are not the poorest (those dependent on pension income are the poorest group), suggesting that it may be the struggle to combine work and care which is the issue here.

The EHRC has also found that the most effective way to change workplace culture is to extend flexibility to all. This would make flexible working the 'norm' rather than the exception. It would also make it easier for fathers to work flexibly. We know that fathers are a group who are less likely to ask for flexibility and also more likely to have their requests refused.

The business benefits of flexible working have been well-documented and include increased staff morale and reduced sickness absence. However, particularly in the current economic climate, we recognise that some employers may need further incentives to persuade them to change their working practices, and therefore see the right to request extended to all employees as a longer-term goal. We welcome the measures announced in the recent Government response to the recommendations of the Family Friendly Working Hours Taskforce. But we would like to see the Government announce its intention to move towards flexibility for all and to introduce incentives for employers to encourage them to make that transition sooner rather than later.

2. The introduction of “granny leave” in the first year of a child’s life, similar to fathers’ entitlement to paternity leave.

As the green paper acknowledges, parental relationships often come under considerable pressure during a child’s first year and this is a time when they are more likely to break down. We also know that parents are particularly likely to turn to grandparents for help and advice at this time. We want to make it easier for grandparents to get time off work to provide this vital supporting role. We therefore recommend that 2 weeks paid ‘granny leave’ in a child’s first year should be provided in a similar way as paternity leave is now. In our view it should be for the parents, in consultation with their family to nominate which grandparent(s) could take the leave, based on their views about who is able to play the most useful role. We would suggest that the measure could be phased in with employers, initially on a voluntary and unpaid basis first.

Another option would be to trial paid leave for grandparents where the parent is very young and who may lack the support of a partner and need extra support from their own parents at this time. Family maternity policies of this kind apply elsewhere in Europe, for example in Portugal where grandparents are entitled to 30 days paid leave if the mother is 16 or younger and living with the grandparent.

3. Paid leave for grandparents or other family members who are taking on the full-time care of a child who is not their own, to operate in the same way as paid leave for those who adopt.

At the moment a high proportion of family members who take on the care of a child are forced to give up their job – in a survey of members of our Grandparents Raising Grandchildren network³ we found that one in three had done so, and a further 30% had reduced their working hours when they became the main carer for grandchildren. We also know that family and friends carers are at high risk of experiencing poverty, with four out of ten in our survey living on a net income of under £200 a week.

There are precedents for this kind of policy elsewhere within the EU. In Germany, for example there is a similar provision for grandparents to take parental leave of up to 3 years when they become responsible for a grandchild, for example following the death or serious illness or disability of the parent.

4. Enabling parents to pay grandparents who provide childcare whilst they are working through the childcare tax credit system, or with childcare vouchers.

The value of the grandparental childcare contribution has been estimated at £3.9 billion. 1 in 3 families depend on grandparents for childcare. DWP's own research shows that this figure rises to 47% for single parents and may be as high as two thirds⁴. We also know that families with disabled children are particularly likely to depend on grandparents for childcare as formal provision often fails to meet their children's needs. Some black and minority ethnic groups may also be disproportionately likely to rely on grandparental childcare.

The Millennium Cohort Study (2004 & 2007) showed that 64% of managerial/professional mothers used formal childcare for their under 3s compared to just 6% of semi-skilled/unskilled mothers. As the green paper recognizes, working class families are more likely to live closer to each other and to be in jobs with irregular or anti-social hours, so formal childcare often does not meet their needs. Additionally, the cost of formal childcare, even allowing for the generosity of the tax credit system, is still a significant expense for low income families and acts as a barrier to their accessing formal provision. Many parents use a combination of childcare options with grandparental childcare as the 'wrap around' to formal childcare. For example, 15 hours free nursery provision is insufficient if a parent wants to work over 16 hours per week in order to qualify for tax credits, so they need to rely on someone else to supplement the free formal provision.

Question 3

Which services need the most urgent development to make them truly family friendly?

1. Children's services

We welcome the recognition in the green paper of the estimated 200,000 to 300,000 children who are being raised by grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings and other family members or friends because their own parents are unable to look after them, as a result of serious family crisis such as bereavement, drug or alcohol misuse, serious illness or imprisonment.

We believe that children's services and children's trusts more generally, need to broaden their focus to providing support for families with children being raised by family and friends carers. While some local authorities provide good support for family and friends carers, the experience of family and family friend's carers who are members of our Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network is that both practical and financial support is often lacking. For example, almost half of the children in our survey were reported to have serious emotional or behavioural problems, but only 39% of these were receiving support for these problems. Most carers had had contact with children's services at some point but many were dissatisfied with their experience, and two thirds of those who had not received help from social workers said they had asked for help.

The experience of family and friends of carers who are members of our Network suggests that children's social services in many areas have become too narrowly focussed on child protection, and to a lesser degree outcomes for looked after children, at the expense of providing support for children in need irrespective of who they live with and children who may have experienced severe trauma, neglect or abuse and are now being raised by kinship (family and friends) carers.

As members of the Kinship Care Alliance, we welcome the recent steps taken by the Government, including the budget announcement on the disregard of support allowances for calculation of housing benefit and council benefit purposes, and the review of the statutory guidance framework for family and friends carers. However, much more needs to be done and we are backing the calls in the Kinship Care Alliance's manifesto:

1. That Government collects and publishes official statistics on children being raised by family and friends carers and places a duty on local authorities to collect local data.

2. To enable more children to be raised within their family network by:

Placing a duty on local authorities to:

- o Publish accessible policies and procedures in relation to family and friends care;
- o Explore all safe alternatives for the child's care within their family network when a child may be removed from home;
- o Commission independent advice and information for relatives when a child cannot live at home;
- o Offer a family group conference to the child and their family before (or immediately afterwards in an emergency) care proceedings are commenced.

Ensuring such duties are properly funded by the Government.

3. To implement a new safe, effective approach to assessment of family and friends as potential carers

Relevant Government guidance and regulations recognize family and friends carers as a specific group (distinct from unrelated foster care) who require tailored policies and support and a bespoke assessment process.

4. To support children in family and friends care to reach their full potential by:

Amending legislation so that children are treated as children in need, and therefore have a right to assessment of their needs;

Placing a duty on local authorities to establish and commission family and friends care support services, including help with contact, help with children's emotional and behavioural difficulties and setting up local support groups for carers.

5. To tackle poverty and end financial discrimination against family and friends carers by:

Ending the current postcode lottery related to financial support and introducing a national

financial allowance for family and friends carers who are raising children who cannot live with the parents;

Ensuring family and friends carers, who are permanently raising a child, are given the same exemption as unrelated foster carers and temporary family and friends carers in relation to income support rules vs. Job Seeker's Allowance;

Amending the legal aid rules for family and friends carers to cover their legal costs in order to secure the child's permanent future with them.

2. Parenting services

At the moment parenting services are targeted at, and designed exclusively for parents, and the needs of children being raised by grandparents and other family members are overlooked. We welcome the commitment in the Green paper to ensuring that children's centre services better take account of the contribution that grandparents make, but we believe that more is needed, and that parenting support needs to be refocused to meet the needs of other family members who have taken on the full-time care of a child. These children have frequently experience high levels of trauma, neglect and abuse and their needs are very similar to those within the care system, yet services for those who have taken on the parenting role are often poorly developed or non-existent. Grandparents and other family and friends carers we are in touch with through our Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network report that they feel isolated and lack support, including in relation to support in managing their grandchildren's behaviour. Further exploration is needed to establish whether the needs of this group are best met through separate services, or through adapting mainstream parenting services, and it may well be that both are needed.

Question 4

Do you consider that compulsory mediation assessment would improve the take-up of mediation in family law cases, and what more could be done to improve the take up of family mediation as an alternative to court action?

We have reservations about compulsory assessment as we believe families should remain in control. We would prefer to see ways of providing incentives for people to use mediation and/or making it more accessible explored.

Question 5

How far does the need to seek leave of court act as a barrier to preventing family members applying for contact with a child?

Is there a need to remove this requirement for some other family members, beyond grandparents?

The requirement to seek leave of court acts a barrier to family members applying for contact with a child because of the cost involved. We would like the Government to explore whether

the requirement to seek leave of court should be removed for close family members, namely siblings, aunts and uncles. We would like to see some research evidence on the way the current leave of court requirements are operating for other family members.

Question 6

Would a comprehensive advice service on family issues based on successful models like NHS Direct and the NHS Carers Direct service make it easier for families to find the help they need? This could consist of a national online service coupled with a single telephone number.

Whilst we see potential benefits of a National Service of this kind, we also think that are significant potential risks and believe it is important to explore how the existing expertise and services provided by others already working in the field could contribute to such a service. In contrast with health, where people are used to accessing medical needs through state provision i.e. the NHS, people may in fact be more willing to access family information and advice through trusted voluntary organisations than through a national service. Furthermore, we would not want the specialist expertise and services provided by the third sector (e.g. those offered by Gingerbread and Parentline Plus and other helplines) to be lost or displaced by a National Family Service, however there may be potential for an integrated approach which we hope would be developed in partnership with those organisations already providing such services.

¹ Older workers: employment preferences, barriers and solutions. Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009

² The Poor Relation? Grandparents Plus 2009

³ Recognition Respect Reward, Family and Friends Care, Grandparents Plus, October 2009

⁴ Bell, A., Finch, N., La Valle, I., Sainsbury, R. and Skinner, C., 'A question of balance, lone parents, childcare and work', DWP Research Report 230, 2005.